

The hardened heart (Exodus 7-10)

Sermon 3 in the series 'The Great Escape'

There are two fundamentally different ways of looking at the world. On the one hand, there's the perspective you get when you put yourself at the centre of things. That's the one that seems to come most naturally to us human beings. If you ask an African tribesman what shape the world is, the chances are he'll tell you it's flat. If you ask him to substantiate his answer, he'll take you outside onto the plains, turn you round in a circle, and say: 'There, look at the horizon! Anyone can see the earth is a flat disc and we are standing in the middle of it.' You and I, of course, with the benefit of our scientific education, know it's a little more complicated than that. If we took a rocket ship and blasted off into outer space, when we looked back at the world we'd left behind, we would know no longer see a disc at all, would we, but a sphere? It had looked flat because we were observing it from our man-centred point of view. But that can be a most deceptive perspective. It's only when we place ourselves on the margins of the universe that we see it as it really is. Of course, the facts don't change. The earth is the same as it always is. But the interpretation we put on the facts we observe depends on where we choose to stand to look at them. In fact, changing one's perspective in that kind of way can be a most unsettling experience. Even astronauts, who knew what to expect, have frequently testified on their return to the powerful emotional impact that seeing the earth in that new way had upon them. In fact, sometimes the impact can go beyond mere emotion. Seeing the world from a radically new standpoint can actually transform your whole understanding of the meaning of human existence. That's why science has sometimes encountered resistance over the centuries. We desperately want to maintain that man-centred way of looking at things. Only with great reluctance do we abandon it and see things differently. Even today I'm told there is a 'Flat Earth Society'. And when you look back through history the evidence of our intellectual obstinacy in this regard is even more obvious. Just think, for instance, of the persecution which a man like Galileo suffered because he tried to persuade 17th century Europe that the earth moved. Up until that time, everyone had assumed that the earth was stationary and at the centre of universe. It was obvious that the sun, the moon and the planets went around it. Galileo, however, concluded that such a man-centred perspective was false; a heliocentric model, as proposed by Copernicus, made more sense of his astronomical observations than the traditional geocentric one. Once again, the facts hadn't changed. Men had been observing the motion of the planets for centuries. Galileo just chose to look at those facts without putting himself in the middle. And what he saw was, in more senses than one, revolutionary! So revolutionary, it took poor Galileo, as a very old man, to prison after a humiliating trial in which he was forced to recant his scientific conclusions as heresy. Of course, he argued his case; in fact, he did so with great eloquence. He even invited the professors of the University of Padua to look down his telescope. But they refused. They didn't want to see the universe from the perspective that Galileo was recommending. Their minds were closed on the subject. No argument, no evidence could possibly have persuaded them. To use a phrase that occurs in our Bible passage today, their hearts were 'hardened'.

In fact, I want to suggest to you that they were hardened for reasons not dissimilar to those that were responsible for the hardness of Pharaoh's heart. Moses, like Galileo, was a revolutionary cosmologist. The confrontation he had with Pharaoh was generated by a conflict between two fundamentally irreconcilable worldviews. On the one hand, Pharaoh saw himself in the middle. Everything that happened in Egypt happened because he said so. In a very real sense, Pharaoh was the centre of his world; the universe revolved around him. And just like the cardinals who opposed Galileo, he did not want to change. He had a vested interest in the maintenance of his self-centred perspective. Moses, on the other hand, had been to the burning bush. His petit ego had been

dwarfed there by a far greater 'I am'. And as a result of that revelatory experience, Moses now saw the world differently. He realised that the power and supremacy belonged not to any man, least of all himself, but to Jehovah, the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That theological discovery was as dramatic for him as Galileo's cosmological discovery was for him. Moses had discovered that the universe was theocentric and, just as for Galileo, the result of that new perspective was utterly revolutionary.

So what we have in this study passage is two men, Moses and Pharaoh, looking at precisely the same events but interpreting them completely differently. For one is looking at them through the spectacles of faith, seeing God at the centre, in sovereign control of the world. While the other is looking through the spectacles of unbelief, struggling to keep himself at the centre of things.

