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Exodus 4:21-6:12¹

God's Exodus People:

A Matter of the Heart

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(S1) If you think my sermon title sounds like the title of a romance novel you might buy at the grocery store, you're right. When I took my first creative writing course, I learned that many romance novels actually follow a pretty generic formula and that those who master the romance novel, can make a lot of money. Danielle Steel, the author of *Matters of the Heart* has sold over 590 million copies of her novels.

I have a confession to make. I have read one of those Christian romance novels, *Redeeming Love* by Francine Rivers. It's loosely based on the book of Hosea, so that's why I told myself it was okay... I read it about a year before I met Monica. I think it's fair to say I'd been single a little too long. I thought it would help me "woo" my future wife better when I met her, but when Monica found out, she just laughed at me.

Maybe you've read one of those embarrassing romance novels, love a sappy chick-flick, or are just a romantic at heart. All of these things, poetry, art, music, they seek to move and mold our hearts. What shapes our hearts? There's this thing in us that drives us to love, to care, to make wise decisions, and sometimes foolish ones. What rules your heart? Your mind, your emotions?

I have a good friend who I chat with about every other week. He asks me this simple question, "How's your heart?" He asks because he wants to cut away all the clutter, all the busyness, all the things I hide behind. Today, as your pastor who loves you, I want to ask you the same question. How's your heart?

In the Bible, the heart is the **core** of a person. Not just emotions or thoughts, but where those emotions and thoughts come from, the soul, the center. We're continuing our study of Exodus today. The theme of the heart runs throughout the whole book. The Hebrew word for heart, *léb*, is used 46 times in Exodus (not all as "heart"). About half of those verses are about the heart of one man, Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

Early in Exodus, God makes Moses, the one who is going to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, a promise. God promises him he is going to harden the heart of Pharaoh.

(S2) Exodus 4:21 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. (NIV®)

God is going to use Pharaoh's heart to prove he is God and Pharaoh is not. As we examine the theme of the heart, I want us to ask ourselves that big question, "How's my heart?" Is it hard towards God, or soft? Pharaoh doesn't stop to ask that question, and it costs him his kingdom and his firstborn son.

I. (S3) Pharaoh's hardens his heart by rejecting God. (Exodus 5:1-2)

¹ ¹ All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.

At the beginning of chapter 5, Moses and Aaron go before Pharaoh and say, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go...!’” But Pharaoh doesn’t listen to them, just like God promised. Instead he says, “Who is this Lord you speak of? I don’t know him.”

When you see “LORD” in all capitals, that’s the english translation of God’s special covenant name, “Yahweh.” *A covenant is a promise where God is involved.* God made a covenant promise with Moses’ forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He promised to give their descendants the promised land (place), to make them into a great nation (people), and to always be with them (presence).

So when Pharaoh says, “I don’t know Yahweh” he’s saying, “I don’t know your god, I only know mine. Your god is less than my gods; he’s not worth knowing or believing. His promises aren’t true.” Pharaoh doesn’t just not know God, he doesn’t want to know God. Hard-heartedness comes from disbelief that God exists and cares for us. It’s rooted in not knowing God or trusting him, in rejecting him.

Application: As we examine Pharaoh’s heart, we need to examine our own, to test ourselves. The primary way to know if our hearts are hard towards God, is to ask... Do I know God? Do I believe in him, specifically, the God revealed in the Bible? If you don’t believe in God, you have Pharaoh’s heart.

Illustration: If Jesus were to take a stethoscope and place it on your chest, what would he hear? Would he hear a heart-beat that beats harder the closer he gets to you because you love him? Or would he hear a sick heart-beat that’s hissing and wheezing? A healthy heart loves God. A sick one could care less about him. When you visit the doctor’s office, there’s other ways to examine your health. The Doctor checks your eyes, ears, nose, and throat. A Doctor looks for symptoms. I want us to look at several symptoms of a hard heart.

We find the symptoms by looking at the Hebrew word for hardening. In fact, not one, but three different Hebrew words are used to describe Pharaoh’s **hard heart**:

1) חָזַק (hāzaq) to be firm (Ex 4:21)² (S4)

This first word (hāzaq) is used the most often and describes Pharaoh’s response to God’s commands. When Moses and Aaron come to Pharaoh, telling him to let the Israelites go, Pharaoh stands his ground. He won’t budge, he won’t move. He’s stubborn, obstinate. As king, you’re supposed to stand your ground. Pharaoh can’t let those around him see weakness or change.

