

DOES GOD HARDEN HUMAN HEARTS?

By David Lee Burris



Throughout the Bible, God’s allowance of something to take place often is described by the sacred writers as having been done **by the Lord**.

The book of Exodus records how “God hardened Pharaoh’s heart” (Exodus 7:3,13; 9:12; 10:1; et al.), but it was not that God directly forced Pharaoh to reject His will. Rather, God hardened his heart in the sense that God provided the circumstances and the occasion for Pharaoh to reject His will. God sent Moses to place His demands before Pharaoh, even accompanying His Word with miracles—to confirm the divine origin of the message (cf. Mark 16:20). Pharaoh made up his own mind to resist God’s demands. God merely provided the occasion for Pharaoh to demonstrate his unyielding attitude. If God had not sent Moses, Pharaoh would not have been faced with the dilemma of whether to release the Israelites. So, God was certainly the initiator of the circumstances that led to Pharaoh’s sin, but He was not the author (or direct cause) of Pharaoh’s defiance (see [Butt and Miller, 2003](#)).

What Does the Bible Say?

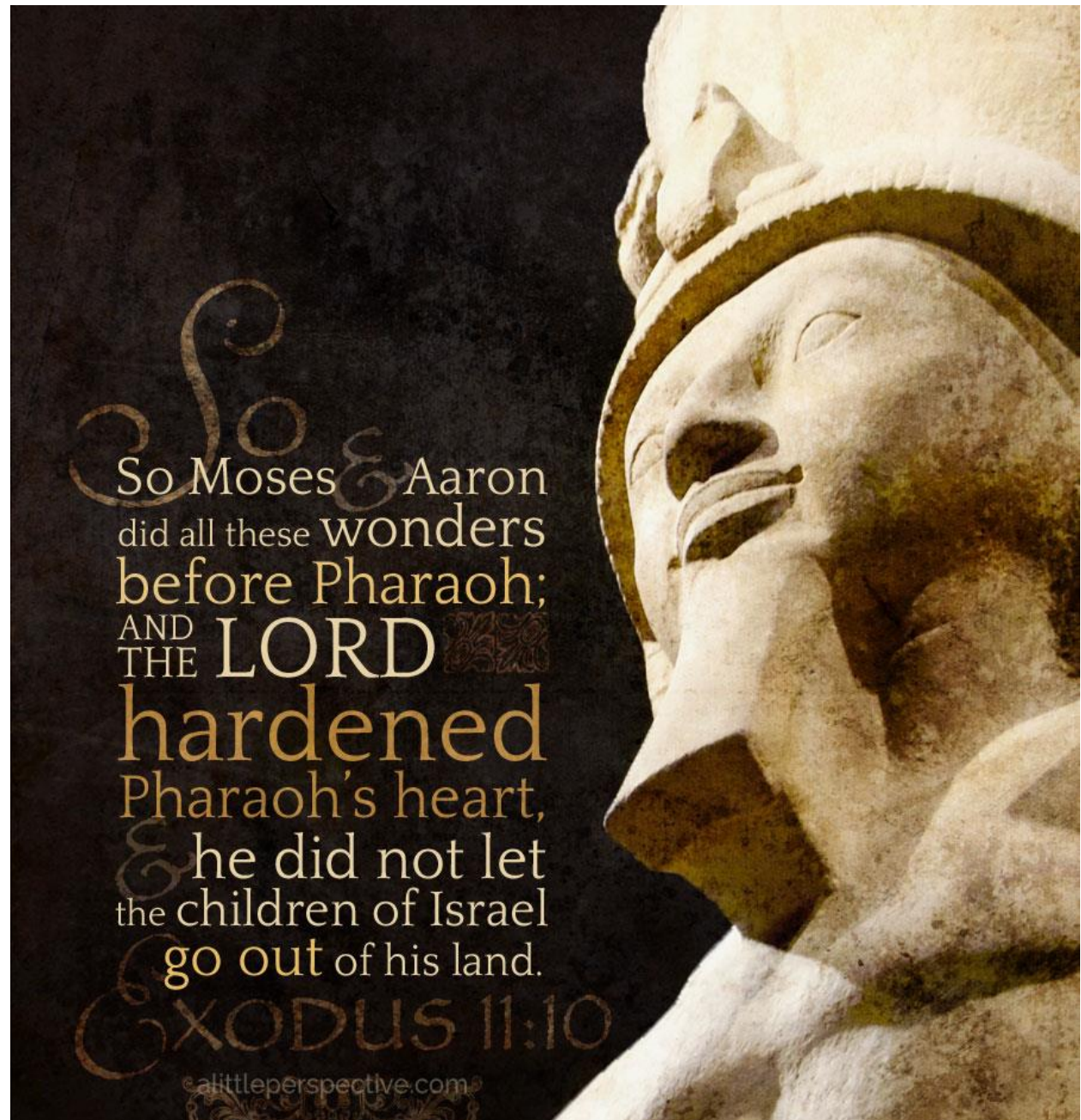
Pharaoh's Heart Was Hardened

“And Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as Jehovah had spoken” (Exodus 7:13; note v. 14)

“And the magicians of Egypt did in like manner with their enchantments: and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as Jehovah had spoken” (Exodus 7:22; note v. 23)

“Then the magicians said unto Pharaoh, This is the finger of God: and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as Jehovah had spoken” (Exodus 8:19)

“And the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the children of Israel go, as Jehovah had spoken by Moses” (Exodus 9:35)



So Moses & Aaron
did all these wonders
before Pharaoh;
AND THE LORD
hardened
Pharaoh's heart,
& he did not let
the children of Israel
go out of his land.

EXODUS 11:10

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Romans 9:18 - God Hardens Whom He Wants to Harden?

We like to think of God as a God of mercy. Yet it is quite troubling to hear that he hardens whom he wants to harden. Does that mean that some people don't have a chance and that the mercy of God is less than universal?

In order to understand this passage, we first have to understand the context. Paul is writing to the Romans defending his position that Gentiles do not have to become Jews in order to become full Christians. That is, he is defending a Christianity that is free from the Jewish law insofar as it marked out people as Jews. At this point in the argument he has just answered the objection that such an approach would lead to immoral behavior (Rom 6–8). Now he is completing his argument by showing that there is a place in the heart of God for the Jewish people. In other words, he is arguing that Old Testament history is not simply a plan that did not work out or a way of producing Jesus, but instead has value in its own right.

Paul begins the chapter by asserting that he does care very much for Israel or the Jewish people (he returns to this theme in Rom 10:1). He cares so much that he would go to hell himself if by so doing he could save the Jewish people from hell. He then lists some of the good things that God has given the Jewish nation in the past. Having said this, he addresses a problem: do these facts imply that God's plan has failed? His full explanation will take from Romans 9:6 to Romans 11:36. His main point is that the plan of God was to send the gospel to Gentiles and thus stir Israel to jealousy, resulting in the salvation of Israel in the end. In the middle of this argument he makes it clear that he is talking about the Jews (or Israel) as a whole, not every individual within the Jewish nation, for on the individual level there are Jewish people (including himself) who have believed in Jesus.