Some people think that, in order to turn a person from unbelief to faith, you have to convince them by intellectual arguments. Others say you have to persuade them through demonstrations of miraculous power – signs and wonders. What Pharaoh shows us is that neither arguments nor miracles can, in fact, create faith. For faith is not an additional piece of information that can be tacked onto your existing worldview. No, faith is a radically new way of looking at everything – a revolutionary cognitive paradigm that completely overturns all previous assumptions about the meaning of things. And human beings resist that revolution, as the cardinals resisted Galileo, as Pharaoh resisted Moses, not for lack of arguments, not for lack of evidence, but because they do not want to change their minds.

Their hearts are 'hardened'.

Well we are going to investigate the progress of this cardiac sclerosis on Pharaoh's part. For if you study the narrative of Exodus 7-10 you will find that progress is observable. There are in fact three distinct stages in the development of Pharaoh's hardened heart, and they correspond to the three ways in which the inspired narrator chooses to describe it.

In the earlier part of the story, he presents Pharaoh's hardened heart as **a natural state**: 'his heart became hard or was hardened' – 'the heart' is the subject of the verb.

When we get to the central part of the story, however, Pharaoh's hardened heart becomes **a voluntary choice**: 'Pharaoh hardened his heart' – 'Pharaoh' is the subject of the verb.

And by the time we get to the end of the story, this hardness has become even more ominous – it has become **a divine decree**: 'The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart' – 'Jehovah' is the subject of the verb.

It seems to me vital that we wrestle with this threefold way in which the Bible speaks of Pharaoh's unbelief – for two reasons. First, because if we don't, we will underestimate the size of the barrier that separates an unbeliever from faith.

One of the reasons that evangelism is so often misdirected and prone to disillusionment is that we fail to understand the dynamics of a hardened heart. We need the realism of Jesus who observed: 'This is the verdict. Light has come into the world and men preferred darkness.' (John 3:19).

Secondly, and even more important, because some of us, like Pharaoh, are being challenged to put God at the centre of our lives, and we are resisting. Well, at the risk of fomenting your indignation, I have to tell you that Pharaoh's sad example is a serious warning. If such resistance is persisted in, it can become a permanent and irreversible condition that will drag us inexorably to destruction. The

appeal of God in Psalm 95 was never relevant: 'Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts!' (Psalm 95:7-8; see also Hebrews 3:7-8).

(1) the hardened heart as a natural state (Exodus 7:6-8:14)

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "When Pharaoh says to you, 'Perform a miracle', then say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh', and it will become a snake." So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts. Each threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Yet Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said. (Exodus 7:8-13)

So Pharaoh did not have to do anything to become an unbeliever. His hardness of heart was from the start a natural state. The verb 'became hard' could just as accurately be rendered 'was hard'. That was clear back in chapter 5, when he was challenged by Moses and Aaron for the very first time: 'Who is the Lord that I should obey him ... I do not know the Lord.' (Exodus 5:2). This is how all unbelievers instinctively react. We take this threat to our man-centred perspective as a jest. 'So Aaron can turn his staff into a snake – that's something Egyptian magicians learn to do in the fourth-form of the Academy of Secret Arts. You will have to do better than that, Moses!'

Perhaps it was a conjuring trick; perhaps they knew how to calm a cobra into a cataleptic state; perhaps occult forces were involved. It is impossible to say how the Egyptian magicians did it, and we do not need to know. The point is that Pharaoh had no difficulty at all in accommodating this first sign of Moses' authority into his current worldview.

So Moses tried again.

The Lord said to Moses, "Tell Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt – over the streams and canals, over the ponds and all the reservoirs – and they will turn to blood. Blood will be everywhere in Egypt, even in the wooden buckets and stone jars.'" Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord had commanded. He raised his staff in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was changed into blood. The fish in the Nile died, and the river smelled so bad that the Egyptians could not drink its water. Blood was everywhere in Egypt. But the Egyptians magicians did the same things by their secret arts, and Pharaoh's heart became hard; he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said. (Exodus 7:19-22)

This was more spectacular! But it had happened before; they tell us that when the Nile rose particularly high, red earth was washed into it and poisoned the fish. The water had to be filtered before it was fit to drink. So there was nothing particularly worrying about this sign either. "All these so-called miracles – there is always a perfectly reasonable natural explanation – our scientists can reproduce them without any need for 'God.'" As the great mathematician, Laplace, is reputed to have replied when Napoleon asked him where God fitted in his mechanistic description of the universe: "Sire" he said. "I have no need for that hypothesis."

