



Studies in the Book of Exodus

Text

Exodus 7:1-13

Topic

At ages 83 and 80 respectively, Aaron and Moses challenge Pharaoh to let God's people go

Title

"Old Guys Duel"

Kim Jong Un recently was quoted, "The nuclear button is on my desk at all times."

Donald J. Trump replied, "I too have a nuclear button, but it is a much bigger and more powerful one than his, *and my button works!*"

We can laugh a little, but the threat is all too serious.

Japan's Prime Minister has called the prospect of a nuclear-capable North Korea "absolutely unacceptable" and said the security situation facing his country is the severest since the Second World War.

Prime Minister Abe urged the international community to apply increasing pressure to the rogue nation in an attempt to coerce its regime into giving up its nuclear ambitions.

Pressure has been applied, but so far it has only strengthened Kim Jong Un's resolve to be a nuclear maniac.

Egypt's Pharaoh had no button to push; I doubt he had a desk. He was, however, holding God's people captive, and was treating them with intensifying cruelty. God sent Moses and Aaron with a message for Pharaoh, "Let My people go."

Pharaoh refused again-and-again. Each time he refused, God applied increasing pressure - but it only strengthened Pharaoh's resolve against the Israelites.

We're going to talk about this strengthening of Pharaoh's resolve, and hopefully come to a biblical understanding of the frightening phrase, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart."

We're also going to see something in the story to apply to ourselves. If you're a Christian, you know that Satan is the god of this world. Nonbelievers are held captive by him. You and I are sent out with the Gospel - a message of exodus from sin and from death into eternal life.

The pharaoh's of this present age do not give up easily. We're in for a spiritual fight if we wish to see folks moving from the kingdom of darkness they are born into, to the kingdom of light they can be born-again into.

I'll organize my comments around two points: #1 Your God Inspires You To Remain Resolved, and #2 Your Adversary Incites You To Reject Your Resolve.

#1 Your God Inspires You To Remain Resolved

(v1-9)

I want to get right over the major hurdle we encounter in these verses. We've mentioned it before, but now it's directly in our path. It is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

The Lord tells Moses, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (v3), and that "Pharaoh's heart grew hard..." (v13).

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart has been twisted by some to teach a determinism that makes Pharaoh a puppet in the 'hand' of the Sovereign God. They teach that God caused Pharaoh to act as he did.

We reject that. Truth be told, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, when properly understood, **teaches quite the opposite.**

The word "heart" refers most often to the entire inner life of a person. We would translate it *mind* or *will*.

Language scholars point out that three different verbs are used in the various passages that speak of the hardening of Pharaoh's will. The three are translated "hardened," "strengthened," and "made heavy."

After studying all their occurrences, they conclude that, taken together, they convey the single idea that Pharaoh steadfastly refused to release the Israelites.

One scholar therefore commented, “Hardening someone’s heart is about giving them the willpower or resolve to do what they have already decided, when other factors might pressure them into doing otherwise. In some situations this will be associated with courage; in others, stubbornness.”

It was Pharaoh’s will to refuse God’s request. Each encounter with Moses served to strengthen his resolve to refuse. In spite of the signs performed by God, Pharaoh’s will does not change. While he occasionally wavers when put under extreme pressure, he remains resolved in his opposition.

Kim Jong Un would be described as hardening his heart. Is he being forced against his will to resist international pressure? Is he a puppet in the hand of the Sovereign God?

No; he is acting of his own free will. Every effort to pressure him only gives him greater willpower to resist.

The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is not about him being a puppet. It is the reverse; it is about him being emboldened to do what he most desires.

Pharaoh was determined to defy God - not determined *by* God.

God went to incredible lengths to not violate Pharaoh’s free will. On solid biblical grounds, we can say that Pharaoh exercised his own free will, and God strove with him, mercifully, to try to save him.

Then there's the argument from the character of God. If God determined that Pharaoh resist Him, with no genuine possibility of repenting, then God is a cruel despot who penalizes the behavior He Himself brings to pass.

You can't cancel-out that argument by glibly stating, "God is Sovereign," as if He can do something evil and call it good simply because He is God.

Now that we are no longer troubled by the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, let's see how it all works out.

Exo 7:1 So the LORD said to Moses: "See, I have made you *as* God to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet.

