

The Red Sea Crossing

We could subtitle today's message "Persistent Unbelief." With the multitude of plagues suffered by Egypt, even to the death of all the firstborn of the land, the supremacy of God was firmly established. Nevertheless, Pharaoh succumbed to a pernicious character flaw, one that Israel also possessed presently and throughout their history, which brought him to complete ruin. That trait is unbelief; hard-hearted unbelief.

Hardly had Israel departed from Egypt than Pharaoh regretted allowing his nation of slaves to leave. Informed that they were gone, he says rhetorically, "Why have we done this, that we have let Israel go from serving us (Exodus 14:5)?" Already, because of the hardness of his heart, he had forgotten all the suffering he and his nation had endured as a result of his stubborn refusal to submit to God. He determined to pursue Israel and return them to bondage.

We should note that the biblical text records, "Then I will harden Pharaoh's heart, so that he will pursue them; and I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, that the Egyptians may know that I am the Lord (Exodus 14:3)." It is subsequent to this statement that Pharaoh repents of his decision to let Israel go. Some question why God would do this. He had already gained His victory. Why harden Pharaoh's heart again only to lure him out to destruction? There are at least two possible explanations. First, it could be that man can reach a point of no return with God. One can be so excessively defiant that there is nothing left but punishment. The fact that Pharaoh let Israel go was not evidence of repentance and acknowledgment of God's sovereignty, but only of an inability to stand against Divine onslaught. God's judgment upon Pharaoh and his armies was yet to come.

A second explanation could be that God did not harden Pharaoh's heart against Pharaoh's will. Because cement hardens quickly in sunlight, the sunlight cannot be blamed for the hardening quality of cement. Similarly, Pharaoh's heart was already hardened by his own arrogance, even before God was revealed to him. When his heart was exposed to the knowledge of God, not only was his immediate hardness exposed, but the light of God caused his heart to harden all the more. With the pain removed that motivated Pharaoh to release Israel, his true heart was revealed once again and, in a dramatic stroke of folly, Pharaoh follows his hard heart to his destruction.

In either case it is in this circumstance that Pharaoh pursued Israel and found them hemmed in by the Red Sea. But the children of Israel, remembering the great works of God that brought them out of Egypt in recent days, stood firm. No, unfortunately, that was not the case. The hearts of Israel were very nearly as hard as Pharaoh's. They cried out to Moses, "...were there no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness (Exodus 14:11)?" Did we not say to you in Egypt, "It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than that we should die in the wilderness (Exodus 14:12)."

Nevertheless, in fulfillment of His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and in His determination to "gain honor over Pharaoh and... his army (Exodus 14:17)," God ignored Israel's lack of faith and sent a cloud between the Egyptians and the Israelites, shrouding the former in darkness and providing the latter light by night (14:18-19). Commanding Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea, it parted on the strength of "a strong east wind all the night (14:20)" and Israel was able to escape on dry ground. Foolishly Egypt followed Israel on the dry path through the sea. With God causing confusion among the Egyptians (14:24-25) and the Egyptian army attempting to flee by way of the dry sea passage, Moses once again stretched out his hand over the sea and "the sea returned to its full depth (14:27)." In spite of the hardness of Pharaoh's heart and the unbelief of Israel, true to His promise to Abraham and His own indomitable will, "the Lord saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians (14:30)" and "the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord and His servant Moses (14:31)." Unfortunately, for this generation of Israelites, it was not a faith that would stand the test of time.