If that scientific hubris was characteristic of the 18th century, it is even more so now. The secret arts of our twentieth century can unravel the mysteries of the universe more convincingly than ever

before. We are quite capable of explaining everything, from our man-centred perspective. We don't need God in our system.

It is important that we understand this. Scientific education does not dethrone man from his egocentric worldview. All that science has done in the last three hundred years is to put man in a tower from which he sees wider horizons – but he is still at the centre – even more firmly established there than primitive man ever was.

No, there is nothing in a red Nile to challenge our human self-sufficiency. "You'll have to do better than that, Moses!"

So he does.

The Lord said to Moses, "Tell Aaron, 'Stretch out your hand with your staff over the streams and canals and ponds, and make frogs come up on the land of Egypt.'" So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land. But the magicians did the same things by their secret arts; they also made frogs come up on the land of Egypt. (Exodus 8: 5-7)

Well there was not much surprising about this, was there? If the Nile was polluted, the frogs were going to leave the water, weren't they? It's obvious! One can't help feeling that, reassured as Pharaoh was by his own scientists' ability to replicate the frogs, he would have been rather more impressed if they had managed to devise a way to get rid of the frogs, rather than multiplying their number! A polluted Nile is perhaps not so much of a problem, especially if you have plenty of servants on hand to do the laborious work of filtering your drinking water. But frogs are a nuisance! Pharaoh would have liked to find a solution to the frogs.

So he tries '**hardened heart strategy no. 1: a fake decision.**

Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Pray to the Lord to take the frogs away from me and my people, and I will let your people go to offer sacrifices to the Lord." (Exodus 8:8)

Do you think this shows inconsistency on Pharaoh's part? Well, when people are in a tight corner, even though their hearts are hard, they may do inconsistent things where religion is concerned: 'Lord, please heal my child and we'll start going to church again, we really will!'; 'Lord, please get me out of this mess, and I'll be a better man, I promise!'

'God', we say, 'if you'll listen to me, then I'll listen to you!'

'I'll pray,' we say, 'it can't do any harm, can it?'

You can find the most hardened heart asking the pastor to pray for him in troubled circumstances. The crunch comes when the prayer is answered.

After Moses and Aaron left Pharaoh, Moses cried out to the Lord about the frogs he had brought on Pharaoh. And the Lord did what Moses asked. The frogs died in the houses, in the courtyards and in the fields. They were piled into heaps and the land reeked of them. (Exodus 8:12-14)

Up to this point, Pharaoh's hardness of heart is recorded as a purely passive condition of his soul. Nothing has happened to seriously disturb his worldview. A few conjuring tricks; what do they amount to? But now a prayer has been answered. Pharaoh has put Moses' God to the test in an area where his man-centred philosophy was impotent. And now the frogs have gone – even if the smell of

them hasn't! Pharaoh is in a tight spot, for he had said, if the frogs disappeared, he would let the Israelites go. Now he has to choose – and his hardened heart moves from being a natural state to a voluntary choice.

(2) the hardened heart as a voluntary choice (Exodus 8:15-9:7)

But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said. (Exodus 8:15)

We need to notice this if we are not to miscalculate the effects of our Christian evangelism. When people are in a desperate spot, they do sometimes make fake decisions. If Pharaoh had been given a decision-card to fill in as the frogs jumped around his feet, I'm sure would have signed it with alacrity. But there is nothing at all saving in such a decision. In fact, it can make their spiritual situation worse, for when the crisis is over and they renege on their decision, their unbelief becomes far more committed.

'Oh, I was only a boy when I made that decision'

'It was just as emotional experience, wasn't it?'

