

Born to Win

The Ten Commandments #2

by: Ronald L. Dart

Nearly everyone knows the story of the Exodus. Between Charlton Heston playing Moses in the movie *The Ten Commandments* and the animated *Prince of Egypt*, the story has been thoroughly told to the masses. But there's an aspect of it that continues to trouble a lot of people who read the Bible: *Pharaoh had no choice*. God hardened his heart again and again. It would be one thing if Pharaoh were Hitler—a thoroughly bad man and who was himself hardhearted, started hardhearted, and stayed that way. But the Scriptures don't say that. There's little doubt that Pharaoh was a bad actor, but the Scriptures say, categorically, that God hardened his heart so that he would *not* let Israel go.

I can still remember the first time that I ever encountered this idea. It was in Paul's writings and I was just a teenager. I read in Romans 9, verse 17:

Romans 9

AKJV

¹⁷ For the scripture said to Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth.

¹⁸ Therefore has he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardens.

Now, we all know that God is sovereign, and we know that God can do whatever he wants to do. But it's a little chilling to learn that God hardens one man's heart, so that he *cannot* relent, while another man he gives mercy to. Paul continued:

Romans 9

AKJV

¹⁹ You will say then to me, Why does he yet find fault? For who has resisted his will?

²⁰ No but, O man, who are you that reply against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why have you made me thus?

Well, yes. Yes, I would ask God that, if I were one that he had made to destruction. I would say, "God, why did You make me this way?" Paul says:

Romans 9

AKJV

²¹ Has not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel to honor, and another to dishonor?

Yes. Out of the same lump you can make one vessel to honor, he can make another one, to dishonor

Romans 9

AKJV

²² What if God, willing to show his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction[?]

Now that's a clear reference to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, but I'll tell you, it was chilling to me as a young man reading the Bible to consider the possibility, however remote, that I might be a vessel of *wrath*. Someone actually *created to dishonor*.

And there's no question about it, when you read the story in Exodus, God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but there's an aspect of that story that rarely gets told. Nothing I have ever seen in the movies about this event accurately portrays what the Egyptians did to the Israelites and over what period of time they did it.

There was not a man or woman among the Israelites who had known a day of freedom in their lives. They had been born slaves, their mothers and fathers had been slaves, their grandparents, their great-grandparents had been slaves. There was no one around who had *talked* to anyone who would ever had been a free person. And after so long of time, even the memory of freedom begins to fade.

They worked the daylight hours of every day, seven days a week, and it was *hard* work. They lived in wretched conditions of poverty. An entire generation of their male children had been murdered by throwing them into the Nile River. They still prayed, although I can't imagine that by this time, they had very much hope in their prayers. I know they prayed, because God heard them.

And when the time had come, he sent Moses and his brother Aaron to bring them out of Egypt. But there was a small matter of justice that had to be dealt with. God could not allow the brutality, the oppression, and the murder perpetrated by all the Egyptians—not just Pharaoh, all of them—to go unpunished. To do so would have left a bitterness in the Israelites that they would never have been able to overcome in all of their generations.

God is not only a God of mercy, he is a God of justice and justice was about to be visited upon the Egyptians. You get some idea of how cruel the Egyptians had been by the series of plagues that God sent on them.

But first, Moses and Aaron have to lay out God's requirements. They have to reveal themselves to the children of Israel and say, "Here's what were going to do folks. God is going to take us out." And you find this story beginning in Exodus chapter, 4 verse 29:

Exodus 4

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²⁹ And Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel:

³⁰ And Aaron spoke all the words which the LORD had spoken unto Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people.

³¹ And the people believed: and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel, and that he had looked upon their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped.

It wasn't going to be long until they would feel a little *less* grateful about things that happened, because some things were going to take place that were going to make them *very uncomfortable*.

Moses and Aaron managed to get an audience with Pharaoh and they went to see him and said:

Exodus 5

KJ2000

¹ [...] Thus says the LORD God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness.