Our verse comes in the first part of the argument. Paul is establishing the ability of God to work his plan, not only by getting people to cooperate with what he is doing, but also by getting them to oppose what he is doing. Paul's point is that God is absolutely sovereign in his choices.

The Jewish people prided themselves in the fact that God had chosen Israel and hadn't chosen the Gentiles. Part of this theme is picked up in the argument in Romans 9:7–13. While Abraham had more than one son, God chose Isaac as the one through whom the promise would be passed down. Isaac also has more than one son, but God chose Jacob and not Esau. Any Jewish reader would nod affirmingly, especially if he or she had not read the opening verse (Rom 9:6): "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel" (RSV). Paul's reason for arguing this is not to prove that God could choose the Hebrew people for his purposes and reject others. All Jews knew this. Paul is pointing out that if this is the case, God can also choose some *Jews* and reject others. Paul is using the Jews' own teaching against their national complacency.

The Jewish people also prided themselves on their adherence to the Mosaic law. Surely God would reward their careful observance with salvation; surely, he would not select Gentiles for salvation when the Jews were so much more righteous. Paul argues that this is not the case. In the opening parts of the book he has argued that there is no one who is righteous, so no one has a claim on God's salvation. Any salvation which people get is mercy and grace, not just deserts. Now in this chapter he goes out of his way to point out that God's choice in the case of Isaac and Jacob was not based on their character. It was made before they developed their character. It does not help to argue that God knew what sort of people they would become, for that would be to deny what Paul is arguing. He is arguing that God simply chose. To underline this point he cites God's words to Pharaoh in Exodus 9:16: "But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Pharaoh did not arise by chance or by his own power, but God had raised him up. Why would God raise up such an obstinate ruler? So that God's power could be clearly seen when he brought about the exodus. Pharaoh's hardening was part of God's plan for God's own purposes.

In Romans 9:24–33 he is making the point that God has chosen, but he has chosen *Gentiles* for salvation, *not just Jews*, nor have the Jews as a whole been chosen for salvation at the present time.

Here he is making a point about how God has worked with broad groups of people, the Jews as a whole and the Gentiles as a whole. He is also pointing out that Jewish prophets knew about this plan of God long before it took place. Yet Paul goes on to underline in the following chapter that all of this happened through human choices. God chose to make his salvation available, not on the basis of the Jewish law, but on basis of the grace of Christ. This was proclaimed to Jew as well as Gentile, so God didn't coerce Jews into hardening themselves. Yet, as God predicted, this good news was largely rejected by the Jews and often accepted by the Gentiles.

So here are two sides of the same reality. On the one hand, people hear the gospel and reject it, just as Pharaoh heard the command of God through Moses and rejected it. There is a true moral choice made by the individual in each case. On the other hand, the sovereign God tells us that he had raised up such a Pharaoh precisely so that he could make that choice. It is no surprise to God when Pharaoh chooses to oppose him, nor is it a surprise to God when many of the Jewish people reject the gospel.

So, does God harden some people? Paul's answer is yes. Does God have mercy on everyone? Paul's answer is no. Yet do people freely choose to reject God? Paul's answer is also yes. And does God have mercy on everyone who believes the gospel? Again, Paul's answer is yes. How do these two things fit together? Paul never tells us.

He knows on the one hand that God is the sovereign ruler of history, shaping it for his own purposes. There is no power that can resist God. He knows on the other hand that people make choices for or against the gospel and all who come to God are accepted by him. He never tries to explain how these two fit together.¹

¹ Kaiser, W. C., Jr., Davids, P. H., Bruce, F. F., & Brauch, M. T. (1996). [*Hard sayings of the Bible*](#) (pp. 561–563). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

- Fact #1: Pharaoh “hardened his heart” shows that he exercised his own free will choice.
- Fact #2: The Lord said he would harden Pharaoh's heart showing that the Lord did something as well.
- How do these two facts fit together?

What is the Issue?

John Calvin on Romans 9:17-18

“We are accordingly to take two points into consideration here, first, Pharaoh's predestination to destruction ... and second, the purpose of his predestination ... his character was given to him by God ... Paul's purpose is to make us accept the fact that it has seemed good to God to enlighten some in order that they might be saved, and blind others in order that they might be destroyed ... Paul does not inform us that the ruin of the ungodly is foreseen by the Lord, but that it is ordained by His counsel and will” (*Commentary on Romans*, John Calvin, 1539, pages 206-207)

The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

- Yes, the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart. Is this Calvinism? No. Paul's point in Romans 9:17-18 is that Pharaoh was chosen to serve the purpose of God and show God's power, not that he lacked free will.
- The verses in Exodus say that the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, but one must read the whole context to see how the Lord did it.
- The issue is not: Did the Lord harden Pharaoh's heart? The issue is: How did the Lord harden Pharaoh's heart?

The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

- Pharaoh was stubborn before it is said that God hardened his heart (Ex. 2:23; 3:9,10; 5:2).
- Note the comment on this incident by the Philistines in 1 Sam. 6:6. Pharaoh was hardened just like Sihon King of Heshbon and others (Deut. 2:30; see also Josh. 11:20).
- God provides the circumstances for hardening to those who do not want to obey God (Ezek. 20:25-26; Rom. 1:24,26,28; 2 Thess. 2:10-11; 2 Cor. 4:4).

When God "hardened" Pharaoh's heart, it was a push in the same direction Pharaoh was going.



Before each of the first six plagues, Pharaoh hardened his heart:

- 1 «And Pharaoh's heart grew hard.» (Exodus 7:13) [NKJV]
- 2 «And Pharaoh's heart grew hard.» (Exodus 7:22) [NKJV]
- 3 «Pharaoh (...) hardened his heart.» (Exodus 8:15) [NKJV]
- 4 «But Pharaoh's heart grew hard.» (Exodus 8:19) [NKJV]
- 5 «But Pharaoh hardened his heart.» (Exodus 8:32) [NKJV]
- 6 «The heart of Pharaoh became hard.» (Ex. 9:7) [NKJV]

Then, God stopped calling him to repentance:

- 7 «The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart.» (Ex. 9:12) [NKJV]
- 8 «The Lord says to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart." » (Exodus 10:1) [NKJV]
- 9 «The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart.» (Ex. 10:20) [NKJV]
- 10 «The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart.» (Ex. 10:27) [NKJV]

Immediately before Moses started on his journey from Horeb, God had repeated this warning, and in a manner explained it, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that he shall not let the people go." This sentence occurs so often in the subsequent history of God's dealings with Pharaoh, and has been the subject of so much controversy, that it is well we should inquire briefly into its meaning before proceeding further.

God is here represented sending messages to Pharaoh, and at the same time exercising such power over his heart as to cause him to reject those messages. The Most High punishes the king and people with a series of unheard-of plagues, and finally with complete destruction, because they will not obey His commands; and yet darkens their minds and hardens their hearts, so that they can neither understand His purpose nor yield to His will.