'Well, I needed something to hold on to when my wife died, you see?'

When the respite is granted, the heart is again hardened, but this time as the result of a deliberate act of the will. It would be damning enough if our hard hearts were just a remnant of Adam's primeval Fall, but each of us at some time in our lives personally puts God to the test. Each of at some point in our life turns away from the light we have personally been given. We are not just sinful by nature; we are sinful by choice. We are not just ignorant of God by nature; we are wilfully ignorant.

Paul puts it like this:

'Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened' (Romans 1:21)

There is a slippery slope that leads to a person being so entrenched in their self-centred worldview, nothing can budge them. Have you heard the story of the man who complained to his doctor:
'Doctor I'm dead!'

'Nonsense! You can't possibly be dead!'

'I tell you, I am dead! And nothing you say will convince me otherwise!'

The doctor thought for a moment or two, and then he had an idea.

'Listen, he said. 'Dead men don't bleed, do they?'

'No,' replied the patient. 'That's true. Dead men don't bleed.'

The doctor took a scalpel from his drawer. 'OK, he said. 'Give me your hand.' And he jabbed the scalpel into the man's thumb.

'There!' What's that?' he asked.

There was a silent pause, then the man said:

'Well! well! well! So dead men **do** bleed!'

So it was with Pharaoh. The rationality of his obstinacy is slipping away from him. He is becoming more and more like a man who clings to his prejudice, even when the folly of his opinion is staring him, and everyone else come to that, in the face.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Tell Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the ground', and throughout the land of Egypt the dust will become gnats." They did this, and when Aaron stretched out his hand with the staff and struck the dust of the ground, gnats came upon men and animals. All the dust throughout the land of Egypt became gnats. But when the magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, they could not. And the gnats were on men and animals. The magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." (Exodus 8:16-18)

Now even the scientists are worried. They had done their best to sustain Pharaoh in his unbelief, but now they have reached the limits of their competence. Sadly, however, their enchantments have worked better than they knew. Their conspiracy of deception and illusion cannot now be stopped.

This is the sorry tale of all godless philosophy; it fosters unbelief, and then finds itself powerless to combat the plagues that fall on society as a result. Huxley, the great humanist, near the end of his life admitted: 'Some kind of religion does seem to be necessary for the preservation of a healthy society'. But his atheistic humanism has eaten too deeply into the minds of his disciples for any such reversal. The magicians of secularism have taught men to idolise technology, to pursue material advance, to abandon traditional morality. And now, at the end of the 20th century, as we begin to rue the consequences of that loss of spirituality in our culture, we discover it is too late! Pharaoh has now wilfully committed himself to his unbelief.

But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the Lord had said. (Exodus 8:19)

His pride is at stake ... so the plagues will go on.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Get up early in the morning and confront Pharaoh as he goes to the water and say to him, 'This is what the Lord says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you do not let my people go, I will send swarms of flies on you and your officials, on your people and into your houses ... And the |Lord did this. Dense swarms of flies poured into Pharaoh's palace and into the houses of his officials, and throughout Egypt the land was ruined by the flies. (Exodus 8:20-21,24)

Pharaoh is once again feeling desperate, so he deploys '**hardened heart strategy no. 2': a negotiated compromise.**

Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land." (Exodus 8: 25)

In other words: 'We can come to some arrangement about this, Moses. You can obey God, up to a point.'

'Yes, you can get baptised ... so long as you don't go getting any silly ideas about becoming a missionary!'

'Yes, I will be a Christian ... but only if I can go on sleeping with my girlfriend.'

We try to strike a bargain with God, as if he was some customer who must barter for our obedience. But it won't do. He is 'the Lord' and he accepts only one type of contract – total surrender. 'You are

mine', he says. 'You will go my way. You will do my will. No conditions or provisos.' We can insert no codicils or stipulations. This God does not negotiate compromises; he doesn't have to. But that doesn't stop us trying! Anything to preserve the illusion that we are still in control of our own destiny. Anything to retain that self-centred perspective on our world.

