

## Does God Harden Human Hearts? *(A Catholic View)*

One of the more difficult biblical themes to understand is that of God hardening the hearts and minds of certain people. The most memorable case is that of Pharaoh. Before sending Moses to him, God said that He would “harden Pharaoh’s heart” (Ex 4:21). There are other instances in which biblical texts speak of God hardening the hearts of sinners, even from among His own people.

Jesus hinted at such a theme in Matthew 13, when He said that He spoke in parables (here understood more as riddles) so as to affirm that the hearts of most people “outside the house” were hardened. He quotes Isaiah 6:9-10 as He does so. Jesus’ own apostles wondered why He spoke plainly only to them and a close company of disciples, but in riddle-like parables to the crowds outside. In His answer we are left to wonder if Jesus has not perchance written off the crowds and left them in the hardness of their hearts. To be fair, Jesus’ remark is ambiguous and open to interpretation.

**What are we to make of texts like these which explicitly or implicitly speak of God hardening the hearts of people?** How can God, who does no evil, be the source of a sinful mind or hard heart? Why would God do such a thing when Scripture also says this:

- *As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?* (Ez 33:11)
- *God our Savior ... wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth* (1 Tim 2:4).

**To be sure, these questions involve very deep mysteries,** about the interaction between God’s sovereignty and our freedom, about time, and about causality. The question of God hardening hearts cannot be resolved simply. Greater minds than mine have pondered these things and it would be foolish to think that an easy resolution will be found in a blog post.

**Some distinctions can and should be made and some context supplied.** We do not want to understand the “hardening texts” simplistically or in ways that use one truth to cancel out others that balance it.

I propose that we examine these texts along four lines:

1. The Context of Connivance
2. The Mystery of Time
3. The Mystery of Primary Causality
4. The Necessity of Humility

**To begin, it is important simply to list some of the hardening texts.** These will be referred to as we examine each of the four points above. The following are not the only hardening texts, but they provide a wide enough sample to use in our discussion:

- *The LORD said to Moses, “When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go” (Ex 4:21).*
- *Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh, but the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let the Israelites go out of his country (Ex 11:10).*
- *Why, O LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance (Is 63:17).*
- *He [God] has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them (Jesus quoting Isaiah 6:9-10, in John 12:40).*
- *They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason, God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie, so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness (2 Thess 2:10-12).*
- *Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ... Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done (Rom 1:24, 28).*

**Point I: The Context of Connivance – In properly assessing texts like these we should first consider the contexts in which they were made and written.**

Generally speaking, most of these declarations that God hardens the heart come after a significant period of disobedience on the part of those whose hearts were hardened. In a way, God “cements the deal” and gives them what they really want. Seeing that they have hardened their *own* hearts to Him, God determines that their disposition is to be a permanent one. In a sovereign exercise of His will (for nothing can happen without God’s allowance), He declares and permits their hearts to be hardened in a definitive kind of way. In this sense there is a judgment of God upon the individual that recognizes the person’s definitive decision against Him. Hence this hardening can be understood as voluntary on the part of the one hardened, for God hardens in such a way that He uses the person’s own will for the executing of His judgment. God accepts that the individual’s will against Him is definitive.

**In the case of Pharaoh**, although God indicated to Moses that He would harden Pharaoh's heart, the actual working out of this is a bit more complicated. We see in the first five plagues that it is Pharaoh who hardens his own heart (Ex 7:13; 7:22; 8:11; 8:28; 9:7). It is only after this repeated hardening by Pharaoh of his own heart that the Exodus text speaks of God as the one who hardens (Ex 9:12; 9:34; 10:1; 10:20; 10:27). Hence the hardening here is not without Pharaoh's repeated demonstration of his own hardness. God does this as a kind of sovereign judgment on Pharaoh.

**The Isaiah texts (many in number) that speak of a hardening being visited upon Israel by God** (e.g., #3 and #4 above) are also the culmination of a long testimony by Isaiah of Israel's hardness. At the beginning of Isaiah's ministry, God describes (through Isaiah) Israel's hardness as being of their own doing: *For the LORD has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him* (Is 1:2-4). There follows a long list of their crimes, their hardness, and their refusal to repent.