² And Pharaoh said, Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the LORD, neither will I let Israel go.

Now this all seems very predictable, you know, here's a man, he's in charge of all he surveys, and at his word people live and people die. Why in the world should he pay any attention to two bearded prophets standing in front of him saying, "Let my people go. Let all of these slaves go to hold a feast in the wilderness."? "Get away from me," he would say.

Exodus 5

KJ2000

³ And they said, The God of the Hebrews has met with us: let us go, we pray you, three days' journey into the desert, and sacrifice unto the LORD our God; lest he fall upon us with pestilence, or with the sword.

Now, this is really interesting because what they are implying by this is that there was a law that said that at this certain time of the year they had to get out in the wilderness and hold a feast. Otherwise, what's this pestilence and sword business? What's this punishment falling upon them because they don't do it? The King of Egypt said:

Exodus 5

KJ2000

⁴ And the king of Egypt said unto them, Why do you, Moses and Aaron, take the people from their work? get you unto your burdens.

⁵ And Pharaoh said, Behold, the people of the land now are many, and you make them rest from their burdens.

⁶ And Pharaoh commanded the same day the taskmasters of the people, and their officers, saying,

⁷ You shall no more give the people straw to make brick, as before: let them go and gather straw for themselves.

⁸ And the number of the bricks, which they did make before, you shall lay upon them; you shall not diminish any of them: for they are idle; therefore they cry, saying, Let us go and sacrifice to our God.

⁹ Let there more work be laid upon the men, that they may labor in it; and let them not give regard to vain words.

¹⁰ And the taskmasters of the people went out, and their officers, and they spoke to the people, saying, Thus says Pharaoh, I will not give you straw.

And so, they had to work harder and longer every day and turn out the same number of bricks or else—and "or else" was pretty severe.

Exodus 5

KJ2000

¹⁴ And the officers of the children of Israel, that Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten, and asked, Why have you not fulfilled your task in making brick both yesterday and today, as before?

¹⁵ Then the officers of the children of Israel came and cried unto Pharaoh, saying, Why dealt you thus with your servants?

¹⁶ There is no straw given unto your servants, and they say to us, Make brick: and, behold, your servants are beaten; but the fault is in your own people.

¹⁷ But he said, you are idle, you are idle: therefore you say, Let us go and do sacrifice to the LORD.

¹⁸ Go therefore now, and work; for there shall no straw be given you, yet shall you deliver the number of bricks.

¹⁹ And the officers of the children of Israel did see that they were in an evil plight, after it was said, you shall not reduce any from your bricks of your daily task.

So, getting no relief from Pharaoh, they went looking for Moses and Aaron, and they ran into them in the street and said:

Exodus 5

KJ2000

²¹ [...] The LORD look upon you, and judge; because you have made our favor to be abhorred in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to slay us.

And Moses—he had nobody else to talk to—went to God. And he said:

Exodus 4

KJ2000

²² [...] Lord, why have you brought evil upon this people? why is it that you have sent me?

Now, you know, up to this point there really are no surprises—God had said he would harden Pharaoh’s heart. But his response up to this point is exactly what I would’ve expected from *any tyrant*. "Do you think you’re getting off work? Forget about it. Let’s make them work harder. Let’s extend the hours. Let’s make them produce more. Whatever it has to be." That’s the typical way a tyrant would respond. But it’s not over yet, there’s a whole lot of karma coming down in Egypt behind these words.

God listened patiently to Moses with his complaint, and then he said, “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

Exodus 6

KJ2000

¹ Then the LORD said unto Moses, Now shall you see what I will do to Pharaoh: for with a strong hand shall he let them go, and with a strong hand shall he drive them out of his land.