In explanation of this it has been suggested that the sentence "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" means only, "I will leave him to his natural obstinacy; I will suffer him to harden himself;" like the doom of Ephraim: "Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone" (Hos. 4:17). But this is rather an evasion of the difficulty than a solution; the words are too plain and too important to be disposed of thus. The LORD Himself says to Moses, distinctly and emphatically, "I will harden," or, "I have hardened;" and the words are equivalent to "I, even I," "I for my part," or, "as for me, I have hardened." Moreover, in the 9th chapter Moses is instructed to tell Pharaoh: "In very deed for this cause have I raised thee up (or made thee to stand), for to shew in thee my power; and that my name may be declared throughout all the earth." It must be admitted, therefore, that it was God himself who hardened Pharaoh's heart, and that He did it by a direct act of His own, and for a wise and righteous purpose.

Yet God cannot be either directly or indirectly the author of sin; He doth not tempt any man. It is not to be believed for a moment that He created Pharaoh for no other purpose than to destroy him, or that He predestined him to do evil, in order that his punishment might be conspicuous and his example profitable as a warning to others. Nor is there anything in the history before us to point to such a conclusion. Pharaoh was a cruel and idolatrous heathen; his people were sunk in the grossest superstition and vice: God designed to punish both for their excesses, which even the law of nature and of conscience must have condemned; and at the same time to lead forth His own people, and deliver them from their misery and degradation. He might have accomplished these objects as well by one sign as by ten. He might have destroyed Egypt in a moment, and set Israel free with a stroke; but He chose rather to make the process gradual, and to give respite and punishment alternately, that He might show the necessary consequences of disobedience, and hand down a lesson and a warning to all future generations. Thus the overthrow of one nation might be made the salvation of another, and the punishment of Egypt the instruction of the world.

Instead, therefore, of executing upon Pharaoh and his people the immediate vengeance which they had deserved, God visited them with a judicial blindness. The obstinacy which He imposed upon them was itself a part of their punishment. We have no reason to suppose that Pharaoh might not, at one period of his life, have controlled his temper and his conduct; or that there was anything, either in his natural character or in the circumstances of his position, which rendered him, of necessity, more vicious than others. He sinned at first willingly, and God bore with him patiently; but his day of grace was now past.

As in the history of Nebuchadnezzar, whose heart was taken away, and a beast's heart given him instead, as a punishment for wickedness and pride, so Pharaoh's heart was now rendered insensible—made heavy,” for such is the literal interpretation of the word, like the heart of one of his own brute deities. The sentence which he had deserved long ago was at length executed upon him, “Make his heart fat and his ears heavy, and shut his eyes” (Isa. 6:10); “He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still” (Rev. 22:11): and now God would make use of him as a warning to others: He would raise him up, or “continue” him upon the throne of Egypt, that he might become a proverb and an example to all generations: He would make use of him for His own ends, and get to Himself honor from him in his death, by judging him *openly* for all the rebellion and dishonor of his life.

Nor are we to conclude that the punishment of Pharaoh was of any other than a temporal kind. A special judgment was appointed as the consequence of each new act of disobedience; and the last offence of all was followed by his death in the Red Sea. There his history ends. God judges men according to their opportunities; their punishments are proportioned to their knowledge and privileges. Pharaoh said truly that he “knew not the Lord.” “That servant who knew not his Lord's will, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes” (Luke 12:47); how few, God, in His mercy, will show us hereafter. The sins of Pharaoh were his own, and his punishment, so far as we are informed of it, was certainly no greater than they deserved. We are never told that his condemnation was increased on account of that judicial hardness which was itself a part of it. The ruin which advanced upon him with successive strokes, and which finally destroyed him, was nothing more than he had merited a thousand times over before God hardened him and judged him.

The same may be said of the Egyptians as a nation. The sufferings they incurred had been justly merited by their own wickedness. God was not wroth with all the congregation because of one man's sin. Far from Him the purpose of destroying the wicked with the just. All Egypt was sunk in the grossest immorality; and all Egypt suffered for the sins of their own flesh. If, at the time of the Passover, “there was not an house where there was not one dead,” it was because there was not an house which was not full of wickedness. God was not extreme to mark iniquity when He judged Egypt; He did but suspend the appointed vengeance, enduring for a time the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction, that the blow, when it fell, might be recognized as coming from His hand, and as the due reward of their misdeeds.²

² Millington, T. S. (1873). [*Signs and Wonders in the Land of Ham: A Description of the Ten Plagues of Egypt with Ancient and Modern Parallels and Illustrations*](#) (pp. i–231). London: John Murray.

The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

What God Says:

"I will harden Pharaoh's heart, **so that he will pursue them**" (14:4a).

"...**that the Egyptians may know** that I am the LORD" (14:4b).

"I indeed will harden the hearts of the Egyptians, and they shall follow them...then the Egyptians **shall know** that I am the LORD" (14:17-18).

Whatever this "hardening" is it is intended to **Like 7:35 - "That they may know that I am the LORD"** - not to prevent this knowledge.

And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that

**I AM
THE LORD**

EXODUS 14:4

Who Hardened Pharaoh's Heart?

by Dave Miller, Ph.D.
Kyle Butt, M.Div.

In their perpetual quest to find discrepancies in the Bible, to undermine biblical ethics, and to find fault with the actions of God, skeptics have charged that God mistreated Pharaoh by overriding his free will and forcing him to resist the demand of Moses to allow the Israelites to exit Egypt. The skeptics focus on the verses about Pharaoh's heart, demanding that the God of the Bible is an unjust, cruel being. Steve Wells, the well-known skeptic writer, said: "God begins the process of 'hardening Pharaoh's heart' (see also Exodus 7:3,13, 9:12, 10:1, 20,27, 11:10, 14:4,8), thus making it impossible for any of the plagues that God sends to have any beneficial effect. But according to 1 Samuel 6:6, God didn't harden the Pharaoh's heart; the Pharaoh did it himself" (Wells, 2001). Kendall Hobbs, in an essay titled "Why I Am No Longer a Christian," added Pharaoh's story to a list of alleged atrocities committed by the God of the Bible. "There are plenty of other atrocities committed by God or at his command," Hobbs comments, then lists "the Exodus story when the Egyptian Pharaoh was repeatedly ready and willing to let Moses and his people go, until God hardened his heart, and then God punished him for his hardened heart by sending plagues or killing children throughout all of Egypt" (Hobbs, 2003).

The Protestant Calvinist response to the skeptic is simply to say that God can do what He chooses to do, and that humans have no right to question God. To him, the answer is "not to retract the sovereignty of God's election, or to try to give a rational explanation to doubting men" (Palmer, 1972, p. 33). Since Calvinism has largely dominated the Protestant landscape for the last five centuries, most skeptics have dismissed Christianity as absurd, and have turned away in utter disgust in order to embrace atheism. The smug Calvinist then declares, "So be it! You have the problem!"

But why would many otherwise right-thinking people reject the John Calvinistic brand of Christianity? Must their rejection **necessarily** be due to a desire to be free from the moral and social restraints that come with the acceptance of the Christian religion? Must the unbeliever's unbelief inevitably be the result of an unwillingness to accept **truth**? While it is true that most human beings in history have rejected the correct pathway in life due to stubborn pride, selfishness, and a desire to gratify fleshly desires (cf. Matthew 7:13-14; 1 John 2:15-17), there are exceptions. Some people reject Christianity because they have been presented with **pseudo-Christianity**—a Catholic or Protestant version of it—what Paul called "a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6), that is, a diluted, distorted form, rather than pure, New Testament Christianity.