This sounds a little strange until you remember that the Pharaoh was considered to be a god. In his own court stood another man - Moses - who was speaking as God.

The fact he spoke through Aaron only intensified the symbolism. If Moses spoke directly, Pharaoh might think him a mere prophet of some secondary deity. But here was Moses speaking through a prophet - the way God would speak. The theatrics of it communicated to Pharaoh that he was, indeed, being addressed by the God of the Israelites.

"Made you as God" is better translated, "made you a god in My stead." It is a technical term used of men and women who act in God's place, on His behalf.

While it would be confusing to say of Christians, “you have been made as God,” it is nevertheless true that we act in God’s place, on His behalf, as we await the resurrection and rapture of the church.

Exo 7:2 You shall speak all that I command you. And Aaron your brother shall tell Pharaoh to send the children of Israel out of his land.

Moses’ assignment was not easy, but it was simple. He only need “speak all that [God] command” him.

Our assignment as servants is likewise not easy, but it is simple:

1. If you are in full-time ministry, especially as a teacher, you teach the whole counsel of the Bible, verse-by-verse, book-by-book.
2. For all of us, who can be used by God at any moment, we must remain sensitive to the Holy Spirit, listening for Him to guide us into what to say to others that will shine light into their darkness.

Aaron was going to repeat what God told Moses. He did not have freedom to edit, or to augment, or to interpret the message. So, too, with us, we should keep it simple and not add our own exaggerations.

Exo 7:3 And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt.

God’s confrontations with Pharaoh would serve to strengthen his will to resist and remain a cruel despot.

Mean time God would “multiply... signs and... wonders,” which while they would only make Pharaoh’s heart heavier, would open the eyes of the citizens of Egypt to the majesty of Israel’s God.

Exo 7:4 But Pharaoh will not heed you, so that I may lay My hand on Egypt and bring My armies *and* My people, the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments.

God has foreknowledge. He knew how Pharaoh would respond. His foreknowledge did not determine how Pharaoh would respond; it did not cause Pharaoh to harden his heart.

Even though Pharaoh would not heed the message, God would provide for His plan, and get the Israelites out of Egypt. In ways that are deep and mysterious, God accomplishes His will without violating ours.

Exo 7:5 And the Egyptians shall know that I *am* the LORD, when I stretch out My hand on Egypt and bring out the children of Israel from among them."

This is quite an insight into the nature and character of God. He was simultaneously delivering His people AND revealing Himself to the nonbelieving Egyptians.

Never forget that God so loved the world that He sent Jesus into it, to die for whosoever would believe in Him, and thereby have eternal life. Holding that overriding truth in mind, we see Him reaching-out to the Egyptians - not taking pleasure in judging them.

Exo 7:6 Then Moses and Aaron did *so*; just as the LORD commanded them, so they did.

What a great thing to have said of you in the end: "Just as the Lord commanded him, so Gene did."

As I get older, I think more about the epitaph I might deserve on my tombstone. I found the following actual, but somewhat comical, epitaphs:

- On the 22nd of June, Jonathan Fiddle went out of tune.
- Here lies the body of Jonathan Blake; Stepped on the gas instead of the brake.
- I laid my wife beneath this stone, for her repose and for my own.

Exo 7:7 And Moses *was* eighty years old and Aaron eighty-three years old when they spoke to Pharaoh.

Is the *Old Guys Rule* campaign still popular? It would have been a great t-shirt for Moses and Aaron to wear into Pharaoh's court.

D. L. Moody said, "Moses spent forty years in Pharaoh's court thinking he was somebody, forty years in the desert learning that he was nobody, and forty years showing what God can do with a somebody who found out he was a nobody."

Are you getting older? Looking towards retirement? That's great - **it should give you a lot more time to serve the Lord.**

When you think retirement, top of the list ought to be where or how you can dedicate more - not less - service to Jesus. There's no such thing as spiritual retirement.

Exo 7:8 Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying,
Exo 7:9 "When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Show a miracle for yourselves,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your rod and cast *it* before Pharaoh, *and* let it become a serpent.' "

According to AncientEgyptOnline, the Pharaoh's and other prominent citizens of Egypt had ornate staffs that represented their stature and authority.