And he went on to explain something to Moses. He said:

Exodus 6

KJ2000

² And God spoke unto Moses, and said unto him, I am the LORD [*Yehovah*]:

Now there is a convention here in your Bible that you may not be aware of. Everywhere in the Old Testament where you see the small caps “LORD”, they are putting that in the place of the Hebrew word for the name of God, which is *YHWH*, or something close to that, in the Hebrew language. Written Hebrew has no vowels, so there is some uncertainty to the pronunciation of that name. But the reason why you find LORD in virtually every Bible instead of Yahweh or Yehovah (or whatever particular description you might find) is because the Jews considered this the ineffable name of God. Lest they should take it in vain, lest they should somehow defile God’s name, they don’t use it. They substitute *Adonai* in their language, or LORD in English, for it. Some use the term *hashem*, which is Hebrew for “the name.” They hold the name of God in *great awe* and therefore they do not pronounce it. But when you come to a passage like this one, you need to understand that the name is suddenly coming into play and it’s important.

Exodus 6

KJ2000

² And God spoke unto Moses, and said unto him, I am the LORD:

³ And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty [The Hebrew for “God Almighty” is *El Shaddai*], but by my name the LORD was I not known to them.

Now the question comes, why? And it’s not that hard to understand if you understand a little about languages. The Hebrew language is not the language that Adam and Eve spoke in the Garden of Eden. It is not the language that Jesus and the Father speak at home, in heaven. Who knows what language they speak—they may not even *need* a language for all we know. Hebrew is a human language like every other human language that has come along. It has evolved. Actually Arabic is an older language than Hebrew. And the problem was that *Yahweh* or *Yehovah* is the Hebrew name of God. Abraham didn’t speak Hebrew. Hebrew didn’t *exist* in Abraham’s day. Abraham therefore knew God, not as *Yahweh*, but as *El Shaddai*. But it *was* the same God. So God says that he wasn’t known that way, but:

Exodus 6

KJ2000

³ [...] by my name the LORD was I not known to them.

⁴ And I have also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, in which they were strangers.

⁵ And I have also heard the groaning of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage; and I have remembered my covenant.

Now, you see, this is what the issue is: the whole land of Palestine—in fact, everything from the Nile River in Egypt all the way to the Euphrates—was deeded in perpetuity to Abraham and his descendants. But they had been down here in Egypt a long time and God wanted them to go back and to possess the land of Canaan because that’s where he wanted the sons of *Israel* to be. And so, he had come down into Egypt to get them.

Exodus 6

KJ2000

⁶ Therefore say unto the children of Israel, I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments:

And, you know, I think most people who read through this passage overlook that little word —“judgments”—because what he is talking about is rendering judgment on the Egyptians for all the things they have done—for all the evil that they have perpetrated. That sort of thing cannot be allowed to stand.

Exodus 6

KJ2000

⁷ And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

⁸ And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it to you for a heritage: I am the LORD [*Yahweh*].

They listened to him when he came down, they were encouraged. They thought, “Well, this is going to be wonderful! We will just pack up our stuff and we will migrate.” And it wasn’t working that way. It wasn’t working that way because God had to finish his work of judgment on Egypt and they had to live through it.

Exodus 6

KJ2000

¹⁰ And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying,

¹¹ Go in, speak unto Pharaoh king of Egypt, that he let the children of Israel go out of his land.

Now, Moses is beginning to be a little frustrated by this time and he says:

Exodus 6

KJ2000

¹² And Moses spoke before the LORD, saying, Behold, the children of Israel have not hearkened unto me; how then shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised lips?

¹³ And the LORD spoke unto Moses and unto Aaron, and gave them a charge unto the children of Israel, and unto Pharaoh king of Egypt, to bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt.

Exodus 7

KJ2000

¹ And the LORD said unto Moses, See, I have made you a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet.

² You shall speak all that I command you: and Aaron your brother shall speak unto Pharaoh, that he send the children of Israel out of his land.

³ And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt.

Why is God hardening Pharaoh's heart? Is it just arbitrary? Is it because he doesn't like Pharaoh? Is it because God wants to show off? No, not hardly.

