



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 16.6 – The Doctrine of the Election of Grace (Predestination)

The Hardening of Hearts

When the Lord, in His grace, brings the Gospel to us in Word and Sacrament, it is important for us to pay close attention to His words and accept what He is offering us. The Holy Spirit warns us in Psalm 95: **“Today, if you will hear His voice: do not harden your hearts”** (Psalm 95:7-8). We do not know how many opportunities for hearing the Gospel we will have in our lives. For this reason, it is urgent that we take hold of God’s promise of forgiveness as soon as we hear it. The apostle Paul explained: **“We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ... Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation”** (2 Corinthians 6:1-2).

God is patient and longsuffering, as His Word tells us many times, but eventually we reach the point when His patience comes to an end. It is good for us not to put God to the test in order to see how long we can put Him off before listening to His Word. This continuing resistance to God’s Word is called hardening of the heart against what God says.

When the children of Israel were slaves in Egypt, God told Moses to go to the Pharaoh of Egypt, the mighty ruler of the land, and give him God’s order that he should let his Israelite slaves go free. So Moses and his brother Aaron **“went in and told Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD God of Israel: “Let My people go”’** (Exodus 5:1). The Pharaoh responded by saying: **“Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice”** (Exodus 5:2). This was the first time the Pharaoh resisted the Lord’s command.

Moses and Aaron continued to present the Lord’s demand to Pharaoh, but he kept on resisting. In response God sent ten plagues on Egypt, and after each plague Pharaoh had opportunity to obey the Lord. But in each case, even though he at first promised that he would do so, he changed his mind as soon as the plague came to an end. He refused to let God’s people go. Over and over again, the book of Exodus reports: **“Pharaoh’s heart grew hard”** (Exodus 7:13). **“He hardened his heart”** (Exodus 8:15). **“Pharaoh’s heart grew hard”** (Exodus 8:19). **“Pharaoh hardened his heart at this time also”** (Exodus 8:32).

Finally, after this went on for some time, we read in Exodus: **“The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh”** (Exodus 9:12). When we sinners harden our hearts against God and refuse to listen to His Word, the time may come when God hardens our hearts as a judgment against our hardening our hearts against Him. When God hardens our hearts, this means that God’s patience has come to an end, and there is no more opportunity for us to repent of our sins. In other words, our time of grace has come to an end already in this life.

Thus, the Bible teaches that God at His own time and in His own way hardens the hearts of some who harden their hearts against Him and despise His Word. God, however, is very patient and forbearing towards these enemies of His, as we can see from the history of the Pharaoh of Egypt at the time of Moses (very likely Amenhotep II) and Judas Iscariot.

Jesus told His disciples why He spoke to the people in parables. **“Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: ‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed’”** (Matthew 13:13-15). Our hardening of our hearts

is sometimes followed by God's hardening of our hearts so that we may hear the words of the Gospel but not really hear or understand them.

Is there some way we can tell in advance how long we can harden our hearts before God hardens them? This is something we cannot know. The apostle Paul says: **"Whom He wills He hardens"** (Romans 9:18). Those whom He hardens have no right to complain. Paul says: **"God ... endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction"** (Romans 9:22). Notice that Paul does not say **"prepared beforehand"** (Romans 9:23) with regard to those whose hearts are hardened. But he does say: **"The rest were blinded. Just as it is written: 'God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day'"** (Romans 11:7-8).

It is important that we realize that God's hardening of hearts comes about as a response and a judgment on man's resistance to His Word. It remains true, as we have said before, that **"The Lord ... is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance"** (2 Peter 3:9).

We cannot with our human minds fully understand all the ways of God, such as His eternal election and His hardening of hearts. The human mind asks questions like: Why does God seem to be more patient with some than with others? Why is that some hear the Gospel and are brought to faith while others hear the same Gospel and resist it?

All unbelievers are equally dead in sins when they come into this world. God wants to save them all, and Jesus died for all. Yet only some are brought to faith in Christ, even though God wants all to repent and be saved. At the same time those who are converted are just as sinful and naturally dead in sins as those who are unconverted.

We need to teach what God has told us in His Word, even though we cannot fully understand it. We must say that all who are saved are saved by God's grace alone. All who are lost are lost through their own fault, even though God earnestly desires the salvation of all and Jesus died for all. Our answer to any objection to God's ways must be simply this: **"O man, who are you to reply against God?"** (Romans 9:20). **"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! 'For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to Him?' For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen"** (Romans 11:33-36).

Questions

1. What is meant by the hardening of hearts?
2. When does God harden people's hearts?
3. Which came first:
 Pharaoh hardened his heart
 or
 God hardened Pharaoh's heart?
4. What was one reason for Jesus' speaking in parables?
5. Why should we be satisfied with God's teachings even if we can't fully understand them?