Moses "rod" was either the traditional shepherd's crook, or the shorter rod that shepherds would carry. Either one seemed woefully inadequate. I mean, just look at a staff from Egypt in a museum, then compare it to an everyday wooden staff or rod.

In the first (and best) *Men in Black*, Tommy Lee Jones shows Will Smith the impressive Series Four Deatomizer, but then gives him the diminutive Noisy Cricket.

Or how about that scene when a guy pulls a knife on Crocodile Dundee, and he says, "That's not a knife," then pulls out his own huge blade, adding, "**That's** a knife."

A shepherd's staff or rod seem to be like a small knife and a Noisy Cricket. But it was just the weapon God needed to communicate that it is His nature to lead His people, and to care for them, as their Great Shepherd.

God's entire plan to save mankind is steeped in what appears to be inadequacy, but is, in fact, strength, because it alone can open the eyes of the spiritually blind.

One example out of thousands: we just got through the Christmas season. Does it make any real sense that the Savior of the world would be born to a virgin, thought by others to have gotten pregnant while betrothed? And away in a manger? Greeted by shepherds? I think you get the idea.

In his classic devotional, *The Jesus Style*, Gayle Erwin lists unusual characteristics of our Lord: He was a servant, He did not Lord over others, He was humble, as a child, as the younger, last, least, used no force, had no reputation, and was obedient.

Then he lists “death” as a characteristic in a chapter titled, *Shepherd's Don't Run*.

God's entire approach to saving us is absolutely upside-down to the way we normally think. For Deity to take on humanity, in order to be our Substitute and die in our place, then offer salvation as a free gift for believing; that's contrary to our whole natural mindset.

We can see Egypt as a type of the world system ruled by Satan. All those things and people opposed to us are like mini-pharaoh's.

The eventual outcome of history is written in advance. We win. But along the way, we will be resisted, and folks will harden their hearts against God.

The Shepherd Who died is alive forevermore - still seeking to woo hearts by upside-down methods that put us in His stead as the least, and as the last.

#2 Your Adversary Incites You
To Reject Your Resolve
(v10-13)

Moses had expressed great reluctance to go to Pharaoh. At one point he flat-out told God, "Get someone else."

For His part, rather than forcing Himself on Moses, God answered his objections by implementing a back-up plan, using Aaron as Moses' mouthpiece.

Might Moses lose his resolve in the face of continuing resistance from Pharaoh?

He didn't; but it gives us the opportunity to examine ourselves.

I don't know if you've figured it out yet, but life is hard. Harder for some of you than others, but we will all have our share in suffering.

If you serve the Lord much, you're going to have additional trials on account of the Gospel.

Might we lose our resolve in the face of continuing resistance from the pharaoh's of this world?

The next few verses simultaneously reveal to us that our adversary will not relent, but that we should never lose our resolve - never harden *our* hearts.

Exo 7:10 So Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh, and they did so, just as the LORD commanded. And Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent.

"Serpent" can be translated *snake* or *crocodile*. No way of knowing which, but I favor the croc, since they were so common in the Nile River.

The rod is called “Aaron’s” only because he was the one wielding it at the time. It was, technically, the rod of God in Aaron’s hand.

This Moses and Aaron thing tells me that I can miss out on being used by God, but God is not stymied by my disobedience.

Moses clearly missed-out. It should have been Him speaking to Pharaoh, and wielding the rod.

Can you think of a time you’ve missed-out? Maybe God touched your heart in church, about doing something or giving something. But you overlooked it.

God’s not angry with you for it. It’s you that missed-out on the reward of obeying God. God got it done - using someone else. He’s gracious like that.

Exo 7:11 But Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers; so the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments.

In Disney’s 1963 animated feature, *The Sword in the Stone*, there’s a fun sequence where Merlin and Mim have a wizard’s duel. They try to destroy one another by transforming into different animals. At the end Mim transforms into a purple dragon which is supposed to be against the rules. Merlin is able to think quickly, and transforms himself into a germ and infects her, winning the duel.

The “wise men,” the “sorcerers,” the “magicians,” were truly able to duplicate the miracle. It wasn’t mere slight of hand.

They weren't Penn and Teller. They were Janne's and Jambres - identified by the Holy Spirit through the writing of the apostle Paul in the New Testament, in Second Timothy 3:8.