Application: How can we test our hearts to see if they are firm? Do you pride yourself in your stubbornness? Do you stand your ground even when you know you’re wrong? If we do this in normal living, what’s to say we won’t do this in our relationship with God? If the Holy Spirit has been convicting you about a sin-pattern in your life that you need to change, and you keep ignoring him, then you are standing firm when you shouldn’t, your heart is getting harder.

2) כָּבֵד (kābēd) to be heavy (Ex 10:1) (S5)

² Adapted from the Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament (pgs. 403, 490, 1175), Mounce’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, and the NIV Zondervan Study Bible (126).

When you think of hardness, you might think of something that also weighs a lot, like iron or steel. The Hebrew word for weight (kābēd) is the same used for glory or honor. Pharaoh was more concerned with his pride than he was with God's glory. Pharaoh is weighed down with ego, making him sluggish and indifferent to God's words.³

Application: When our pride is more important to us than obeying God, we have hard heartedness. When we're more concerned with our reputation than God's, we're showing hardness like Pharaoh's. I wrestle with this kind of hard-heartedness. When God calls me to do something, and I say no, or delay, the root is usually my fear of what others might think of me. That's my pride. Ultimately, that's a heavy heart, a heart that's more concerned with my pride than God's glory.

3) קָשָׁה (qāšâ) to be difficult (Ex 7:3) (S6)

This last word (qāšâ) is only used once in Exodus 7:3. It means “(to be) bad, evil, difficult.” There was a type of “harshness” or “severity” building up in Pharaoh's heart. This Pharaoh's father was willing to throw Hebrew baby boys into the Nile and he is willing to enslave them in hard labor. He wasn't gentle or merciful. He was a man who wanted his way and didn't care how he hurt others.

Application: When we act harshly towards others, instead of loving them, we're showing hard-heartedness. If you don't mind hurting others, this may be a symptom of hard-heartedness towards God. Each one of us is created in God's image, and deserves to be treated with respect and value, from the smallest to the greatest. If you struggle with harshness, ask God to soften your heart.

If you are a Christian, I don't believe you can experience the same hard-heartedness as Pharaoh. His heart has rejected God. The Holy Spirit does not live inside of him. But if you do believe in Jesus, even if you struggle with a hard-heart sometimes, you can be confident that your hardness will not overcome the Holy Spirit's work in you. What God promises to do is take our hard hearts and transform them.

(S7) Ezekiel 36:26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. (NIV®)

If you don't know God through a relationship with Jesus, you can pray right now for God's Holy Spirit to enter into your heart and transform you from the inside out. If Pharaoh had repented of his hard-heartedness, the story would look a lot different. Instead, he relished his hard heart, he didn't want to know God.

But maybe that doesn't seem fair to you because you remember Exodus 4:21 where God promised Moses that he would harden Pharaoh's heart. Is it really Pharaoh's fault if God does this? In Exodus, we see: **(S8)**

- A. Pharaoh's heart becomes hard (Ex 7:13-14, 22, 8:19, 9:7, 9:35)
- B. Pharaoh hardens his own heart (Ex 8:15, 32, 9:34)
- C. God hardens Pharaoh's heart (Ex 4:21, 7:3, 9:12, 10:1, 20, 27, 11:10, 14:4, 8)

If God promised to harden Pharaoh's heart, can he really help it? Whole books have been written on this subject, but what helps me is to remember the Bible wasn't written for modern western readers who need

³ NET Bible footnote for 8:15 for hardened.

things to fit in logical boxes. The Old Testament was written for a Hebrew audience much more comfortable with **paradox**, with **tension**, with **mystery**. The readers of the Old Testament believed that God is in charge, that he rules over everything, and yet we're still responsible for our choices, our decisions, our sins.

The mystery is that Pharaoh's heart becomes hard because of the sin he is born with (it becomes hard), because he wants to rebel against God (he hardens his own), and because God nudges him along (God hardens him). And yet, we know in all of this God is good, and God will use this hardening in Pharaoh's heart to reveal he is the one true God to the Egyptians, which is an act of grace and kindness (Exodus 7:5). What concerns us is not who is responsible, but how we can respond differently.