**St. John Chrysostom:** Of the numerous texts later in Isaiah (and also referenced by Jesus (e.g., Jn 12:40)) that speak of Israel as being hardened by God (and having their eyes shut by Him), St. John Chrysostom wrote, *That the saying of Isaiah might be fulfilled: that here is expressive not of the cause, but of the event. They did not disbelieve because Isaiah said they would; but because they would disbelieve, Isaiah said they would ... For He does not leave us, except we wish Him ... Whereby it is plain that we begin to forsake first, and are the cause of our own perdition. For as it is not the fault of the sun, that it hurts weak eyes, so neither is God to blame for punishing those who do not attend to His words* (on a gloss of Is. 6:9-10 at Jn 12:40, quoted in the Catena Aurea).

**St Augustine:** *This is not said to be the devil's doing, but God's. Yet if any ask why they could not believe, I answer, because they would not ... But the Prophet, you say, mentions another cause, not their will; but that God had blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart. But I answer, that they well deserved this. For God hardens and blinds a man, by forsaking and not supporting him; and this He makes by a secret sentence, for by an unjust one He cannot* (quoted in the Catena Aurea at Jn 12:40).

**In the passage from 2 Thessalonians**, while the text speaks of God as having sent the delusion, the verses before and after make clear the sinful role of the punished.

**Of this text St. Augustine wrote,** *From a hidden judgment of God comes perversity of heart, so that the refusal to hear the truth leads to the commission of sin, and this sin is itself a punishment for the preceding sin [of refusing to hear the truth]* (Against Julian 5.3.12).

**St. John Damascus:** *[God does this] so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness* (The Orthodox Faith 4.26).

**The passages from Romans** speak of God handing them over only after they have suppressed the truth (1:18), persevered in their wickedness (1:18), and preferred idolatry (1:23). Hence, as a just judgment, God hands them over to sexual confusion (homosexuality) and countless other destructive drives. So although it is said that God hands them over, it is really not that simple. They do not want to serve Him and so He, knowing their definitive decision, gives them what they want.

**Thus our first point** of distinction in understanding the hardening texts is that the context of connivance is important in assessing them. Scripture does not assert that God takes a reasonably righteous man and, out of the blue, hardens his heart, confuses his mind, or causes him (against his will) to become obstinate. The texts are usually presented as a kind of prevenient judgment by God, that the state of the person's hardness has now become permanent. They refuse and so God "causes" them to walk in their own sinful ways since they have insisted on doing so.

**Point II: The Mystery of Time** – In understanding these hardening texts (which we have seen are akin to judgment texts) we must recall that God does not live in time in the same way that we do. Scripture speaks often of God's knowledge and vision of time as being comprehensive rather than speculative or serial (e.g., Ex 3:14; Ps 90:2-4; Ps 93:2; Is 43:13; Ps 139; 2 Peter 3:8; James 1:17).

**To say that God is eternal and lives in eternity is to say that He lives in the fullness of time.** For God, past, present, and future are all the same. God is not wondering what I will do tomorrow; neither is He waiting for it to happen. For Him, my tomorrow has always been present. All of my days were written in His book before one of them ever came to be (Ps 139:16). Whether and how long I live has always been known to Him. Before He ever formed me in my mother's womb He knew me (Jer 1:4). My final destiny is already known and present to Him.

**Hence, when we strive to understand God's judgments in the form of hardening the hearts of certain people, we must be careful not to think He lives in time the way we do.** It is not as though God is watching my life like a movie. He already knows the choices I will make. Thus, when God hardens the hearts of some, it is not as though He is trying to negatively influence the outcome and trip certain people up. He already knows the outcome and has always known it; He knows the destiny that they have chosen.

**Be very careful with this insight,** for it is a mystery to us. We cannot really know what it is like to live in eternity, in the fullness of time, where the future is just as present as the past. Even if you think you know, you really don't. What is essential for us to realize is that God does not live in time the way we do. If we try too hard to solve the mystery (rather than merely accepting and respecting it) we risk falling into the denial of human freedom, double predestination, or other misguided notions that sacrifice one truth for another rather than holding them in balance. That God knows

what I will do tomorrow does not destroy my freedom to actually do it. How this all works out is mysterious, but we are free and God holds us accountable for our choices. Further, even though God knows our destiny already, this does not mean that He is revealing anything about that to us, so that we should look for signs and seek to call ourselves saved or lost. We ought to work out our salvation in reverential fear and trembling (Phil 2:12).

**The key point here is mystery.** How, why, and when God hardens the heart of anyone is caught up in the mysterious fact that He lives outside of time and knows all things before they happen. Thus He acts with comprehensive knowledge of all outcomes.

**Point III: The Mystery of Causality** – One of the major differences between the ancient and the modern world is that the ancient world was much more comfortable dealing with something known as primary causality.