Pharaoh said, "I will let you go to offer sacrifices to the Lord your God in the desert, but you must not go very far. Now pray for me."... Then Moses left Pharaoh and prayed to the Lord, and the Lord did what Moses asked. The flies left Pharaoh and his officials and his people; not a fly remained. But this time also Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go. (Exodus 8:28, 30-32)

So the plagues grind on, becoming more intense as they do so. Up till now, they have been little more than a nuisance, just a minor irritation. But with the fifth plague, things become more serious: livestock start dying. And something rather odd becomes increasingly obvious: the Israelites seem strangely immune to the plagues.

Pharaoh sent men to investigate and found that not even one of the animals of the Israelites had died. Yet his heart was unyielding and he would not let the people go. (Exodus 9:7)

There is something pathetic about this man, isn't there? One is reminded of the words of the poet Henley:

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced or cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul. (W.E Henley - Invictus)*

It is no longer a question of reason or evidence. His defiance is adamant. The ego of Pharaoh versus the 'I am' of Jehovah. And that unequal contest can end only one way.

(3) the hardened heart as a divine decree (Exodus 9:8 – 10:29)

Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Take handfuls of soot from a furnace and have Moses toss it into the air in the presence of Pharaoh. It will become fine dust over the whole land of Egypt, and festering boils will break out on men and animals throughout the land. So they took the soot from a furnace and stood before Pharaoh. Moses tossed it into the air, and festering boils broke out on men and animals. The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and on all the Egyptians.

But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said to Moses. (Exodus 9:8-12)

Notice the new subject of the verb: 'The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart'. Can that be? Would God do such a thing? How we rebel at that sentence – and not just unbelievers, many Christians too refuse to accept the force of those words. We will go to any length to avoid their blunt significance. 'It's unjust!' we protest. 'It's inconsistent with God's love!' The arguments pour forth. But the sacred historian has chosen his grammar carefully and made no mistake. No less than four times he repeats it: in 9:12, 10:1, 10:20, and 10:27.

Why don't we like it? I suggest to you the root of its repugnance lies in that myth of our man-centred universe. So persistent is the hold of that myth over our imaginations, that even when we say we have agreed to look at the world from a theocentric point of view, we still want to maintain a little island of human independence, a little sacrosanct zone of human autonomy where human self-rule prevails and divine omnipotence cannot invade. 'God can never contradict your free-will!' we say. And we say it with such desperate confidence.

But where do we get that idea from? From the Bible? Or from those humanistic philosophies we've been imbibing for the last four centuries?

Why should God not contradict your free-will? After all, he can take away your health if he wants to; it's his gift. He can take away your sanity if he wants to; it's his gift. He can take away your life if he wants to; it's his gift! And are you telling me that there is something inalienable, something untouchable, about your power of choice? Don't you realise that every atom in your body, every neurone in your brain, every mysterious facet of your personality is permanently, continuously, second by second, upheld by his divine power. We can't take a breath without his say-so! How much less than can we make a decision independent of him?

No, the only unconditionally free agent is the Lord. All the freedom we exert is freedom within the constraints of his permission. It is freedom he gives to us; freedom he allows us to have because he chooses to do so, not because we have any enforceable title to it. In his extraordinary and inscrutable will, he gives us freedom to disobey him – true enough! But he has not given us freedom to thwart him. Nor has he given us freedom to save ourselves.

If we resent this God-imposed limitation upon our freedom, tough luck! That's the way this universe is made. Our complaining about it isn't going to change it. This world is God-centred, not man-centred. To try to fight that reality is simply to bang your head against a brick wall. Just as Pharaoh was doing – and just as stupidly!

Remember that God didn't have to do anything actively to harden Pharaoh's heart. The hardness was there already: it was a state of nature that had been reinforced voluntarily. All that God was doing was judicially confirming that state of nature and of choice by his own irrevocable decree.

