

Hardening of Hearts

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[0 : 00] Good to see you all this morning. We're going to continue our series in Joshua, so please have your Bibles open in that passage. We're going to look in more detail. I want to start by quoting from well-known atheist Richard Dawkins, one of the most vocal opponents of Christianity.

He had himself a read of bits of the Old Testament, and he had this to say about it. But the God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction, a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser and a genocidal, capriciously malevolent bully.

So that's his idea of God when he reads the Old Testament. And if you've been with us through the book of Joshua, you might be wondering whether maybe he has a point. Because Joshua is a very violent book. It's filled with bloodshed. Entire cities of people are slaughtered.

And prisoners of war are executed. Those are the kinds of things we expect to see in a Holocaust museum perpetrated by evil dictators. Not read in the Bible by a supposedly loving, gracious God. And so what Christians tend to do, let's be honest, when we read those things in the Bible, we tend to skip over them. They make us uncomfortable. We don't really want to think too much about that, so we read through it quickly and we don't really think too deeply into it.

[1 : 22] I want to change that this morning. I want to think about the uncomfortable stuff. Because we do ourselves a disservice when we skip over the uncomfortable parts of the Bible. Because every part of the Bible is meant to teach us something, even the parts that are objectionable.

And so this morning, we're not going to go through the whole chapter that Richard read for us. We're going to do that in Bible study, so make sure you join a Bible study this week. But what we are going to do is we're going to deliberately, I want to take deliberately two problems, two problem verses in the passage that was read this morning.

Two things which are objectionable, two things which are uncomfortable, and tackle them head on. Which often doesn't happen in a sermon on Sunday. Often, you know, the preacher will preach the more comfortable stuff and maybe skip over the objectionable stuff.

I don't want to do that. But every part of the Bible has something to teach us. So let's tackle these problems head on and see what God has to say to us this morning through them. And before we do that, I'm going to pray for his help.

Let's bow our heads. Heavenly Father, we don't understand all you do. And much of it is we admit uncomfortable. Much we want to object to. And so, Lord, as we tackle some of these difficulties this morning, help us to understand them.

[2 : 34] And help us to get a clearer picture of you and who you are. And help us to honor you from what we learn. And to really hear what you have to tell us, each of us, this morning.

As we go out into a new week, Lord, I do pray that you would have a word for each of us through the Bible. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. The first objection that I want to tackle, the first uncomfortable thing in this passage, is the hamstringing of the horses.

Did you notice that as we were reading it? We find, I'll read verse 6 again. The Lord said to Joshua, do not be afraid of them talking about these enemies, because by this time tomorrow I will hand all of them slain over to Israel.

You are to hamstring their horses and burn their chariots. The moment we read that, something goes, wait, no, come on. That's not very nice. Just to give you some context, God was talking about the huge new Canaanite army that had come to wipe out Joshua and the Israelites.

And this thing, this army was huge. It was a great horde, we're told, unlike Israel had ever faced before. Massive, heavily armed with cavalry and chariots, all the latest technology of war.

[3 : 48] And yet, we saw last week, didn't we, that because God was fighting for his people, Israel, to give them this land, which he had promised to them, he also promised to defeat any enemies that

stand against that.

No matter how intimidating the enemies are, he promised to wipe them out, which he did. And which, violent as it is, we can understand.

I mean, we saw last week as well, if you oppose the God of creation, his plans, he's going to take you out. There's no getting away from that. But what we can't understand is why he tells Joshua, after they've killed the enemies, to hamstring the poor horses.

If you don't know, to hamstringing a horse means to cut the sinews in its leg so as to cripple it, so that it can't gallop anymore. Which is just mean.

I mean, it's cruelty to animals, isn't it? It would have been painful, if not fatal, for the horses. So why would the Creator God command such a thing?

[4 : 51] Doesn't that make you feel uncomfortable? Doesn't it make you object? Even cross? Doesn't it make you cross that God would do something like this? Now, it's funny, isn't it?

In a passage full of wiping out cities of men, women, and children, what makes us uncomfortable is the horses. We don't really mind thousands of Canaanites dying.

