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The Communicator's Commentary

Exodus

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over the sea and divide it. And the children of Israel shall go on dry *ground* through the midst of the sea.

17 "And I indeed will harden the hearts of the Egyptians, and they shall follow them. So I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, his chariots, and his horsemen.

18 "Then the Egyptians shall know that I *am* the LORD, when I have gained honor for Myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen."

Exod. 14:1-18

It's always good to review the story because it is so revealing of human nature. Pharaoh, fickle man that he was, was bent on power. Though the plagues had eventually gotten to him, especially the death angel claiming the firstborn of the land, still he had not learned his lesson. Though he thought he had had enough of God's intervention in his life—to the point that he summoned Moses and Aaron in the middle of the night and commanded them to take the people and leave the land and go serve the Lord—still his stubborn trust in self prevailed. God knew that was the way it would be. He had directed Moses as to where the children of Israel were to camp, saying that Pharaoh would think, "*They are bewildered by the land; the wilderness has closed them in*" (v. 3). And again, we have that word that can be confusing, "*Then I will harden Pharaoh's heart, so that he will pursue them; and I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, that the Egyptians may know that I am the Lord*" (v. 4).

Remember our earlier discussion of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart? Here it is again. When Israel had gone from the land, Pharaoh and his servants changed their mind. "*Why have we done this, that we have let Israel go from serving us?*" It's hard to give up a place of privilege and position. It was impossible for Pharaoh and the Egyptians to give up having all those servants and slaves around to fulfill their every need. So, the army of Pharaoh made itself ready, and with all its leading officers and with its mighty chariots, went in hot pursuit of the Israelites.

Here we come to a recurring practice on the part of Israel—the loss of faith, the murmuring against Moses, and the murmuring against God. When the Israelites saw the dust of Pharaoh's army coming, naturally they were terrified. They turned on Moses and accused him of bringing them into the wilderness to die. They

teaches a profound truth. *"The Lord said to Moses in Midian, 'Go, return to Egypt; for all the men who sought your life are dead'"* (v. 19). You can hardly keep from comparing this to the words with which the infant Jesus is recalled from exile—there's such a close verbal resemblance. *"Go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead"* (Matt. 2:20).

G. A. Chadwick has made the point of the truth of that observation so well. "One can scarcely venture to speak of the death of Herod when Jesus was to return from Egypt as being deliberately typified in the death of those who sought the life of Moses. But it is quite clear St. Matthew intentionally points the reader back to this narrative, for, indeed, under both there are to be recognized that God does not thrust His servants into needless or excessive peril; and that when the life of a tyrant has really become not only a trial, but a barrier, it will be removed by the King of kings. God is prudent for His heroes."⁴

And the journey itself—Moses' journey back to the land of his people—is paralleled by that journey of Joseph and Mary in the New Testament. The life of faith is one of pilgrimage, and the people of God have their life "in caravan." Like Jacob before him, Moses returned to his fathers' land with his family. This is the motif of faith for the nation Israel in the Old Testament.

Hardening of the Heart

As Moses moved out toward Egypt, God rehearsed with him what he was to do when he got to Egypt. He was to perform all of the wonders that God had placed at his disposal and then demand the release of the Israelites from slavery. Then God added a very perplexing word. It must have been as perplexing to Moses as it is to the modern reader: *"But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go"* (v. 21b).

References to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart are found eighteen times in the chapters that follow. And the thought is expressed three different ways. (1) God hardened Pharaoh's heart, (2) Pharaoh hardened his own heart, and (3) Pharaoh's heart was hardened.

There are shades of meaning in these phrases. One of them means "to be strong," hence, stubborn. The second means "to be heavy," thus, dull or unresponsive. The third means "to be hard, severe,"

therefore, obstinate. Put all of these together and you have a description of how Pharaoh is going to respond to Moses' demands that he let Israel go free.⁵

To begin to understand this perplexing notion, we need to remember that in Hebrew thought the heart was understood to be the seat of the intellect or will, not the emotions. It was the seat of volitional action and did not carry with it the emotional tones with which we identify it in the twentieth century. Also, Hebrew thought did not deal with secondary causes—causes standing between an event and God. We might say "The circumstances hardened Pharaoh's heart." But that would not fit into the Hebrew pattern of thought. God was sovereign, and His action was direct and everything could be traced to Him. So, the Israelites could only say, "Pharaoh hardened his heart," or "God hardened Pharaoh's heart," and they would see no difference or contradiction in it.