II. (S9) The people of God are also susceptible to hard heartedness. (Exodus 5:3-22)

When Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh, it doesn't go well. Pharaoh doesn't set the people free. In fact, he makes the Israelite's lives more miserable. Pharaoh takes away the straw provided to them for brick-making and commands they make the same amount of bricks each day. To make bricks, they mixed straw and clay and then baked them into bricks. By losing their supply of straw, their work has doubled.

Of course, the people aren't able to meet this new demand and the Egyptian taskmasters beat the Israelite foremen. The foremen go to Pharaoh to plead their case, but he won't have any of it. Pharaoh calls them "idle", get's angry with them, and the foremen realize they're in "trouble" (v. 19). So what do they do? They don't pray to God, calling out for deliverance, instead they get mad. In verse 21, they yell at Aaron and Moses, "May the Lord look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put sword in their hand to kill us." (NIV®)

Application: It's easy for the people of God to trust God when life goes well. But how about when life get's difficult? Are we quick, like the Israelites, to turn away from God when the going get's hard? The Israelites are willing to follow Moses, and obey God, if God gives them what they want when they want it. As Christians, I think we are particularly susceptible to hard harts because God tells us to put our hearts on the line for him. He tells us to call out in prayer and expect an answer. Usually all we get is silence and it hurts.

Illustration: Have you ever heard of **Paris syndrome**? Paris syndrome is a diagnosed psychological disorder that some people experience when they visit Paris. They're told by marketers, poets, and artists that Paris is full of cheese, wine, flowers, architecture, and romance. But when they arrive, they find locals who don't like tourists, trash on the streets, pollution in the air, and that everything isn't as wonderful as they imagined. This can lead to hallucinations, feelings of persecution, anxiety, dizziness, sweating, and even vomiting.⁴ These tourists open their hearts to Paris and it doesn't meet their expectations.⁵

I think **church-planting** is a little bit like Paris syndrome. You hear how amazing it is, "You can help found a brand new church in a community that needs it" but when you arrive, it's actually a lot tougher than it sounds. Lots' of people visit, but not many stay. We have lot's of ideas and ministry goals, but not enough volunteers. We want to see God move, but he moves slower than we want. The temptation, after a while, is to

⁴ Paris syndrome. (2017, January 14). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 07:57, January 14, 2017, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Paris_syndrome&oldid=759987953

⁵ 'Paris Syndrome' Strikes Japanese by Caroline Wyatt. BBC News, Paris. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6197921.stm> (accessed 2017.01.19).

let it get to you. The temptation, is to begin to shut your heart down because it's difficult to put your heart on the line week after week or when you invite a friend to church, and they don't come.

Maybe your Paris syndrome has nothing to do with church planting. Maybe you felt lead by God to step out in faith in a particular way in your finances, family, or career, and it's not going very well. As the people of God, our hearts are susceptible to hard heartedness. So how can we prevent this?

III. (S10) The cure to a hard heart is knowing God. (Exodus 6:1-13)

After the people complain to Moses, Moses turns to God and asks "Why? Why God did you bring me here? I've only made it worse." You know what God's solution is? God tells Moses about himself. *The cure to a hard heart is knowing God.* It's knowing that even when our circumstances are bad, God is good and he loves us. God re-introduces himself to his people to give them hope. He introduces himself three ways:

1. (S11) "I am the Lord" who keeps his promises.⁶ (6:2-5)

God keeps calling himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because it re-affirms to Moses the covenant he made with Abraham to bless his descendants. Abraham was born at approximately 2166 BC and Jacob died around 1859 BC.⁷ 1 Kings 6:1 tells us the Israelites leave Egypt in 1446 BC. God is saying, I was faithful for over 300 years from Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Then I was faithful again for the last 400 years you were in slavery in Egypt. I haven't forgotten my promises of a people, place, and presence.

Application: When we're tempted to doubt God, remember God's promises. Remember how God has promised eternal life to all who believe in Jesus (John 3:16). Remember how God's promise to bless Abraham's descendants applies to any who are spiritual descendants of Abraham through faith in Jesus. Remember how God promises to use all things for our good (Rom 8:28).

2. (S12) "I am the Lord" who brings evildoers to justice. (6:6b)

God says, "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment." Next week we're going to look at the plagues God sends against Pharaoh and the nation of Egypt. These judgments aren't God being petty or mean, they're him rightly punishing those who have slaved and abused his people for four hundred years. When God stretches out his hand in judgement, he dispenses perfect justice.