The reason rational, honest people would reject Calvinism's claim that God arbitrarily (i.e., for His own sovereign reasons) rejects some people, or overrides their free will, is because they recognize that a perfect God, i.e., One Who is infinite in all of His attributes (including justice, fairness, and impartiality), **would not do so**. God cannot be **just**, while **unjustly** rejecting some people. God cannot be **God**, and yet conduct Himself in an **ungodly** manner. Even the biggest sinner, who has violated his conscience repeatedly, and has dulled his spiritual sensibilities, has enough sense to comprehend the principle of being fair—even if he chooses not to treat people fairly.

Turning to the book of Exodus, most Bible readers must admit that they were at least slightly startled the first time they read about God hardening Pharaoh's heart & then His punishing Pharaoh for that same hard-heartedness. In dealing with these allegations, three distinct declarations are made with regard to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. First, the text states that God hardened Pharaoh's heart (7:3; 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:10; 14:4,8), and the hearts of the Egyptians (14:17). Second, it is said that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (8:15,32; 9:34), that he refused to humble himself (10:3), and that he was stubborn (13:15). Third, the text uses the passive form to indicate that Pharaoh's heart was hardened, without giving any indication as to the source (7:13,14,22; 8:19; 9:7,35). The questions that arise from this state of affairs are: (1) did God harden Pharaoh on some occasions, while Pharaoh hardened himself on others? (2) Did God do **all** the hardening of Pharaoh, with the references to Pharaoh hardening himself being the result of God forcing him to do so against his own will? (3) Are all three declarations given in the text actually parallel expressions that mean the same thing? (4) Are the three declarations distinct from one another in their meaning, but all true in their own respects? Is the God of the Bible an unjust, cruel Being?

Two excellent explanations are available that account for the Exodus declarations, each perfectly plausible & sufficient to demonstrate both the skeptic & Calvinist interpretations are incorrect. Both explanations pertain to the fact that every language has its own way of using certain types of words and phrases that might appear odd to a person not familiar with the language. For instance, suppose a person commented that his boss became angry and "bit his head off." Would anyone think that the speaker actually had his head bitten off? Of course not! English-speaking people understand this example of figurative speech. Or suppose a person went looking for a job, and someone said she was "hitting the streets." She was not literally hitting the streets with her fists. Most English speakers would easily understand the idiom. In the same way, **biblical languages had idioms, colloquialisms, Semitisms, and word usages peculiar to them, which only those familiar with the language would understand.**

In his copious work on biblical figures of speech, E.W. Bullinger listed several ways that the Hebrew and Greek languages used verbs to mean something other than their strict, literal usage. He listed several verses that show that the languages "used active verbs to express the agent's design or attempt to do anything, even though the thing was not actually done" (1898, p. 821). To illustrate, in discussing the Israelites, Deuteronomy 28:68 states: "Ye shall be sold (i.e., put up for sale) unto your enemies...and no man shall buy you." The translators of the New King James Version recognized the idiom and rendered the verse, "you shall be offered for sale." The text clearly indicated that they would not be sold, because there would be no buyer, yet the Hebrew **active verb** for "sold" was used. In the New Testament, a clear example of this type of usage is found in 1 John 1:10, which states, "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him [God—KB/DM] a liar." No one can **make** God a liar, but the attempt to deny sin is the equivalent of attempting to make God a liar, which is rendered with an **active verb** as if it actually happened. **Verbs, therefore, can have idiomatic usages that may convey something other than a strict, literal meaning.**

With that in mind, Bullinger's fourth list of idiomatic verbs deals with active verbs that "were used by the Hebrews to express, not the doing of the thing, but the **permission** of the thing which the agent is said to do" (p. 823, emp. in orig.). To illustrate, in commenting on Exodus 4:21, Bullinger stated: " 'I will harden his heart (i.e., I will permit or suffer his heart to be hardened), that he shall not let the people go.' So, in all the passages which speak of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. As is clear from the common use of the same Idiom in the following passages" (1968, p. 823). He then listed Jeremiah 4:10, " 'Lord God, surely thou hast greatly deceived this people': i.e., thou hast suffered this People to be greatly deceived, by the false prophets....'

” Ezekiel 14:9 is also given as an example of this type of usage: “ ‘If the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, I the Lord have deceived that prophet’: i.e., I have permitted him to deceive himself.” James MacKnight, in a lengthy section on biblical idioms, agrees with Bullinger’s assessment that **in Hebrew active verbs can express permission & not direct action**. This explanation unquestionably clarifies the question of God hardening Pharaoh’s heart. When the text says that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, it means that God would **permit** or **allow** Pharaoh’s heart to be hardened.

A second equally legitimate explanation for the Exodus text is that the allusions to God hardening Pharaoh’s heart are a form of figurative speech, very closely associated with metaphor, known as “metonymy,” where one name or word is employed for another. For example, when we speak of “reading Shakespeare,” we mean that we read his writings or plays. **God hardening Pharaoh’s heart would be “metonymy of the subject,” that is, the subject is announced, while some property or circumstance belonging to it is meant. Specifically, under this form of the figure, “[a]n action is sometimes said to have been accomplished, when all that is meant by it is an occasion was given”** (Dungan, 1888, p. 287; cf. Bullinger, 1898, p. 570).

The Bible is replete with examples that illustrate this figure of speech. John reported that “Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John” (John 4:1). In reality, Jesus did not personally baptize anyone (John 4:2). But **His teaching and influence** caused it to be done. Jesus, the subject, is mentioned, but it is the circumstance of His **influence** that is intended. His **teaching** was responsible for people being baptized. Repeatedly in the book of 1 Kings, various kings of Israel are said to have “walked in the way of Jeroboam...who had made Israel sin” (e.g., 1 Kings 16:19,26; 22:52). But Jeroboam did not force either his contemporaries or his successors to sin. Rather, he set an example that they chose to follow. **Judas was said to have purchased a field with the money he obtained by betraying Christ (Acts 1:18). But, in reality, he returned the money to the chief priests and then hung himself. The blood money was then used to purchase the field (Matthew 27:5-7). By metonymy of the subject, Judas was said to have done that which his action occasioned.** Paul warned Roman Christians: “Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died” (Romans 14:15). What he meant was that they should not set an example that lures weaker brothers into doing what they consider to be wrong. Paul told Corinthian Christians that they were in a position to “save” their unbelieving spouses (1 Corinthians 7:16). He told Timothy that he was in a position to “save” those who listened to his teaching (1 Timothy 4:16). In both cases, Paul meant that proper teaching and a proper example could influence the recipients to obey God’s will for their lives.

