

# Landry: Fire of God's love will help or harden our hearts

Last week, a student asked me a question about a biblical story that I, too, have struggled to understand.

During the lead-up and eventual escape of the Israelites from Egypt, we read multiple times that God *hardened* Pharaoh's heart, with dire consequences including the death of many in the Egyptian army.

At first glance, this passage seems to imply that God acted to ensure the death of those Egyptian soldiers – and it's led me to wonder how God, who is love, would *deliberately* set into motion events that would cost so many lives.

I've typically answered others' questions on this passage (Why would God...?) by explaining that God allowed Pharaoh's heart to become hard in much the same way as God often allows us the exercise of free will even when it brings great evil in our own lives, and in the lives of others.

It's often felt like an incomplete answer.

The discussion I had last week led me to dig a little deeper on the subject, when I came across a particularly helpful discussion of this question by Mark Shea, a Catholic writer and speaker. Shea discusses the effect of God "hardening" Pharaoh's heart in the context of fire:

"Fire will go on being and doing what it is and does, and our God is a consuming fire. If the wet clay wifully (sic) confronts the fire, the wet clay will become hard, not because the fire is putting mind control whammy on the clay, but because the fire is what it is."

Having spent 10 years involved with Scouts Canada growing up, I learned a lot about fire. One of the skills I needed to demonstrate before being fully initiated as a Scout was the ability to light a fire using only two matches and natural supplies I found in and around our campsite (ie: no paper, cardboard, or flammable accelerants).

Those 10 years also taught me to have a healthy respect for fire, because this great tool – which had the ability to keep us warm, to cook our food, and to provide ambience for our evenings – also had the ability to harm and to destroy. (We saw this clearly on the night our zeal to stoke a fire nearly burned our campsite to the ground.)

The difference between the two applications of fire – that it can hurt us or help us – has less to do with the fire itself and much more to do with what we expose to fire, and how that exposure takes place. In any case, there is very

little in this world that can have a close encounter with fire, and leave unchanged.

Echoing Hebrews 12:29, Mark Shea comments that “our God is a consuming fire.” This is a recurring theme throughout Scripture, when you consider that the Holy Spirit descended like “tongues of fire” (Acts 2:3) and that Psalm 29:7 tells us that “the voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.”

This image of God acting in our lives like fire seems to be an apt one, as any close encounter with God necessarily leaves the human heart transformed. It’s easy to see that just as fire warms, cooks, and provides ambience, an encounter with God often becomes the catalyst for a life of devotion.

We see this in the call of Abraham, St. Paul’s blindness, St. Augustine’s encounter with Scripture, and St. Therese of Lisieux’s “little way.” In all of these – and in so many others – we can recognize that it was an encounter with the fire of God’s love that has served as a starting point for their lives of faith.

On the other hand, we have stories like that of Pharaoh during the Exodus. The signs Moses provided Pharaoh – the 10 plagues – represent numerous moments where Pharaoh encountered the “fire” of God’s love. But instead of softening his heart, Pharaoh’s heart became harder.

The reasons for this are likely numerous: Pharaoh’s own experience of the gods (and his belief that he ruled with divine authority), his desire to maintain a workforce of Hebrew slaves, and the root cause of all of our hard hearts: human selfishness and sin. The hardness of his heart exists not because of a deliberate action of God’s, but is instead his unwillingness to bend or be changed (as Abraham, Paul, Augustine, and Therese each were in their own way).

Day to day human life offers us many opportunities to encounter and experience the fire of God’s love, and this fire will do what fire always does: it will help us or it will harden us. When we have these moments of encounter, we always find ourselves with one of two choices. Like the saints who’ve come before us, we can learn to be sensitive to this fire and to allow it to soften and shape our hearts ... or, like Pharaoh, we can resist it, clinging to our own will, our own ambitions, and the status quo.

“O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts...” – Psalm 95:7-8

– *Mike Landry is the chaplain for Evergreen Catholic Schools. He is based in Spruce Grove, Alberta.*