There is, you see, a very real sense in which God does not send anyone to Hell. He doesn't have to; people go to Hell of their own 'free-will' - that very 'free-will' we are so anxious to defend against the deterministic implications of divine predestination. That's why Luther, in his great treatise 'On the bondage of the will' insists that Erasmus was foolish to ask for free-will. Free-will is a curse, he says, not a blessing! 'I frankly confess that for myself, even if it could be, I should not want free-will to be given me.' He knew from bitter experience that when God does leave us to make our own unfettered choices, we do not choose heaven. So bound in their moral rebellion, are we; so bound in their pride, are we; that we choose Hell! What we call 'free-will' is a misnomer – for we are free only if we agree with God, otherwise we are in bondage. The so-called 'liberty' of free-will is simply another word for 'sin'. It is the folly and the shame of humanity that we live as if we could choose!

'I don't want a world with God at the centre' we insist. 'I want to run my own life. I want to go my own way.'

Well, this third stage of Pharaoh's hardened heart shows that if we say that often enough and defiantly enough, and God will give us what we want – even while we still have life left to live.

'The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart'. The plagues would go on, but no longer were they opportunities for him to repent; now they would be simply judgements.

When the seventh plague of hail descends, we might almost believe he does repent:

Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron. "This time I have sinned," he said to them. "The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Pray to the Lord for we have had enough thunder and hail." (Exodus 9:27)

But it doesn't last – his repentance is just a sham of remorse and self-pity. His heart is unchanged because it is unchangeable.

When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned again. He has his officials hardened their hearts. (Exodus 9:34)

When the eighth plague of locusts falls, once again Pharaoh seems to be on the point of conversion:

Pharaoh quickly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "I have sinned against the Lord your God and against you. Now forgive my sin once more and pray to the Lord your God to take this deadly plague away from me. (Exodus 10:16-17)

But our hopes founder once again:

But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let the Israelites go. (Exodus 10:20)

When the ninth plague of darkness strikes, Pharaoh seems at last to relent:

Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and said, "Go, worship the Lord. Even your women and children may go with you ... "

But alas, his surrender is still not complete:

"... only leave your flocks and herds behind." (Exodus 10:24)

He is playing pursuing the same strategy of negotiation and compromise. And when it fails to work, his obdurate heart is seen to be as unrepentant as ever:

Moses said, "Our livestock too must go with us; not a hoof is to be left behind ... But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he was not willing to let them go. Pharaoh said to Moses, "Get out of my sight! Make sure you do not appear before me again! The day you see my face you will die." "Just as you say," Moses replied, "I will never appear before you again." (Exodus 10: 25 -29)

At the beginning of the story, Pharaoh simply did not repent. In the middle of the story, Pharaoh would not repent. Now, at the end of the story, we find that Pharaoh cannot repent. Like Esau, repentance eludes him. Like Faustus, he has sold his soul; he is beyond redemption. The divine messenger whose prayers might have spared him is banished from his sight. What was it Jesus said about the lost in Hell 'weeping and gnashing their teeth'. That's what we see here. A pathetic, frustrated spectacle of a little man impotently waving his fist at God; a man who would rather destroy himself than bow the knee to his Maker; a man, so hardened in soul, he is already damned, even while he lives.

Perhaps the question on our minds is, why did God preserve him so long? Why did God prolong the agony? Why so many plagues? Indeed, if it was God's purpose to condemn this man, why was he ever born? For surely God did not have to wait to issue his decree of reprobation until Pharaoh's condition was plainly culpable. Look back to and you will see that God prophesied to Moses from the very start: 'I will harden his heart' (Exodus 4:21, 7:3). God foresaw the course that history would

take, and that being so, why did he not appoint some alternative path? Why raise this miserable man up at all, if he knew it could only end this way? This is the problem that troubles the universalists: how can we believe that, they say, that a God who knows the end from the beginning would raise up human beings knowing that they are going to be damned? Surely he must plan for the salvation of even the Pharaohs of this world, mustn't he?

But in voicing such hopes we are just surrendering again to that man-centred superstition of ours. Note rather how the inspired narrator of Exodus answers such questions.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Get up early in the morning, confront Pharaoh and say to him, 'This is what the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, says: 'Let my people go so that they may worship me, or this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you ... so that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth. For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. (Exodus 9:13 -16)

Words that have shocked many! But their implication is clear: God is glorified, even in judgement. Our man-centred assumptions lead us to believe that God's actions are motivated solely for our benefit. But it isn't so. The primary purpose of these dreadful plagues was that God's name should be declared. That the whole world should recognise his supreme power and glorify him. He says it repeatedly in these chapters: 'I am doing this so that you may know I am the Lord!'