Another instance of metonymy of the subject, closely aligned with the example of Pharaoh in Exodus, is the occasion of the conversion of Lydia, the businesswoman from Thyatira. The text states that the “Lord opened her heart” (Acts 16:14). However, the specific means by which God achieved this action was the preaching of Paul. God’s Word, spoken through Paul, created within her a receptive and responsive mind. **In like fashion, Jesus is said to have preached to Gentiles as well as to the antediluvian population of Noah’s day (Ephesians 2:17; 1 Peter 3:19). Of course, Jesus did neither—directly. Rather, He operated through agents—through Paul in the first case and through Noah in the latter.** Similarly, Nathan accused king David: “You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword” (2 Samuel 12:9). In reality, David sent a letter to his general ordering him to arrange battle positions where Uriah would be more vulnerable to enemy fire. On the basis of metonymy of the subject, David, the subject, is said to have done something that, in actuality, he simply arranged for others to do.

In the case of Pharaoh, “God hardened Pharaoh’s heart” in the sense that God provided the circumstances and the occasion for Pharaoh to be forced to make a decision. God sent Moses to place His demands before Pharaoh. Moses merely announced God’s instructions. God even accompanied His Word with miracles—to confirm the divine origin of the message (cf. Mark 16:20). Pharaoh made up his own mind to resist God’s demands. Of his own accord, he stubbornly refused to comply. Of course, God provided the occasion for Pharaoh to demonstrate his unyielding attitude. If God had not sent Moses, Pharaoh would not have been faced with the dilemma of whether to release the Israelites. So, God was certainly the instigator and initiator. But He was not the author of Pharaoh’s defiance.

Notice that in a very real sense, all four of the following statements are true: (1) **God** hardened Pharaoh’s heart; (2) **Moses** hardened Pharaoh’s heart; (3) the **words** that Moses spoke hardened Pharaoh’s heart; (4) **Pharaoh** hardened his own heart. All four of these observations are accurate, depicting the same truth from different perspectives. In this sense, God is responsible for everything in the Universe, i.e., He has provided the occasion, the circumstances, and the environment in which all things (including people) operate. But He is not guilty of wrong in so doing. From a quick look at a simple Hebrew idiom, it is clear that God did not unjustly or directly harden Pharaoh’s heart. God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34), He does not act unjustly (Psalms 33:5), and He has always allowed humans to exercise their free moral agency (Deuteronomy 30:19). **God, however, does use the wrong, stubborn decisions committed by rebellious sinners to further His causes (Isaiah 10:5-11). In the case of Pharaoh’s hardened heart, God can be charged with no injustice, and the Bible can be charged with no contradiction. Humans were created with free moral agency and are culpable for their own actions.**

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The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

“Harden” (Exodus 9:34)

Heb. *kabed* (כָּבֵד)

“to be heavy, weighty, burdensome, honored”

(Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament Brown, Driver, Briggs, p. 457)

Can apply what one does to themselves:

I Samuel 6:6

“Why then do you **harden** your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh **hardened** their hearts?”

Why did God harden Pharaoh's heart?

Got Questions.org
Animated Series



2 Thessalonians 2:11

". . . A Working of Error"

Jim R. Everett

There are none so blind as they who will not see!

Jesus said, "If any man will do his will (if anyone wishes to do his will), he shall know of the doctrine ..." (John 7:17). If our understanding and exegesis of 2 Thessalonians 2:11 should be incorrect, this much we know for sure before a man can know, he must want to know and the man who does not want to know will never understand.

What power does Satan really have? In view of the clarity of truth, how can Satan deceive? How can man avoid being deceived by his lies? What does the phrase "working of error" mean? How can it be said that God gives man a "working of error"? Is God responsible for man's being lost?

It is critical, in the study of this text, that we maintain a proper, balanced concept of the sovereignty of God and the free will of man. God rules, but he does not rule in a monothetic manner; that is, his will, in the existence of time, is not "one single element" but he restrains his will to allow man the freedom to choose. For instance, 1 Timothy 2:4 expresses his will he wishes that all men be saved. Not all men will be saved though, because most men do not want to do God's will. In harmony with that understanding, we accept the truth that God's message has two effects on the hearts of free men. It opens the receptive heart; the case in mind, Lydia, whose heart the Lord opened (Acts 16:14). It hardens the rebellious heart; consider the Jews of Jesus time (Matt. 13:10-15). In this way it can be said that God hardens men's hearts, but we understand it is done indirectly it is done through his message which offers grace. God created both hearts good and in neither instance did he operate on them contrary to the aspirations of either.

When Isaiah had been sent to Judah, God told him that the message would be met with a hardness of heart and blindness of eyes. Both Judah and the Jews of Jesus' time could not understand the message, because they did not want to understand. In whatever way we may seek to explain this text, no lost man can ever lay the fault for his condition at God's feet.

The focus of attention in this study on 2 Thessalonians 2:11, is on the phrase "a working of error." The immediate text (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12) presents God's dealings with hearts already hardened, hearts that do not want to believe & do not love the truth. That is clearly demonstrated in Paul's statements: ". . . because they received not the love of the truth ..." (v. 10), "believed not the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (v. 12). Understanding the phrase "a working of error" then cannot be divorced from an understanding of the immediate context in its general context with remote contexts interwoven. That interwoven procedure will be followed here.

Verses 1-8

In the general context, Paul began by referring to the "coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 1). Then he says that Christ's coming will not happen until the man of sin be revealed and a falling away occur (v. 3). He follows those predictions with a description of the behavior of the "son of perdition" and an alignment of him with Satan as his source of power to deceive (vv. 4-9). His most effective ploy has been and will always be the lie. Note that in the Greek verse 11 says specifically "the" lie. This is exactly how he deceived Eve in the beginning (cf. Gen. 3:1).

Verses 9-12

The immediate context (vv. 9-12), presents a conflict between the truth and the lie, which is really a conflict between God and Satan. There also existed a heart problem here, because there were hearts which "loved not the truth" and "loved the pleasures of unrighteousness." Who wins the struggle between truth and lies in men's lives depends upon the heart's aspirations.

That Satan has power enabling him to deceive man is obvious "Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and all deceivableness of unrighteousness" (vv. 9-10a).

Is he able to work real miracles, to do real signs? Notice first that Paul calls Satan's wonders "lying wonders," or, literally, "wonders of a lie." He identifies those miracles with "deceivableness of unrighteousness," or, literally, "all deceit of unrighteousness" (v. 10a). The Thessalonians would remember that when Paul first came to them his preaching was not of "deceit, nor of uncleanness nor in guile" (1 Thess. 2:3). Such methods are associated with Satan but never with God and his servants.

John says of the land beast: "He doeth great wonders ... and deceiveth them that dwell on the earth by the means of those miracles which he had power to do in the sight of the beast . . ." (Revelation 13:13-14). One way Satan deceives is by his ability to imitate God's signs by magic and sorcery. Simon the sorcerer knew the difference between his sorcery and Philip's signs (Acts 8:11-13). Pharaoh's magicians admitted their inability to match God's miracles they also knew the difference (Exod. 8:1-19). If God allowed Satan to do real miracles, he would nullify the witness of his own miracles to verify truth (cf. Mark 16:20; Heb. 2:3-4).