The horses is what we object to. Now, doesn't that tell us something about ourselves? Doesn't it tell us something about the culture we live in? We live in a culture, you see, which is influenced by evolutionary theology.

Or theory, rather. It's not even a theology. It's a theory. Which, by the way, is the assumption that we all came from apes, which all, in turn, came from amoebas.

And so we're really no different from the animals. We're all just animals. We're just animals with computers, I guess. That's what evolutionary says.

[5 : 50] And so we live in this culture which values the life of animals as much as, if not more than, human life. And this has been illustrated recently in America with the killing of Harambe.

Anybody heard of Harambe the gorilla? Put up your hand. Okay. Let me tell you about Harambe. He was a gorilla in a zoo in the United States. And a three-year-old toddler managed to get inside the enclosure.

This was a few months ago. The gorilla grabbed this child. And nobody quite knew what he was going to do with it. And then he dragged the child through the water and through the rocks and stuff. It looked very dangerous. And the authorities had no choice but to shoot the gorilla and kill it. Which is sad. And it caused a real uproar around the country and beyond the country.

The killing of this gorilla caused such an uproar that people actually forgot that a boy's life was saved. Nobody was thinking about the little toddler that could have been killed. They were all just angry about this gorilla being killed.

[6 : 56] And they even wanted to take the parents of the child to court for the killing of this gorilla. It's actually funny. Apparently, a number of people in the most recent U.S. elections voted for Harambe to be president of the USA.

Harambe. And then the only reason that they couldn't is because he didn't make the age. He had to be over 35 to run for president. And so that's why Harambe.

And he was dead. So I guess that's why Harambe couldn't stand. Anyway, this is a sad situation.

And maybe it could have been resolved differently. In hindsight, it's 20-20 vision, of course.

But the reason, when you look on the outside and you study what happened, the reason that there was such an uproar is because Harambe, this gorilla, supposedly had certain rights which were violated.

And, you know, we should be all for animal rights. And we should protect the rights of animals, which, of course, is a worthy cause. But I want us to just pause this morning and ask the question, as an aside, I want to ask something about animal rights, this idea of animal rights, which is very popular in our culture.

[8 : 04] And this is my question. I mean, I'm not against protecting animals. Absolutely. We've got to. But if Harambe the gorilla had rights, then why doesn't the chicken in the food aisle of Pick and Pay have rights?

Really? What about the mosquito I killed yesterday? Where are its rights? I mean, where do you draw the line? You know what I'm saying? With animal rights, where do you draw the line? Well, you know, with the creator of this world drew the line when he created all life.

And what we discover in the Bible when we turn to Genesis is that he made humans alone in his image, not animals. Humans alone are made in his image. We are separate from the animals.

And then what God did is that he put all animal life under the authority of humans, under the rule of humans. And what that teaches us is that animals exist in this world for us, for God and his glory ultimately.

But they exist for us. We are in authority over them. They exist for our purposes. That's why God put animals in this world, to either to help us, like horses, or to provide companionship, like dogs or cats, or to provide food, like that chicken in the food aisle of Pick and Pay, or cows, for example.

[9 : 24] So you don't have to hold off on that steak lunch you were planning this afternoon. So do you understand that animals were given to us for our purposes?

Now, of course, that doesn't mean we can abuse animals. That doesn't give us license to abuse animals because we also read in Genesis, as stewards of creation, our job is to care for what God has put under us, including all the animals.

And so we should support animal conservation. We should care for animals' well-being. And we have no license for any kind of cruelty.

Because with authority comes responsibility. And we have a responsibility towards the animal world. But what I wanted us to just consider this morning is the idea of animal rights.

We mustn't fall into the trap of thinking that animals are ever more important than humans. They are not. The Bible teaches that clearly. If it's the life of a human versus the life of an animal, the human life always comes first.

[10 : 29] And that's why they shot Harambe, sad as it was. Okay, but now what's that got to do with this morning's passage? What's that got to do with Joshua? And what's that got to do with the hamstringing of the poor horses?

Well, basically, if we want to understand what's going on here in Joshua 11 with the horses, this was a Harambe situation. What I mean is that it was necessary to disable these horses in order to save the Israelites, who were more important.

