

# What does it mean that God hardens human hearts? And will he do that to a believer?"

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This is a serious and important two-part question, but it is really six questions in disguise. Though human speculation could not touch it with a javelin pole, God's revelation helps to unfold the answer. None of us is made modest by tiptoeing past this question if the Bible offers us answers.

I'll try to unfold the six questions and answer them briefly in this (woefully short) article.

## 1. What is a hard heart?

A hard heart is an obstinate and calloused heart that fails to respond to God or obey him. A hard heart is blind to the precious value of the gospel and refuses to embrace Christ ([Rom. 11:8](#)). Most precariously, a hard heart is synonymous with spiritual ignorance and alienation from God ([Eph. 4:18](#)).

## 2. But does God actively harden the hearts of sinners? And if so, why?

Without question, the answer is *yes*, he does. The Bible speaks of God's active agency in hardening hearts with unmistakable bluntness.

Maybe the clearest example is Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus. God hardened his heart in obstinacy on purpose. "Not once in [Exodus 4-14](#) is the assertion of God's hardening of Pharaoh *grounded* in any attitude or act of Pharaoh. Instead, again and again the reason given for the hardening is God's *purpose* to demonstrate his power and magnify his name," as Paul explains in [Romans 9:17](#) (John Piper, [The Justification of God](#), 174).

We find another example in [John 12:36-43](#), showing Jesus unmistakably connecting unbelief in his day with the hardening of God. But before we go much further it's vital to hear four key qualifications from D. A. Carson on this text:

If a superficial reading finds this harsh, manipulative, even robotic, four things must constantly be borne in mind:

- (1) God's sovereignty in these matters is never pitted against human responsibility;
- (2) God's judicial hardening is not presented as the capricious manipulation of an arbitrary potentate cursing morally neutral or even morally pure beings, but as a holy condemnation of a guilty people who are condemned to do and be what they themselves have chosen;

(3) God's sovereignty in these matters can also be a cause for hope, for if he is not sovereign in these areas there is little point in petitioning him for help, while if he is sovereign the anguished pleas of the prophet (Is. 63:15-19)—and of believers throughout the history of the church—make sense;

(4) God's sovereign hardening of the people in Isaiah's day, his commissioning of Isaiah to apparently fruitless ministry, is a stage in God's "strange work" ([Is. 28:21-22](#)) that brings God's ultimate redemptive purposes to pass. [Carson, [John](#), 448-9]

God has his ways and his prerogatives in divine hardening, and those prerogatives are just and right ([Rom. 9:14-24](#)).

At the same time, a hardened heart always reflects the willful, self-hardening, and rejection of God by the sinner ([Rom. 1:26-28](#)). Pharaoh hardened his own heart ([Ex. 8:15](#)). God also hardened Pharaoh's heart ([Ex. 7:3](#)) for God to display his wrath and power.

But this answer raises another question: is the hardening work of God now passed? Was it only a stage in redemptive history to bring out the cross and the ingathering of Gentiles? Or, to ask the question another way:

### **3. Does God harden Gentile hearts, and does he still harden hearts today?**

Further evidence in the epistles leads me to answer *yes* and *yes*. We know God's hardening will one day manifest in the Gentile world on earth at a future point leading up to the return of Christ ([2 Thess. 2:1-12](#)).

But even more tangibly, the hardening of God is made manifest in two ways: in the continued rejection of the Messiah by ethnic Israel ([Rom. 9-11](#)), and in the celebration of homosexual sin by Gentiles ([Rom. 1:26-28](#)). In both cases, broadly speaking, God's hardening is made visible to modern eyes.

### **4. So whose hearts are hardened?**

As the New Testament makes clear, the whole world is ultimately divided into two groups, the gospel-embracers and the gospel-rejecters, or more specifically, the elect and the non-elect. In the end, these categories divide the entire population. There are vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath ([Rom. 2:5](#)). There are "elect" and there are "the rest" ([Rom. 11:7](#)). God "has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills," and those two categories cover all human beings. The hardened in this passage include a Gentile Pharaoh ([Rom. 9:17-18](#)).

Taking this point even further, based on the contrast in [Romans 11:7](#), I believe we can say every one of the non-elect will experience God's active hardening at some point, to be shut up in a condition that excludes one from salvation. God's hardening is a feature of his activity with the "vessels of wrath."

## 5. So does God harden the heart of a believer?

Now we get to the main question, one where even Reformed theologians seem to disagree. Some say *yes*, God could harden the heart of the pre-converted elect in their sin but then reverse that hardening later in regeneration. The case of David is cited as an episode where a child of God may have experienced a circumstantial divine hardening ([2 Sam. 24:1](#)).

And this possibility raises questions about what ultimately happened to Pharaoh. Did he convert after the Exodus? Possibly, but this would seem to contradict Paul's use of Pharaoh as an example in his discussion of election in [Romans 9-11](#). It seems more likely that Paul uses Pharaoh as an example of a "vessel of wrath" who was never converted.

But I think the best answer to this question is *no*, because in the argument of Romans, God's act of hardening is permanent. As one commentator puts it:

It is unlikely that the hardening to which Paul refers is reversible (Rom. 9:18, 21-23; 11:1-10). One is the object either of God's mercy or of his hardening (9:18), and there is not the slightest hint in 9:21-23 that the vessels of wrath may become vessels of mercy. Instead, Paul argues that the vessels of mercy will appreciate God's mercy when they see his just anger inflicted upon the vessels of wrath. (Thomas R. Schreiner, [Romans](#), 618)

Based on Romans, it seems best to say God hardens only the vessels of wrath (non-elect), never the hearts of the vessels of mercy (elect), either before, or after, conversion. God's hardening of a heart is a judicial act that is never overturned. Therefore I think it's best to say, *no*, the true believer is never the object of God's hardening.

## 6. But has my heart been hardened?

Often this question comes from Christians suffering spiritual numbness in their heart. They don't feel joy in God like they want, or like they did before. Their Bible reading plan is less fruitful on a daily basis than they desire. But all believers feel and lament this sort of coldness in their hearts. All believers struggle with occasional callousness in their affections—but this feeling is not the same thing as a hard heart. A truly hard heart cannot feel or lament its own hardness, and there's the key difference.

Hardness of heart leads the non-elect to feel increasing confident in their sin; hardness of heart in the redeemed makes us feel weak and needy.

So how do you know if God has hardened your heart? Well, have you hardened your heart to God ([Heb. 3:7-19](#))? The beauty of God's divine drama is that we don't immediately know who is a vessel of mercy and who is a God-hardened vessel of wrath. The Jewish man who currently rejects Christ may eventually come to faith in Christ by an act of God's sovereign grace overriding his self-hardened heart. And the practicing homosexual sinner may turn from her sins and live by an act of God's sovereign grace overriding her self-hardened heart.

This is why gospel preaching is so amazing. We offer the gospel to all. We let the gospel-lion out of its cage to do its work in separating sheep from goats, vessels of mercy from vessels of wrath. “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing (non-elect), but to us who are being saved (elect) it is the power of God” ([1 Cor. 1:18](#)).

In the end, each of us must answer one question above all regarding the condition of our heart: Do I embrace Jesus Christ as the greatest treasure in the universe?

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