In harmony with our text's presentation of Satan's lying signs and wonders, a close parallel could be made to those who, currently, are blindly following the gospel of health and wealth. In spite of the fact that many of those preachers have been exposed as frauds who have no power from God to work miracles, millions are being deceived. Why? Many, plagued with debilitating diseases are desperately grasping for some hope of cure. Others are deluded by promises of great wealth. Both are easily duped by skilled charlatans who are nothing more than manipulative magicians. No doubt some of these teachers have deceived themselves into believing that God actually is working through them. Others merely perform in order to accumulate treasures, but Satan can deceive only the heart which does not love truth.

Verses 10-12

There are two statements used by Paul which mean, essentially, the same thing "they received not the love of the truth" (v. 10), and "they had pleasure in unrighteousness" (v. 12). Understanding this restrains one from blaming God for the condition of the heart and resulting damnation. They did not believe the truth because they did not want it, and they did not want it, because they had pleasure in unrighteousness. The result of their lack of love for truth is covered by the words "perish," and "damned."

Verse 11

The phrase "working of error" (2 Thess. 2:11) can be understood as being done by God either indirectly or directly. We have observed previously in this study that God's message for good has a bad effect on hearts that are unreceptive. In this way, God can be said to have hardened hearts by his requirements of men. However, in this context the word "send" suggests activity on the part of God. It is something God does as a consequence of their having Measure in unrighteousness. How God dealt with Egypt's Pharaoh serves as a model in history which demonstrates the truth affirmed in 2 Thessalonians 2:11. In Pharaoh's case God operated upon a heart already hardened by Pharaoh's own aspirations.

It is said that Pharaoh hardened his heart but it is also said that God hardened his heart (Exod. 7:11-14, 22; 8:12-15, 19, 32; 9:32-35; 10:1-2, 20, 27; cf. Rom. 9:17-18). In an analysis of all the statements made, it appears to me, that not only did God's message harden Pharaoh's heart but after Pharaoh initially hardened his heart, God made him obstinate in order to demonstrate clearly his power (note Exod. 6:1; 7:3-4; 8:22; 10:1-2; 14:3-4, 17-18). Though he could have delivered Israel without any signs or, for that matter at any point in time, he wanted both the Egyptians and the Israelites to know, beyond any doubt, that he was The Almighty. It was necessary that Pharaoh not let Israel go until God had demonstrated his mighty power.

God also affected Nebuchadnezzar's heart without violating his freedom to choose (Dan. 4:1-37). Though Nebuchadnezzar had been warned by Daniel's interpretation of his dream about the stump, twelve months later Nebuchadnezzar exalted himself in his pride and God did exactly what he said he would. "Let his heart be changed from man's, and let a beast's heart be given unto him and let seven times pass over him till thou know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdoms of men" (Dan. 4:16, 25b).

Establishing those truths makes it easier to understand, not only the meaning of the phrase "working of error," but also, what God does to the hearts of those who do not want to believe his truth. "Working of error" (NKJV) means "an active power of misleading" (Vincent, 4:67), or ". . . the energy or working that belongs to error" (Lenski, 431). It is true, as we have already observed, that God allows men to believe and practice wrong (cf. Rom. 1:24, 25, 26, 28); however, "send" (pempai, Greek) is not permissive but active. We would never be justified in concluding from this context that error is God's creation, for that would violate the very nature of God. Rather, errors authored by Satan (cf. John. 8:44), are used by God for those who have actually chosen to do the will of their father, Satan.

When man wants to believe a lie, when he has no love of truth, when he has pleasure in unrighteousness, not only will God allow that but he will also send error's energy into such a heart that it might believe the lie and be damned. No stronger warning could compel us to love and seek truth above all else.

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God Hardens Whom He Wills?

by Dave Miller, Ph.D.



Over the centuries, people have rejected Christianity for many reasons. Tragically, some have done so as the result of misconceptions regarding what the Bible actually teaches. They have heard individuals who claim to be Christians expound what they claim are Christ's teachings. The hearers assumed Christ's teaching was being represented accurately, but recognizing the self-evident flaws in the presentation they heard, falsely concluded that Christ's teaching was contradictory, when, in reality, the problem was in the one who purported to present correct Bible teaching.

One major cause of unbelief among those who have concluded that Christianity is false has been the advocacy of Calvinism. The rational, logical mind recognizes that a perfect, infinite God would not create beings in His own image (Genesis 1:27) that are not free moral agents responsible for their own decisions. Nor would He allow them to be subjected, through no fault of their own, to a condition of depravity, inherited from their parents, that makes them incapable of exercising their free moral agency to choose to accept or reject Him. Since a substantial segment of Christendom has promulgated Calvinism for well over five centuries, multitudes of people unfortunately have assumed that the New Testament endorses Calvinistic tenets.

One passage that has been alleged to teach that God's sovereignty means He is free to override human will or do whatever He pleases, though His actions may interfere with human choice – a passage that is found in the New Testament book of Romans:

But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, "In Isaac your seed shall be called." That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. For this is the word of promise: "At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son." And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (**for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls**), it was said to her, "**The older shall serve the younger.**" As it is written, "**Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated**" (Romans 9:6-13, emp. added).

The parenthetical material is typically interpreted to mean that God decided to save Jacob and reject Esau before either was born, and without regard to any action of good or evil on their part. Of course, such an interpretation rips the verse from its context and places God in an unfavorable light.

In stark contrast, the context of the statement demonstrates that the apostle was referring to **God's plan to bring Christ into the world by means of the genetic line of Abraham and his descendants**. Even though the bulk of the Jewish nation ended up rejecting Christ and the Gospel, God's word concerning Abraham's descendants was still fulfilled. How? "They are not all [spiritual—DM] Israel who are of [physical—DM] Israel." In other words, Paul insisted unequivocally that the original promise to Abraham to bless the world was fulfilled in Christ, the Gospel, and the church of Christ—not in the fleshly, physical nation of Israel. To be **physically** descended from Abraham does not make one a **spiritual** child of Abraham. As John asserted: "And do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones" (Matthew 3:9). Genetic offspring are "a dime a dozen." Only spiritual descendants—i.e., those who trust and obey God, are genuine children of Abraham.

Consequently, no person has a right to maintain that simply because he had descended **physically** from Abraham, he shares in the promise of salvation in Christ. After all, Abraham had other sons who could claim the same genetic connection to Abraham (Genesis 16:15; 25:1-2). But it was through **Isaac** that God chose to bring the Christ. Abraham's other fleshly sons were not "children of the promise," i.e., through whom God promised to bring Christ. When a person today obeys the Gospel in order to become a Christian, that person becomes a child of the promise, and then is counted as the seed of Abraham, regardless of physical nationality (Romans 4:11-12; Galatians 3:29).