That isn't egotism ... it is deity.

The God who rules this world is not some self-effacing sentimentalist. He is 'King of kings and Lord of lords.' He demands that every creature should acknowledge his unique sovereign authority. We can learn the truth of Jehovah's great name either, like the Jews, in the experience of salvation, or like the Egyptians, in the experience of judgement. But one way or the other we will learn it. We will bow to his name – 'every knee shall bow' – either in humble dependence as his loyal subjects, or under unwilling coercion as his vanquished enemies.

Ultimately we will learn that this universe is God-centred, not man-centred.

There is a world where God is the centre and sun, and all acknowledge him as such: it is called 'New Jerusalem' (Revelation 21:2). But there is also a world where all are left in the cold isolation of their own self-centred independence: it is called 'the outer darkness' (Matthew 25:30). And make no mistake about it, God is glorified in both worlds! Hell may be an embarrassment to some contemporary theologians, but Hell is no embarrassment to the Bible or to God.

Pharaoh's hardened heart, then, is a solemn warning to any of us who, as a result of our man-centred philosophy, are tempted to underestimate its reality. You will perhaps shift uncomfortably in your seat and tell me I am trying to frighten you? Well perhaps I am! I don't do it very often, but there are some biblical texts that leave me no choice. Pharaoh tried to play games with God – please don't make the same mistake. The subject of this study is serious and urgent. More serious and urgent than any other issue that may be causing you concern today. Here was the most powerful man in the world – Pharaoh of Egypt. And God snubbed him – glorying in the humiliation of his impertinent pride!

If that's how God treated Pharaoh, how do you think he is going to treat you?

God offers us an opportunity to repent today. That's what Jesus and the cross is all about. It is a sign erected in the midst of history declaring that we may repent, and believe, and be saved. You may say: 'But it is ignoble of me to turn to God only out of fear of judgement!' Well so it is! No doubt there are many better motives for becoming a Christian. And as C.S. Lewis observes in one of his books, if God were proud he would not accept us on such terms. It is hardly flattering to God that we choose him only an alternative to Hell! But such is the graciousness of this wonderful sovereign God, such is his longing to exercise mercy, such is his divine humility, that he is prepared to stoop even that low in order to conquer our rebel hearts.

If we are wise, we will not despise the opportunity. If you know in your heart that you have the power to choose for God, abandoning that vaunted self-sufficiency and enthroning him at the centre of your worldview, then praise God! For that power is a gift, not a right. By nature your heart is hard. By choice your heart is hard. That opportunity for repentance is a gift that God may withdraw at any time. In Pharaoh's case, he did withdraw it. And if we are inclined to accuse him of injustice for doing so, then the Bible replies:

Who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' (Romans 9:20)

We are creatures, not gods. And we will never get this world in the right perspective till we recognise and accept that lowly status. No, the truth is, most of us do not fear damnation nearly enough! We come to church, Sunday by Sunday, and we assume we can repent whenever we want. We assume that faith is an ever-open door. Well, learn from Pharaoh's hardened heart that it isn't so.

When the cardinals refused in their obstinacy to look through Galileo's telescope and see the universe from a heliocentric perspective, they made fools of themselves and of their church for centuries to come. And when we proud human beings, in our obstinacy, stubbornly refuse to put God at the centre of our lives, we risk making fools of ourselves for all eternity.

What are you waiting for? Arguments? Signs and wonders? No, this matter is not settled by such things. It is our hearts that are on trial – God-centred or self-centred? Faith or unbelief? Which is it to be? Choose while you may! For the day may come when that power to choose will be taken from you as surely as this hour of grace is given to you.

'I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, today is the day of salvation.' (2 Corinthians 6:2)

*'Today, if you hear his voice, **do not harden your hearts.*** (Hebrews 3:15)