But how do we grapple with this? Did Pharaoh have no choice in his action, since "God hardened his heart"? If that was the case, how could he be punished for what he could not control? We can more easily understand the phrase "Pharaoh hardened his heart"—he refused to release the Israelites; that was a willful decision.

But how do we reconcile all those different expressions? The only satisfactory answer, I think, is in the biblical paradox of the sovereignty of God set against the freedom of man. While a person is free to accept or to reject the will of God for his or her own life, God's purposes are going to be accomplished regardless of that person's decision. In that context, of the sovereignty of God and the freedom of man, people are responsible and accountable for what they do.

In his commentary, Alexander Maclaren has provided a helpful word on the result of the plagues with Pharaoh.

God hardens no man's heart who has not first hardened it himself. But we do not need to conclude that any inward action on the will is meant. Was not the accumulation of plagues, intended as they were to soften, a cause of hardening? Does not the gospel, if rejected, harden, making consciences and wills less susceptible? Is it not a "savior of death unto death" as our fathers recognized in speaking of "gospel-hardened sinners"? The same fire softens wax and hardens clay. Whosoever is not brought near is driven farther off by the influences which God brings to bear on us.⁶

I've known a number of people throughout my ministry who seemed to be impervious to the gospel. In the old days, it would be said of them, "Their hearts are hardened." I remember a dramatic example of this in the first church I served in rural Mississippi. A seventy-two-year-old man went through some terrible ordeals—the breakup of the family of one of his sons, the imprisonment of another son for bootlegging, the terminal disease of a grandchild, and finally his own broken health. One would have thought that all of this would have brought him to his knees, that there would be some opening for the Spirit of God to get through to him, but not so. I remember so vividly those times that I would spend with him, seeking to share the grace of the gospel. It wasn't as though he turned me off with a deaf ear or that he was obstinate toward me personally, but there seemed to be a barrier there that couldn't be penetrated. Because I never shared an experience with that man in which he confessed any faith in God, I always wondered if his heart was not so hardened by his continual refusal of the gospel that he could not now respond.

There is a mystery in all of this, but it's the kind of mystery that we need to grapple with, because it has to do with our own eternal destiny.

This is serious business. It is soul business with eternal consequences. Besides that dramatic experience in my first church, I've seen it in varying degrees throughout my ministry. To refuse the gospel call upon our lives at any level is to lay another brick in our wall of resistance to God's grace. That's the reason little decisions—responses to what appear to be minor calls—are important. Our obedience to the everyday calls of God is the discipline that equips us to respond faithfully when the big calls come.

What are those everyday calls?

- to repent; as soon as you sense some sin in your life, repent, come to Christ, be genuinely sorry, beg His forgiveness.
- to give a cup of cold water in Jesus' name.
- to speak up for that colleague or neighbor who is being maligned by gossip.
 - to tithe your income as God has called each one of us to do.
 - to witness for Christ every time the opportunity arises.
 - to live holy lives; to be recognized as set apart, refusing to participate in the immorality that is rampant in our time—cheating, infidelity, deceit, fornication, lying.

God's call comes to us in some form every day. Every day we have the opportunity to respond to Him. Though it may not be noticeable to us, refusing these calls will gradually harden our hearts.

That's the reason the psalmist made this call to his people:

O that today you would hearken to his voice!
Harden not your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness.

Ps. 95:7b-8, RSV

We'll come to Meribah and Massah soon in chapter 17. The people have experienced the glorious works of the Lord—the passing over of the death angel and the deliverance out of Egypt, escape through the Red Sea and the drowning of Pharaoh's army, manna from heaven to miraculously feed them daily—glorious acts of God! Yet when they came to Rephidim, and there was no water there, in their thirst they forgot God. They railed against Moses: "Why is it you have brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (Exod. 17:3b).

Years later, the psalmist refers to this:

O that today you would hearken to his voice!
Harden not your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your fathers tested me,
and put me to the proof though they had seen my
work.

For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, "They are a people who err in heart,
and they do not regard my ways."

Therefore I swore in my anger
that they should not enter my rest.

Ps. 95:7b-11, RSV

"The Lord Met Him and Sought to Kill Him"

Here in verse 24 is another puzzling word and a baffling test of faith for Moses as he journeys back to Egypt. Along with his wife Zipporah and his two sons, Moses was camping out on his journey when *"the Lord met him and sought to kill him."*