

How Does God Harden the Heart?

(by Bob Pulliam)

It sounds very much like God does something to the heart of an individual so that he cannot believe. If so, we might wonder if unbelief was the individual's fault. But the process of God hardening the heart is a different matter entirely, as you will shortly see. First, let's look at a couple of passages that speak of God hardening the heart.

But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the children of Israel go. (Ex 7:3)

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth." Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. (Rom 9:17f)

Does this mean that Pharaoh would have liked to have released the Israelites after he had seen a few plagues, but the Lord wouldn't let him do so? No, for when we dig deeper, we find that God was not forcing Pharaoh to be obstinate. Notice these passages:

But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and did not heed them, as the Lord had said. (Ex 8:15)

But Pharaoh hardened his heart at this time also; neither would he let the people go. (Ex 8:32)

And when Pharaoh saw that the rain, the hail, and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet more; and he hardened his heart, he and his servants. (Ex 9:34)

Why then do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? When He did mighty things among them, did they not let the people go, that they might depart? (I Sam 6:6)

Who is doing the hardening in these passages?... Pharaoh and the Egyptians. And isn't this the same time period that God was said to be hardening hearts? So is there a way in which we might see both of these processes at work together? There certainly is.

How Man Hardens His Own Heart...

This process is a little more understandable to us since it is spoken of more often in scripture. Man hardens his own heart in refusing to yield to God's command. The writer of Hebrews quoted a Psalm (95:8) with this thought: "Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness," (Heb 3:8). The Israelites rejected God over and over in the wilderness, and it was spoken of as their hardening their hearts. The concept is that of losing sensitivity, and the ability to conform or be shaped. The writer of Hebrews also warned, "but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." (Heb 3:13). Sin can deceive us into rejecting the commands of God.

And so we might illustrate man hardening his own heart in this way:

The Hardened Heart

How Man Hardens His Own Heart



**God's
Word**

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Result:

God's word makes a demand, and this man will not yield. It may take away something he loves in life, or it may simply contradict what he has previously concluded. For whatever reason, he will not do as God has said. Although the man may believe on Jesus, the result is still unbelief, for he has failed to acknowledge the word of the Lord. He has not had the faith necessary to cast all else aside and do as God says.

How God Hardens the Heart of Man...

Man hardening his own heart seems so simple to understand. But when we get to God hardening man's heart, it is easy to draw some erroneous conclusions. Let us keep in mind that this process should have all of the same elements as the process where man hardens his own heart.

To explain the Lord's part in the hardening of man's heart, we look to a case where the Lord did not harden the heart. In Matthew 19:7 the Jews asked Jesus why Moses commanded the certificate of divorce. His reply was that it was because of the Jew's hardness of heart. God did not want it that way, but he allowed it for the time being. If God had stuck to what He wanted, He knew the Jews would not follow it. The Jews would have hardened their hearts by disobedience. God would have hardened their hearts by not permitting something they would accept. Therefore He permitted another practice because of their hardness of heart. The Lord hardens the heart of man by not permitting anything but that which He has already commanded. God's unwillingness to yield to man is said to harden man's heart.

So, we may illustrate this process in this way:

The Hardened Heart How God Hardens Man's Heart



**God's
Word**

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Result:

In the case of Pharaoh, God could have changed his command to conform with stipulations that Pharaoh set (Ex 10:24). But God would not cave into Pharaoh, and so that very text tells us that "the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart" (v27). If God had accepted Pharaoh's terms, then He would not have been hardening Pharaoh's heart.

Conclusion...

Man hardens his own heart by not yielding to the will of God. God hardens man's heart by not yielding to the whims of man, holding him to His will. God could have yielded to Pharaoh's alternate plan, or offered one of His own. God, instead, insisted on something that Pharaoh would not permit. Pharaoh hardened his own heart by resisting God's will. God hardened Pharaoh's heart by not permitting anything other than that which Pharaoh would not accept. This is how both God and Pharaoh could harden Pharaoh's heart. And this is precisely how the hearts of men are hardened today. The deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:13), and the religious preferences of men are powerful forces. Do not let them harden your heart.