



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 4.10 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

### The Hardening of Hearts

Very similar to the sin against the Holy Spirit is the hardening of the heart. One difference is that the sin against the Holy Spirit is a sin against the Gospel, which the Holy Spirit is trying to bring to us, while the hardening of the heart may occur toward either the law or the Gospel. The first occurrence of hardening of the heart in the Bible is the hardening of the heart of the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. He hardened his heart against the demand of the Lord God to release his Israelite slaves so that they may worship Him. Moses presented this demand to Pharaoh, **“Let My people go, that they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness.”** Pharaoh’s reply was this: **“Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go”** (Exodus 5:1-2).

In the Bible history that follows this encounter in the book of Exodus (chapters 6-10) there are twenty passages that refer to the hardening of the heart. Ten times Pharaoh hardened his own heart, and ten times God hardens the Pharaoh’s heart. This contrast is found in the original Hebrew, but it is not always so noticeable in translation. When God hardens Pharaoh’s heart, it is God’s way of terminating Pharaoh’s time for repentance. From that point on, it becomes impossible for Pharaoh to repent. First Pharaoh hardens his heart in stubborn opposition to God, and then God finally hardens Pharaoh’s heart. We read in Exodus 11:10: **“The LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let the children of Israel go out of his land.”**

Even after the tenth plague, when Pharaoh finally told the Israelites to get out of his land, he again changed his mind and he pursued the fleeing Israelites with his horses and chariots. Pharaoh could not truly repent at that point, for we read again: **“The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the children of Israel”** (Exodus 14:8). The end result, of course, was that his forces were drowned in the Red Sea.

In the last days of the earthly kingdom of Judah, there was another man who hardened his heart: Zedekiah, the last king of Judah before the Babylonian Captivity. This was in the days of the prophet Jeremiah. We read that Zedekiah **“did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke from the mouth of the LORD. And he also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear an oath by God; but he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD God of Israel”** (2 Chronicles 36:12-13). It seems Zedekiah was not the only one to harden his heart at that time. Jeremiah reported that the people, as well, had hardened their hearts: **“They have refused to receive correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to return”** (Jeremiah 5:3). God’s judgment then followed. **“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: ‘Behold, I will bring on this city and on all her towns all the doom that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their necks that they might not hear My words’”** (Jeremiah 19:15).

When God sent His Son Jesus into the world, there were those who hardened their hearts against Him. When Jesus saw a man with a withered hand in the synagogue, the Pharisees watched Him closely to see whether He would heal the man. Jesus asked them, **“Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?”** When they kept silent, Jesus **“looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts”** (Mark 3:1-5).

There were times when even Jesus’ disciples were accused of having hard hearts. Jesus fed a crowd with five loaves and two fish. In the evening of that same day, He walked on water in their presence.

Still they were slow to understand who Jesus was. Mark wrote: **“They had not understood about the loaves, because their heart was hardened”** (Mark 6:52). In their case, Jesus did not harden their hearts, for their hearts did not remain hard. Nevertheless, Jesus was troubled by their lack of faith. Even after He had fed the five thousand and the four thousand, they thought that Jesus was angry with them because they had forgotten to bring bread on the boat. Jesus scolded them severely: **“Why do you reason because you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened? ... How is it you do not understand?”** (Mark 8:18-21). They had collected twelve baskets of leftovers from the first miracle and seven large baskets after the second miracle. They should not have been concerned about having enough bread, but they should have trusted that their Lord could easily provide bread for them.

Because we sinners naturally resistance God and His Word, we all need to heed the warning of Psalm 95:7-8: **“Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.”** We cannot know in advance how long God will give us to repent of our sins. Even though God is patient, there comes a time when God responds to our resistance by hardening our hearts and making it impossible for us to repent. When the ancient world turned away from God to gross idolatry, **“God gave them up to uncleanness,” “God gave them up to vile passions,” “God gave them over to a debased mind”** (Romans 1:24, 26, 28).

When the Christians **“did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved”** (2 Thessalonians 2:10), God sent them **“strong delusion, that they should believe the lie”** (2 Thessalonians 2:11) – the lie of the Antichrist who has come with signs and wonders from Satan himself to deceive them. The timing of God’s judgment is not in our control, for it is written: **“He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens”** (Romans 9:18).

As is the case with the sin against the Holy Spirit, it is not for us to determine whose heart God has hardened. Rather we are to warn against the possibility of hardening one’s heart. When the apostle Paul preached the Gospel, he warned his listeners of the danger of rejecting the Gospel. He said to the Jews of Antioch in Pisidia: **“It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles”** (Acts 13:46). Jesus Himself warned His disciples that their message would be rejected by many and said: **“Whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet. Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!”** (Matthew 10:14-15).

These warnings against the hardening of the heart should lead each of us to examine ourselves to see if we are resisting God and His Word in some way. When we see signs of such hardening in ourselves, we need to bow before God in humble repentance and ask to be restored through God's grace and forgiveness. **“If we confess our sins, He (God) is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”** (1 John 1:9).

## Questions

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1. In what way did the Pharaoh of Egypt harden his heart against God?
2. What did God do in response to Pharaoh’s repeated stubbornness?
3. How did God finally send judgment on the Pharaoh of Egypt?
4. Which king of Judah hardened his heart against the Word of God?
5. What judgment from God came to this king and his people?
6. Why was Jesus angry with the Pharisees in connection with the man with the withered hand?
7. Why was Jesus upset with His own disciples when they forgot to bring bread?
8. Why is it dangerous to postpone our repentance?
9. Why has God sent the Antichrist into the church?
10. What warnings did Paul and Jesus Himself give to their hearers?