Because they were people and they were God's people. And let me tell you why it was necessary to disable these horses. And this is where we learn something for ourselves this morning. The success of God's people coming in and inheriting the land we've already seen in Joshua depended totally on them relying on God.

They had to rely on God. When they didn't rely on God, it fell flat. When they did rely on God, they were successful. And that's the only reason they won these battles where they were heavily outnumbered and out-armored.

They won them only because they were relying on God, because they were depending on Him, that they weren't depending on their own strength, but on God's. That was the key to their success so far in Joshua.

[11 : 39] But it wasn't easy to do that. It wasn't easy for them to depend on God. Because by nature, as people, we want to depend on ourselves, don't we? That is our default position, to rely on ourselves, to depend on ourselves.

We're self-reliant. But, and the problem with Israel now, all of a sudden, having all of these great war horses, was that's exactly what they'd end up doing. And God knew that.

They would end up relying more on the horses than on God. You see, horses in those days is what gave an army its strength. They were like the tanks of the day.

Well, the chariots were. But the horses, I guess, were like the airplanes. They were like really, they could change the battle. They could change the tide of a battle. So, when you had many horses in an army, you would feel confident.

No one could stand up against you. You had this great cavalry. But for the Israelites to think that was the most dangerous thing that they could have thought. Because this is why they couldn't rely on themselves and rely on God at the same time.

[12 : 42] It's impossible to rely for the same thing. To rely on yourself and to rely on God. The Israelites couldn't. And if the Israelites had any reason whatsoever to rely on themselves, and these horses were a really good reason to rely on themselves, then they would have stopped relying on God.

And that would have been detrimental for them. And so sad and uncomfortable as this command to hamstring the horses is, I hope you see this morning why it was necessary. It was necessary to save the Israelites at the end of the day.

God knew that in his wisdom. And that's why he gave the command. And it's here in the Bible to teach us something about ourselves. All the uncomfortable bits are.

And what we learn about ourselves this morning is that just like the Israelites, when it comes to salvation, when it comes to entering our promised land of eternal life in the new creation one day, we can't rely on ourselves and rely on God at the same time.

We've got to choose where our confidence for salvation lies, in ourselves or in God. And depending on what you choose will determine how you live your life.

[13:52] See, if you think that salvation depends on you, you will live your life your own way, doing your things by your rules, and think that what you do can earn you relationship with God, can earn you eternal life.

If you depend on God, on the other hand, then you have to listen to him. You have to follow his cue. You can't live life for yourself. You've got to follow him, which is what the Bible calls repentance, turning around from living your way to living his.

But you see, you can't rely on yourself and live your way as well as rely on God and live his way. Don't tell me, I rely on God and then go out and live life your own way, doing your own thing, and depending on your own goodness and strength and good deeds to get you right with God.

You can't do both. It's like being adrift at sea. Imagine you were, I don't know, on a cruise in a ship and suddenly the ship, I don't know, hits an iceberg and sinks.

And you find yourself in the middle of the ocean and you look around. You can't see any land and you think, I'm going to die. I'm going to drown. This ocean is cold. I'm running out of energy.

[15:03] But then you see a rescue helicopter coming along and your heart jumps. And this rescue helicopter comes closer and closer. You realize they've seen you and they hover right over you.

The wind's whipping around and the sea's whipping around. And you see they put down a line and a rescuer comes down and he offers you his hand. Right then you have a choice. You can either grab onto the rescuer and be pulled up or you can try swim to the shore yourself.

You can't do both though. That's the point. You can't try to save yourself and accept the salvation that's been offered to you. You have to choose one. Well, it's the same in life for each of us.

Because in this life we're adrift. We're adrift in a sea of sin and death, the Bible says. We can't not sin. Try it. Try for one week. Try not to sin. And tell me how you do in a week's time.

We can't not sin. The Bible says it's impossible. We're slaves to sin. We're drowning in sin. The Bible says all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And we can't avoid death. Okay, try that one.

[16:08] Try avoid death. Tell me if you find a way to avoid death. You'll make millions. But we can't. Because the Bible says the wages of sin is death. Death is the proof that we've sinned against God.

But we also know something. We know not only that we're drowning in sin and death. We also know that God has come. And he's come into our situation. And he's let down a lifeline.