**Up until the Renaissance, God was at the center of all things and people instinctively saw the hand of God in everything,** even terrible things. Job said, *The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised ... if we have received good things at the hand of God, why should we not receive evil?* (Job 1:21; 2:10) The ancients would commonly attribute everything as coming from the hand of God, for He was the first cause of everything that happened. This is what is meant by primary causality. The ancients were thus much more comfortable attributing things to God, even things that we are not. In speaking like this, they were not engaging in superstitious or primitive thinking; rather, they were emphasizing that God was sovereign, omnipotent, and omnipresent, and that nothing happened apart from His sovereign will. God is the primary cause of all that is.

**Of this ancient and scriptural way of thinking the Catechism says,** *And so we see the Holy Spirit, the principal author of Sacred Scripture, often attributing actions to God without mentioning any secondary causes [e.g., human or natural]. This is not a “primitive mode of speech,” but a profound way of recalling God’s primacy and absolute Lordship over history and the world, and so of educating his people to trust in him* (CCC # 304).

**The key point here** is understanding that the ancient biblical texts, while often speaking of God as hardening the hearts of sinners, did not mean to say that man had no role, no responsibility. Neither did the texts mean to say that God acted in a merely arbitrary way. Rather, the emphasis was on God’s sovereign power as the *first cause* of all that is. Hence, He is often called the cause of all things and His hand is seen in everything. We moderns are uncomfortable speaking in this way.

**After the Renaissance, man moved himself to the center and God was gradually relegated to the periphery.** Man’s manner of thinking and speaking began to shift to secondary causes (causes related to man and nature). If something happens we look to natural causes, or in human situations, to the humans who caused it. These are secondary causes because I cannot cause something to

happen unless God causes me. Yet increasingly the modern mind struggles to maintain a balance between the two mysteries: our freedom and responsibility, and God's sovereignty and omnipotence.

**In effect primary causality has largely been thrown overboard as a category.**

Even modern believers unconsciously do this and thus exhibit three related issues:

1. **We fail to maintain the proper balance** between two mysteries: God's sovereignty and our freedom.
2. **We exhibit shock** at things like the "hardening texts" of the Bible because we understand them poorly.
3. **We try to resolve the shock by favoring one truth over the other.** Maybe we just brush aside the ancient biblical texts as a "primitive mode of speech," inappropriately concluding that God didn't have anything to do with this or that. Or we go to the other extreme and become fatalistic, denying human freedom, denying secondary causality (our part), and accusing God of everything (as if He were the only cause and shouldered the sole blame for everything). We either read the hardening texts with a clumsy literalism or we dismiss them as misguided notions from an immature, primitive, pre-scientific age.

**The point here is that we have to balance the mysteries of primary and secondary causality.** We cannot fully understand how they interrelate, but they do. Both mysteries need to be held. The ancients were more sophisticated than we are in holding these mysteries in the proper balance. We handle causality very clumsily and do not appreciate the distinctions between primary causality (God's part) and secondary causality (our own and nature's part). We try to resolve the mystery rather than holding it in balance and speaking to both realities. In doing so, we become poor interpreters of the hardening texts.

**Point IV: The Necessity of Humility** – By now it is clear that we are dealing with the mysterious interrelationship between God and Man, between God's sovereignty and our freedom, between primary and secondary causality. In the face of such mysteries we have to be very humble. We ought not to think more of the details than is proper, because they are largely hidden from us. Too many moderns either dismiss the hardening texts or accept them and then sit in harsh judgment over God (as if we could do such a thing). Neither approach bespeaks humility. Consider a shocking but very humbling text in which Paul warns us in this very matter:

*What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore, God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens*

*whom he wants to harden. One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" (Romans 9:14-20)*

None of us can demand an absolute account from God for what He does. Even if He were to tell us, could our small and worldly minds ever really comprehend it? *My thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways, says the Lord (Is 55:8).*

**SUMMARY** – In this (rather too long) post, we have considered the “hardening texts,” in which it seems that God hardens the hearts of certain people and groups—and so He does. But texts like these must be approached carefully, humbly, and with proper understanding of the scriptural and historical context. At work here are profound mysteries: God’s sovereignty, our freedom, His mercy, and His justice.

We should be careful to admit the limits of our knowledge when it comes to such texts. As the Catechism so beautifully states, when it comes to texts like these they are to be appreciated as *a profound way of recalling God’s primacy and absolute Lordship over history and the world, and so of educating his people to trust in him (CCC # 304).*

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