Does it disturb you to hear that the devil can perform miracles? It does me. Nevertheless we read,

2Th 2:9 The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders,

The fact that Jannes and Jambres could duplicate God's miracle strengthened Pharaoh's will to resist God. After all, maybe this was God at His best? Maybe Pharaoh's masters of the mystic arts were superior to the God of Israel.

Let's digress a moment. Until right then, there was no empirical evidence to suggest that Israel's God had *any* power - let alone enough to deliver His people.

- Their God had left them in Egypt over 400 years.
- They were forced into servitude, treated as slaves.
- Their deliverer had miserably failed in his first attempt - he killed an Egyptian, causing him to flee a wanted felon.
- Upon his return, their deliverer presented himself as a reluctant-to-talk shepherd trying to take-on one of the world's great military powers.

The rod turning into a croc was the first sign that Israel's God had any power at all.

Knowing what we know, looking back with perfect hindsight, we can see that **those points of weakness were signs of God's power.**

As I was writing this, an old chorus came to mind:

*He shall feed His flock like a Shepherd;
He shall gather the lambs in His arms;
And carry them, in His bosom,
And shall gently lead those that are with young.*

Isn't that what God was going to do? Pharaoh could have seen it. He didn't - probably mostly because he'd never imagined that any 'god' could act that way.

The God of Israel was wholly separate and unlike any other god. His power was not in coercion or force; it was in love and in grace - able to save to the uttermost.

Exo 7:12 For every man threw down his rod, and they became serpents. But Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods.

We're not told how many Egyptian rods there were, but we know there were at least two, and probably several. The rod of God in Aaron's hand "swallowed up" the others.

It doesn't say God exposed them as charlatans. Their rods really turned to crocodiles - but they were brunch for the rod of God.

Exo 7:13 And Pharaoh's heart grew hard, and he did not heed them, as the LORD had said.

The rod battle only strengthened Pharaoh's resolve.

This tells us we are in a long, protracted contest against evil. Victory is assured; but battles may be won or lost along the way.

One commentator said it like this:

God's struggle with evil is real; God does not rid the world of evil with a flick of the wrist. There will be genuine conflict in moving a people from bondage to freedom.

The way I've been putting it lately is to say that because of His longsuffering with sinners, not willing any should perish, God tolerates evil in the world.

Great - except you and I get caught-up in that, and are called upon to press on serving God despite being treated as the least, as the last.

In the midst of what seems defeat, or suffering without relief, our spiritual resolve is tested.

Isn't that what Job is about? The devil contended that Job would lose his resolve to love and to serve God if he were allowed to afflict him.

Afflict him the devil did. Like a weeble, Job wobbled, but he didn't fall down. His resolve to love and serve God was instead all the more intensified by the end of the book.

Right now, in my life, there are some things that I know God could do in the lives of others, for their good and for His glory. It's testing my resolve because it seems to be taking too long.

It's as if I've just thrown down His rod, won the contest, but to the result that hearts are hardened rather than softened.

Ever feel that way? I hope you don't, but I know you will.

Your adversary incites you to lose your resolve. He will never relent, not until he is in chains, or in the Lake of Fire.

In his 2017 speech at the Pentagon 9/11 memorial, President Trump depended upon the word “resolve” no less than four times to get his message across:

1. Addressing the families of victims, Trump said, “we can honor their sacrifice by pledging our **resolve** to do whatever we must to keep our people safe.”
2. Secondly he said, “We shed our tears in their memory, pledged our devotion in their honor, and turned our sorrow into an unstoppable **resolve** to achieve justice in their name.”
3. Thirdly he said, “Here on the west side of the Pentagon, terrorists tried to break our **resolve**. It’s not going to happen.”
4. Leaning upon the word a fourth time he said, “Woven into that beautiful flag is the story of our **resolve**. We have overcome every challenge - every single challenge, every one of them - we've triumphed over every evil, and remained united as one nation under God. America does not bend. We do not waver. And we will never, ever yield.”

On 9/11, our resolve was strengthened as we collectively recognized and faced a great evil.

Without diminishing the events of 9/11, allow me a little freedom to use it as an spiritual comparison.

You are going to face 9/11 level trials and afflictions in your spiritual lives before you go to Heaven. Let them strengthen - not weaken - your resolve.