Further, a person might argue that God chose Isaac over Ishmael because Hagar was not Abraham's real wife. But what about Isaac's sons? They were full brothers, in fact, they were **twins**, and Esau was the **firstborn**. Yet God selected Jacob through whom to work out His redemptive plan—a selection that didn't determine Jacob's salvation status. Two quotations from the Old Testament prove Paul's point—the first from Genesis 25:23, and the second from Malachi 1:2-3. In both, the focus is on the two **nations** that eventually descended from Jacob and Esau, i.e., Israel and Edom. God was not unjust when He made the selections He made to carry out His plans to bring Christ. The Jew might tend to feel that since God chose Abraham, Isaac & Jacob through whom to work, then every **physical** descendant should be **spiritually** acceptable to God. **Here, indeed, is the number one misconception of the nation of Israel throughout Bible history, as well as a major point of confusion for the Calvinistic misrepresentation of the sovereignty of God. When it comes to personal, individual salvation, everyone's treated impartial, as individuals. Genetic descendants of Abraham have no spiritual advantage over anyone else.** The Apostle Paul continued:

What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy and compassion on whomever I will have compassion." So, then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. 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. You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" But indeed, O man, **who are you to reply against God?** Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" **Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?** (Romans 9:14-21, emp. added).

The words that God spoke to Moses, found in Exodus 33:19, were designed to encourage him not to give up on his leadership role. God had brought the nation out of Egypt, despite Pharaoh's opposition. No one could keep God from doing what He deemed necessary to achieve His plan to bring Christ into the world. God showed the Israelites great compassion and mercy in His **physical** treatment of them through the centuries. But He shows **spiritual** compassion (i.e., He imparts salvation) to **everyone** equally on the same gospel terms, i.e., on the basis of what Christ accomplished on the cross.

The Jews were constantly in a dither ("willing" and "running"—vs. 16) as they asserted their favored status to the exclusion of Gentiles. But God never intended to show gospel mercy on the basis of ethnic linkage to Abraham. His exclusive selection of Abraham was for the singular purpose of bringing Christ into the world that the entire human race might have access to forgiveness of sin. The Jewish nation misinterpreted the coincidental racial aspect of God's dealings through them. To bring Christ, God **had** to make choices of people to use. But His choices had nothing to do with each individual's own personal salvation.

Pharaoh provides a good illustration of how God worked in this regard. God purposed to show mercy to the people of Israel that they might leave Egypt, go to the Promised Land & further advance God's plan to bring Christ into the world. So, God sent Moses to present God's words to Pharaoh. The demand to release the people, however, only served to "raise up," i.e., arouse, incite, or stir up Pharaoh (see Thayer, 1901, p. 222; Alford, 1877, 2:409; Vincent, 1890, 3:105; cf. Psalm 80:2). **On his own volition, Pharaoh opposed God's plan. His defiance created conditions under which God's name was publicized to the world, alluded to in the quotation of Exodus 9:16.**

Still, God gave Pharaoh opportunity after opportunity to change his mind—ten separate plagues and multiple visits from Moses (who repeatedly articulated God's word to him). **But this prolonged engagement (the longsuffering of God) resulted in giving Pharaoh more opportunities to be hardened in his rebellion—contrary to God's will for him. Because God was the initiator and instigator of the circumstance, it may properly be said that He did the hardening. God confronts all people through circumstances and His Word, but each person is responsible for his or her own separate, individual reactions.**

But if God showed mercy to the Israelites by allowing them to escape Egyptian slavery, and if God destroyed Pharaoh for resisting His will, why then did God find fault with the Jews of Paul's day? Why would God find fault with anyone whose heart is hardened by His demands? The answer lies in the fact that **God has the divine right to use His own methods to bring about salvation for the world without interfering with our choices. Here is a marvelous feature of the sovereignty of God — His ability to work out His own purposes while simultaneously allowing the human agents involved to exercise their own free wills and make their own choices. God can incorporate human beings into His overarching redemptive plans regardless of the personal choices humans make.** Consequently, no one can rightfully accuse God of mistreating him or her. In fact, truth be told, human heartaches are often self-generated (cf. 1 Peter 4:15).

Thus, throughout the context of Romans 9-11, Paul was not discussing personal salvation. Each individual decides salvation by the choices he or she makes. Paul was writing about how God can, and has, made use of people and nations in history to bring to fruition His grand plan of salvation. One Old Testament passage clarifies the concept:

"O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?" says the Lord. "Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel! The instant I speak concerning a nation & concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, to destroy it, **if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil**, I will relent of the disaster I thought to bring upon it.

And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, **if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice**, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it. Now therefore, speak to the men of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord: “Behold, I am fashioning a disaster and devising a plan against you. Return now every one from his evil way, and **make your ways and your doings good.**” ’ ” And they said, “That is hopeless! So **we will walk according to our own plans, and we will every one do the imagination of his evil heart**” (Jeremiah 18:6-12).

This passage demonstrates that people make their own choices to do evil or good, to obey or disobey God. But God can work over, under, around, or through people—depending upon their personal choices. Either way, God achieves His will while simultaneously allowing each individual to make his or her own decisions and cinch his or her own fate. In **that** sense, and only in that sense, He is a potter with putty in His hands (Isaiah 29:16; 45:9). Each individual decides their own conduct, and God then uses them accordingly.

God must show His wrath against sin and punish sin by His power (Romans 1:18). But He is longsuffering in that He does not want anyone to perish, as illustrated by how long He put up with Pharaoh’s stubborn resistance. Similarly, He tolerated Noah’s generation for many years before bringing the Flood, and He bore with the Israelites throughout their defiant history. They were “prepared for destruction”—in the sense they chose to so fit themselves, and did everything possible to achieve it. But such was not God’s desire for them:

Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance & longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each one according to his deeds (Romans 2:4-6).

Nor is it God’s desire for anyone today:

The Lord isn’t slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. . . Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and account the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation (2 Peter 3:9,14-16; cf. 1 Timothy 2:4).

The nation of Israel had a long history of preparing itself for destruction—which finally came in A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. In the meantime, God endured them with much longsuffering. Why? “That He might make known the riches of His glory.” That is, He was working out His scheme of redemption. He put up with the unbelieving Jews, allowing them to proceed down the pathway of their own self-appointed destruction (Matthew 23:32), until He could bring Christ, and then get the Gospel disseminated to the Gentiles (Acts 18:5-6; Colossians 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16). The church of Christ was launched in A.D. 30 in the city of Jerusalem, the heart of Israel, and consisted only of Jews for several years. God couldn’t instigate due punishment upon the Jewish nation at that point without endangering the infant church of Christ. He waited until the Gospel went forth from Jerusalem to “the end of the earth” Acts 1:8), enabling the Gentiles to be introduced to the Gospel (Acts 10). **This accounts for the “lag time” between A.D. 30 and A.D. 70.**

The book of Romans cannot be used successfully nor legitimately to maintain the doctrine that God can do anything He chooses without regard to human decision-making and free moral agency. Unlike the imaginary deities conjured up in the minds of misguided men, the God of the Bible is shown to be perfect, possessing attributes of excellence to a perfect degree. He is the Supreme Ruler of the Universe.