Illustration: I was recently listening to a sermon by Pastor John Ortberg in which he shared his favorite airplane story. I don't know if it's true or not, but it's the story of a flight from New York to Florida.

An elderly couple get's on the plane and they're moving slowly. There's a man behind them who is being very unkind. He's mocking them for holding him up, he's real self-important, real obnoxious. He sits right in front of them, he's mean to the flight attendants, quite surely to the other people. He's not satisfied with his meal, he sends his meal back twice, on a plane, the second time just to show his contempt. After he sends it back, he jerks his seat back as hard as he can on purpose and it causes all the food and drink to spill on the dress of this elderly old lady. Everybody can't believe this guy.

⁶ Three introductions and paragraph points adapted from *Exodus for You* by Tim Chester, pages 60-61.

⁷ Accordance Bible Software timeline.

The flight attendant comes up to the elderly couple and apologizes and asks if she can help. The old guy says, “I appreciate that. Actually, we’re on this trip because we’re celebrating our 50th wedding anniversary, we’ve been saving up for a long time. We’ve never been on a plane before, this is our first flight. She feels terrible. She brings him a bottle of champagne and he stands up and uncorks it and pours it over the head of the guy sitting in front of his wife and everybody in first class applauds because every once in a while something happens that somebody ought to get angry about.”⁸

Application: As Christians, we see injustice everywhere. We see men abusing their wives and children. We see people take advantage of the poor for money and power. We see road rage that goes unanswered, coworkers that will do anything to get ahead, and bosses that mistreat us. Jesus has promised that he will restore justice once again. That’s terrifying, because we’re not as bad as Hitler or Stalin, but we’ve cut in line too, we’ve gossiped, we’ve acted selfishly, we’ve sinned. Even on our best days, we still disobey God. This is why the last aspect of who God reveals himself to be is so wonderful.

3. (S13) “I am the Lord” who redeems you. (6:6a)

The Hebrew word for “redeem” means “to ransom” or “buy back”. If you’ve read the book of Ruth, you might have heard of the concept of the kinsman-redeemer or kinsman guardian. The kinsman-redeemer was responsible for protecting and delivering close relatives from hardship (Lev 25:25), such as when Boaz married Ruth and prevented her from a life of destitution (Ruth 3:9). Kinsman-redeemers were also responsible for exacting vengeance on those who murdered their family members and were called the avenger of blood (Num 35:21). To be a kinsman redeemer sometimes even meant paying money to buy back a relative from slavery (Lev 25:47-48). When God calls himself a redeemer, as Tim Chester writes, “He will act as Israel’s avenger, protector and provider—even when that involves personal loss.”

Application: The cure to hard heart is knowing there is a God who loves you enough to redeem you. In order for God to claim you and me, and even the Israelites in our story, he had to pay the penalty for our sins. He paid that cost in full with the life of his son, Jesus Christ. As Tim Chester points out, at the cross, God stretched out his hands, not to strike us down, but to receive the judgment we deserve. By doing this, God removes our hard hearts and gives us new soft hearts. The gospel is the best heart softener.

(S14) The cure to a hard heart is knowing God.

If knowing God is the cure, the question is, do you know him? Maybe a better way of asking this is... Does God know you? Does God know your heart? Have you told him how you’re feeling, how you’re doing?

The funny thing about those cheap romance novels at the store is they always have a really macho man like Fabio or beautiful woman on the cover. Those book covers never really highlight what matters. I want to see a romance novel with an average looking man just sitting there looking at the reader, attentively listening. Maybe the book cover is just a giant picture of a guy’s ear with hair in it. I don’t think that would sell very many copies but it would highlight what really matters, knowing and being known.

God wants to know your heart. God invites you to come and know him through a relationship with Jesus Christ. So how's your heart? Is it hard because you reject God? Or is it soft, because Jesus has done heart

⁸ *Is God... Angry?* John Ortberg. January 8, 2017. Menlo.Church Apple Podcast. Illustration at 26:40-28:00

surgery on you. If you don't have a soft heart but you want one, ask God to change you as you get to know him. *The cure to a hard heart is knowing God.*

Preview: Come back next week to hear about the plagues of Egypt.

Romans 15:5–6 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (NIV®)