

Weekly Scripture and Sermon Study: History & Context Guide
Exodus 7:1-13- "Hard-Hearted"

History, Culture, & Context

In Exodus chapter 7, we find God telling Moses that he must return to Pharaoh despite Moses' feeling of inadequacy in doing so. In the last few verses of chapter 6, Moses tells God that since "I speak with faltering lips, why would Pharaoh listen to me" (Exodus 6:30). God tells Moses that He will make him "like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet" (7:1). In doing so, God commands Moses to go and tell the Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Keep in mind that in Egyptian religion the Pharaoh was thought to be a deity and was believed to possess superhuman wisdom and power.

Moses's reluctance to fulfill God's call is a theme we see again in the story of Jeremiah. This is a genre of call (for a prophet or leader) and reluctant actor that needs divine reassurance to carry out their call (see also Jeremiah 1:6-10; and Judges 6:15-24, 36-40).



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These verses are similar to what we saw back in Exodus 4:10-17. Repetition is often used in Hebrew literature to emphasize and strengthen a point. Also, the conflict we see between God and Pharaoh can be described as "contest stories," a similar tale of which is found in Genesis 41 with the story of Joseph. These kinds of stories show a special skill or gift being challenged by other officials who possess the same gift. The true hero of the story is vindicated. In Genesis 41, Joseph is called on by Pharaoh to interpret his dreams where none of his wise men and magicians can.

Beginning in verse 8, God tells Moses and Aaron that the Pharaoh will demand a miracle from them. Aaron is to throw down his staff and it will become a snake. In ancient Egypt, the snake was one of the symbols of power. When Pharaoh demands a miracle, Aaron complies with God's instruction and his staff turns into a snake. However, Pharaoh's wise men and magicians throw down their staff which also become snakes. Aaron's snake then devours the other official's snakes and is shown to be the victor of this contest.

At the conclusion of the contest, Pharaoh's "heart became hardened, and he would not listen to them, just as the LORD had said." This idea of God hardening Pharaoh's heart has become a central theme in theological debate illustrating the tension between divine and human will. Do humans have free will within the framework of God's sovereignty? If Pharaoh can harden his own heart without the influence of divine will, how can God truly be sovereign? The central purpose of this idea is to tell the story in a way that glorifies the God of Israel. These accounts are to demonstrate that God, Yahweh, is in complete control of the situation and we see again and again it is God who hardens Pharaoh's heart (see also Romans 9:17).

Questions to Consider

1. How do we reconcile the idea of God hardening Pharaoh's heart (complete sovereignty) with the idea of Pharaoh, of his own will, hardening his own heart (see Exodus 8:15, 32; and 9:34)? What does this teach us about our lives and God's will for our lives?
2. Why is Moses resistant to God's call? Do you resist God's call in your life? Why?
3. Where have you seen God's signs and wonders in your life? How do you interpret these?