Exodus 7

KJ2000

⁴ But Pharaoh shall not hearken unto you, that I may lay my hand upon Egypt, and bring forth my armies, and my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments.

Now, you need to think about this. Pharaoh was not the only issue here. He was not the Pharaoh that had placed Israel in bondage in the first place. He probably was not even the Pharaoh who ordered the death of all those Hebrew children. No, that was probably the Pharaoh before him because it was *80 years back* that that event took place. And it wasn't just Pharaoh that did it. It was *all* the Egyptians that did it, and payback time has come. God said:

Exodus 7

KJ2000

⁵ And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch forth my hand upon Egypt, and bring out the children of Israel from among them.

What's happening here? What's happening here is that Pharaoh's heart was hardened because the *whole land of Egypt* had to come to grips with what they had done and whose god *really was* God. The whole exercise was to get Israel out of Egypt while punishing the Egyptians—*all* of the Egyptians—for their crimes. If Pharaoh had just let them go, justice would not have been done. And so the stage is now set for Moses and Aaron, before God, to play out on the stage of Egypt the justice of Almighty God.

After a few preliminary miracles that didn't seem to impress Pharaoh very much—after all, God had hardened his heart—God decided it was time to start playing his trump cards.

Exodus 7

KJ2000

¹⁴ And the LORD said unto Moses, Pharaoh's heart is hardened, he refuses to let the people go.

¹⁵ Get you unto Pharaoh in the morning; lo, he goes out unto the water; and you shall stand by the river's bank until he comes; and the rod which was turned to a serpent shall you take in your hand.

¹⁶ And you shall say unto him, The LORD God of the Hebrews has sent me unto you, saying, Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness: and, behold, before you would not hear.

¹⁷ Thus says the LORD, In this you shall know that I am the LORD: behold, I will strike with the rod that is in my hand upon the waters which are in the river, and they shall be turned to blood.

¹⁸ And the fish that are in the river shall die, and the river shall stink; and the Egyptians shall loathe to drink of the water of the river.

¹⁹ And the LORD spoke unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Take your rod, and stretch out your hand upon the waters of Egypt, upon their streams, upon their rivers, and upon their ponds, and upon all their pools of water, that they may become blood; and that there may be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in vessels of wood, and in vessels of stone.

²⁰ And Moses and Aaron did so, as the LORD commanded; and he lifted up the rod, and smote the waters that were in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh, and in the sight of his servants; and all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood.

Now, what is this all about? It was interesting in seeing it in *The Ten Commandments* in the special effects they had, which, for the time, weren't all that great. But why blood? And why the river? Right from the start, these are *acts of justice*. They had defiled the river themselves with the blood of an entire generation of Israelite babies that they had thrown into the river. This is a highly symbolic act. "You like blood, here's blood to drink."

Exodus 7

KJ2000

²⁰ And Moses and Aaron did so, as the LORD commanded; and he lifted up the rod, and smote the waters that were in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh, and in the sight of his servants; and all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood.

²¹ And the fish that were in the river died; and the river stank, and the Egyptians could not drink of the water of the river; and there was blood throughout all the land of Egypt.

²² And the magicians of Egypt did so with their enchantments: and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, neither did he hearken unto them; as the LORD had said.

²³ And Pharaoh turned and went into his house, neither did he lay to heart this also.

²⁴ And all the Egyptians dug round about the river for water to drink; for they could not drink of the water of the river.

²⁵ And seven days were fulfilled, after the LORD had smitten the river.

This is not just a random act. This is highly symbolic. It is a reminder of all the deaths that occurred in that river, at the hands of these people.

The next three plagues were frogs, lice and flies. The frogs (Exodus 7:25–8:15) made the whole land stink to high heaven. The lice (Exodus 8:16–18) made their bodies itch. The flies (Exodus 8:20–32) corrupted their food, got in their face, and walked on their eyeballs. These plagues created, for all the Egyptians, the living conditions they had imposed on the Israelites for all of their lives. You would have to visit a slave camp to understand how bad this can be.

