

Shayla: Why does God harden and soften hearts? For instance, why did He harden Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 4:21)? Wouldn't He want Pharaoh to have a soft heart?

Meforshim:

Heart is a broad term in Hebrew and indicates the inner person and his or her capabilities. Here clearly, the will is involved; it is Pharaoh's intent to reject God's command. This intent is mentioned often in Exodus 4-14, and the seventeen different references to it alternate between statements that God hardened Pharaoh's heart (as here and in 7:3), descriptions that simply affirm that "Pharaoh's heart became hard",¹ and statements that "Pharaoh...hardened his [own] heart".²

The critical issues are (1) whether Pharaoh operated as a free and responsible person in refusing Moses' requests, or whether (2) he was caused to act against his own will by the action of God? It is clear from the text and from the phrase that gives us trouble itself that Pharaoh *was* acting as a free and responsible person. When God says in v. 21 "I will harden his heart", He is predicting the ultimate outcome.

Pharaoh began hardening his own heart.³ He persisted in his ways despite clear warning from God through Moses. Finally he crossed the line and God's patience ran out.

From that point on, God began hardening Pharaoh's heart.⁴ To say that God *hardened* Pharaoh's heart (intent, will) indicates that God simply strengthened the intent to refuse Moses' request which Pharaoh already had. Clearly, God did not cause Pharaoh to act against his own will. Thus, Pharaoh was responsible for his intent, even though God hardened him in it.

¹ 7:13; 8:19

² 8:15, 32

³ 7:13, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7

⁴ 9:12; 10:1, 20:27