Is God the Author of Falsehoods?

by [Eric Lyons, M.Min.](#)



In 1 Kings 22, the story is told of King Ahab requesting the assistance from Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, to go to war with Syria in order to recover the territory of Ramoth Gilead. Jehoshaphat immediately agreed to assist Ahab in this battle, but he also asked for Ahab to “inquire for the word of the Lord” (vs. 5). Ahab willingly granted Jehoshaphat’s request, and gathered together nearly 400 of his prophets. After these prophets approved of Ahab’s plan of war, and assured him victory against the Syrians (vss. 6,10-12), Jehoshaphat (apparently sensing that all was not well) asked if there was another prophet that they might consult in order to get more counsel. Ahab bitterly acknowledged that there still was one man who could be consulted regarding his desire to reclaim Ramoth Gilead for Israel—Micaiah, the son of Imlah. As Ahab suspected, once Micaiah (a true prophet of the Lord) was brought before him, he predicted defeat for the confederation (vss. 17-23)—a prophecy that Ahab and Jehoshaphat ignored, but one that was fulfilled. The battle ended with Israel and Judah in retreat, and Ahab dead.

The problem that many people have with this passage has to do with the lying spirit that Micaiah mentioned as coming from Jehovah. The text reads as follows:

Then Micaiah said, “Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by, on His right hand and on His left. And the Lord said, ‘Who will persuade Ahab to go up, that he may fall at Ramoth Gilead?’ So, one spoke in this manner, and another spoke in that manner. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, and said, ‘I will persuade him.’ The Lord said to him, ‘In what way?’ So, he said, ‘I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And the Lord said, ‘You shall persuade him, and also prevail. Go out and do so.’ Therefore look! The Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets of yours, and the Lord has declared disaster against you” (1 Kings 22:19-23).

Few narratives in the Old Testament have been the focus of more infidel criticism than 1st Kings 22, and particularly these five verses. How could God, Who is revealed in the Bible as being One Who “cannot lie” (Titus 1:2; cf. Hebrews 6:18), “put a lying spirit in the mouth” of Ahab’s prophets (1st Kings 22:23)? What rational explanation can be given to this alleged discrepancy? Is God, or Satan, the “father of lies” (John 8:44)?

First, the honest Bible student must observe that the narrative involves a **vision** that is highly **symbolic**. Therefore, it would be unwise to press it as though it were a **literal** circumstance. **Micaiah answered Ahab with two parabolic visions.** “In the first, Israel was likened to shepherdless sheep scattered on the mountains, which must find their own way home (v. 17). In the second Micaiah described a heavenly scene in which the Lord and his hosts discussed the best way to get Ahab to Ramoth Gilead so that he might fall in battle (vss. 19-23)” (Patterson and Austel, 1988, p. 164). Commentator Adam Clarke wisely noted that this account is an illustration, and “only tells, in figurative language, what was in the womb of providence, the events which were shortly to take place, the agents employed in them, and the permission on the part of God for these agents to act” (n.d., 2:476). Another writer has observed: “Visions of the invisible world can only be a sort of parables; revelation, not of the truth as it actually is, but of so much of the truth as can be shown through such a medium. The details of a vision, therefore, cannot safely be pressed, any more than the details of a parable” (Cook, 1981, 2:619).

Second, there is a common Hebrew idiom used throughout the Old Testament by which the **permissive will of God** is expressed in forceful, active jargon. The Lord is said to have “hardened Pharaoh’s heart” (Exodus 7:3,13; 9:12; 10:1; et al.), “incited David against” Israel (2 Samuel 24:1), “deceived” His people (Jeremiah 4:10), and given them “statutes that were not good” (Ezekiel 20:25). In the New Testament, God is characterized as sending a strong delusion that some might believe a lie and be condemned (2 Thessalonians 2:11-12). Even Jesus used “commands” at times in a permissive sense. For example, He commanded the demons to “go” into the herd of pigs (Matthew 8:32), yet the preceding verse informs the reader that the demons begged Jesus to let them enter the swine. Thus, He was not the initiator of the demons’ move (inhabiting man to dwelling in pigs), He merely permitted them to do so. Similarly, when Jesus told Judas, “What you do, do quickly” (John 13:27), He was not giving Him a direct command, or forcing Judas to betray Him. Rather, Jesus **permitted** Judas’ actions, and (because He knew what Judas was about to do) encouraged him to do it quickly.

All of these passages basically indicate that when men are determined to disobey their Creator, He allows them to follow the base inclination of their own hearts. Such was the case with Ahab and his false prophets. God knew their hearts. He knew Ahab was going to go to war before he ever consulted with his prophets (1 Kings 22:3-4). He knew that the prophets were accustomed to telling the king whatever he wanted to hear (cf. 22:8), and He knew that they were also going to tickle Ahab’s “itching ear” on this occasion (cf. 2 Timothy 4:3-4). Although God’s will was made known to Ahab and his prophets in this case (i.e., Micaiah warned Ahab of the impending doom), He permitted their hardened hearts to believe a lie.

In 1 Kings 22:19-23, and numerous other verses of similar import, the Bible merely expresses what God **allows**, not what He **initiates** or **forces to happen**. Walter Kaiser correctly stated that “many biblical writers dismiss secondary causes and attribute all that happens directly to God, since he is over all things. Therefore, statements expressed in the imperative form of the verb often represent only what is permitted to happen” (1988, p. 119). This account, therefore, shouldn’t trouble the sincere student of God’s Word.

The “Honest” Heart

In the parable of the sower, Jesus spoke of the sowing of seed upon the soil of Palestine. Four types of soil were surveyed. There was the hard, wayside soil into which no seed could penetrate. Then reference was made to the stony ground (a veneer of soil underlain with bedrock), which was too shallow to accommodate growth. A soil crowded with thorn bushes was similarly unproductive. Finally, though, there was the “good” soil, identified by the Savior as an “honest and good heart” (Luke 8:15).

The “honest heart” describes the disposition of one who is characterized by an earnestness of soul, an attitude of sincerity bereft of stubbornness and hypocrisy. It reflects a mentality adorned with “integrity,” as possessed by Abimelech, Abram’s contemporary (Genesis 20:5), or Nathaniel, in whom was found no “guile” (John 1:47).

The honest heart is the one in which there is a sense of craving for the divine; it acknowledges the need for the Creator’s guidance. It’s the mind-set in which the distinction between right & wrong hasn’t been obliterated. It longs for instruction, acknowledging “the way of man is not in himself ... to direct his steps” (Jeremiah 10:23).

No better example of a glaring contrast, i.e., a **dishonest** heart, exists than that of Pharaoh, whose stubborn heart resisted every benevolent overture from God. Three Hebrew words are employed to describe the rebellious inclination of the Egyptian ruler. The word qasha means to “make sharp, hard, obstinate” (Exodus 7:3). The term kated denotes “heavy, insensible,” (Exodus 7:14; 8:15,32; 9:7,34; 10:1), and hazaq signifies “headstrong, stiff, unyielding” (Exodus 4:21; 7:3,22; 8:19; 9:12).

The hardening is attributed both to Pharaoh and to God. To the former because he closed his mind to the enlightenment of Jehovah’s message, as buttressed by awesome power. The hardening is credited to God because the Lord made demands upon the ungodly autocrat he didn’t wish to obey. Heaven respected the ruler’s freedom of choice. What God merely **permits**, he is often, in a figurative sense, said to actually do (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:11). – *Wayne Jackson*

Q: DOES GOD HARDEN HUMAN HEARTS?

THE BEST ANSWER: YES & NO