It wasn't anything new for the Israelites. They had to live with the stench, and with the lice, and the flies, all the time, while the Egyptians lived clean and dry. So it was time for the Egyptians to suffer, just like

they had.

Every time the plague came, Pharaoh would relent and say, “Well, you can go now.” And when the plague ended, his heart was hardened and he wouldn’t let them go.

You know, I suppose God could have kept the plague on until Israel was out of Egypt. That might have worked, but he wasn’t through yet. The Egyptians had not learned yet. Justice had not been done yet. They had not experienced justice to the full.

The next plague was a murrain on cattle. It started killing all the Egyptians’ livestock, right and left. It didn’t affect any of the livestock of the Israelites. Now there’s a difference between what’s happening to the Egyptians and what’s happening to the Israelites. What’s happening is the beginning of the end for Egypt’s economy—an economy they had built on the backs of slaves. They had developed all their wealth on the backs and shoulders of these people living out there in Goshen, and now it was time for all that wealth to be taken away from them and it started with their cattle. It’s the next step in the justice of God.

Then followed the plague of boils (Exodus 9:8–12). *Misery, pain, no rest.* You can’t sit down, you can’t lie down, you can’t stand up. No matter what you were doing, you were in *pain*. It’s almost as though, in these plagues, God alternates between economic disaster and pain, pain and economic disaster. The Israelites had known pain, suffering, and misery throughout their generations. Now it was time for the Egyptians.

Next comes hail mingled with fire (Exodus 8:13–35)—hail so severe that it killed livestock. Lightning induced fire that destroyed houses and crops. Hail beat *all* the crops into the ground. The next step in the destruction of Egypt’s slave built economy. Pharaoh relented until the hail stopped, then his heart was hardened. The hail had destroyed parts of his crop, but “we still have some hope for the wheat,” they said.

The next plague was locust (Exodus 10:1–20) and ended any hope of crops that year. They stripped *every* tree of greenery and fruit and ate *every* blade of grass in the fields. They were everywhere where a man put his foot. The land was *black* with them. They brought *total destruction* to the Egyptian economy. And it was all because they had built that economy on the backs of slaves. But when the locusts were gone, Pharaoh’s heart was still hardened.

It seems as though God alternates between destroying Egypt’s economy and then putting them through the same kind of misery they had imposed on Israel.

And the next plague? The next plague was darkness (Exodus 10:21–29). Moses stretched his hand to heaven and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. They couldn’t even see one another. Nobody got up to go anywhere for three days. The children of Israel had light in their dwellings. The darkness signified the depression and hopelessness that generations of bondage had brought to the Israelites. And now it was the turn of the Egyptians.

After three days and three nights of sitting in the dark, Pharaoh finally called Moses and said:

Exodus 10

KJ2000

²⁴ [...] Go, serve the LORD; only let your flocks and your herds be left behind: let your little ones also go with you.

Now the reasons for that is fairly simple. They had lost all their cattle. The only cattle left in the country were those that the Israelites had, so the negotiations are beginning. “Go ahead. Take your kids, all your adults. You all go but leave the cows.”

Exodus 10

KJ2000

²⁵ And Moses said, you must give us also sacrifices and burnt offerings, that we may sacrifice unto the LORD our God.

²⁶ Our cattle also shall go with us; there shall not a hoof be left behind; for of them must we take to serve the LORD our God; and we know not with what we must serve the LORD, until we come there.

Tough negotiations are going on here.

Exodus 10

KJ2000

²⁷ But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go.

²⁸ And Pharaoh said unto him, Get you from me, take heed to yourself, see my face no more; for in that day you see my face you shall die.

²⁹ And Moses said, You have spoken well, I will see your face again no more.

Well, was this enough? Had justice *finally* been done? No, not quite. There was still the matter of that generation of little Israelite babies thrown into the river to drown. No, there's more justice to come.

Until next time.

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