And he's offered us rescue out of sin and death through his son Jesus. Who came into this world. To rescue us from the penalty and the power of sin when he died on the cross. That is God's rescue.

But it only applies to us if we grab onto him. You see what I mean? Many people don't grab onto him. Many people try to swim to the shore themselves.

Many people try to swim out of the effects of sin and death themselves. In their own strength. They think they can find God in eternal life. In their own strength.

[17:05] Because of their decent lifestyle. Or their religious activity. Or their good works. You know nine out of ten people.

You go to them and say. Do you consider yourself a good person? They'll say. Yeah. I'm fairly good. And that's what they think is going to get them right with God. That's what they think is going to get them to heaven.

But you see. I want you to see this morning. As long as these people who rely on their own strength. As long as they try to swim to the shore. They will never give themselves up to the hands of the rescuer.

Their goodness is actually preventing them from being saved. Their goodness is keeping them away from submitting to Jesus. Because they think they don't need him.

As long as they rely on their goodness to save them. They'll never submit. Their lives to Jesus. And find the only true way. Of getting out of this situation of sin and death. And so you see how dangerous it is.

[18:04] To rely on anything other than Jesus. Relying on ourselves. Relying on good works. Is going to take us away from Jesus. Because we're self-reliant.

It's a huge danger. But it's not just in salvation. That we're self-reliant. It's in every area of life. Our default is to rely on ourselves.

Or to rely on the things that we've gathered around ourselves. Like money and material possessions. Rather than relying on God. Don't we? And then we're not willing actually to step out. And live the lives God's called us to. Until we've got enough money. Until we've paid off our home. Or until we've sorted our retirement. Then I can concentrate on living for God. All of these things that we gather around ourselves to rely on.

Well you know. Sometimes. God. Has to hamstring our horses. You know what I mean? Sometimes God's got to take away from us.

[19:04] The things that we're tempted to rely on rather than him. So that we learn to rely on him alone. Why God didn't you give me that promotion. That I've been gunning for and praying for.

I needed the extra income. Why God? Did you send me the sickness? This is the last thing I need right now. Well no. Maybe it's exactly what you need.

To teach you not to live life in your own strength. So don't be surprised. When God hamstring your horses. When God takes away deliberately the things that you tend to rely on.

Rather than him. Mean as that may seem at the time. Because often you need it much more than you know. So that's the first objectionable verse.

That I wanted to tackle. There's one more I wanted to look at this morning. Not only the hamstringing of the horses. But the hardening of the hearts. So we're reading about all this destruction of Israel's enemies.

[20:09] And we think unlike the horses. These Canaanites deserved what they got. After all it was their choice to attack the Israelites. But then. We stumble upon verse 20.

It says this. For it was the Lord himself who hardened their hearts. To wage war against Israel. So that he might destroy them totally. Exterminating them without mercy.

As the Lord had commanded Moses. And this is the second thing. That as we read this passage. Stands up and we go. Oh no. Wait a minute. Because it tells us.

Actually these Canaanites didn't have a choice. After all. God caused them to attack Israel. So that he might destroy them. Without mercy. That seems a little unfair. Doesn't it?

It does to me. They get punished by Israel. For doing something that God caused them to do. In the first place. So how can they be held responsible for it? And this is not the first time.

[21:05] This has happened. It's not the first time we read about God hardening people's hearts. God is often. Shown to harden people's hearts against him. And he still does it. Today.

Let me read to you again from Romans 9. Which. Alan read earlier. God has mercy. On whom he wants to have mercy. And he hardens. Whom he wants to harden.

Now God has mercy. We know that. He certainly does have mercy. On those who put their faith. In Jesus. And find rescue from their sins. But. God also hardens.

Those who don't. And here's the shocking thing. God doesn't harden them. Because they don't choose Jesus. It's the other way around. They don't choose Jesus.

Because God has hardened their hearts. So that they're unable to choose him. This is the clear teaching of the Bible. But why would he do that? Why would God deliberately harden people's hearts against choosing Jesus?

[22:07] Against him? Well. The Apostle Paul explains it. In Romans. I'm going to read it again. In fact. If you have your Bible. Turn to Romans 9. From verse 19.

Because that's exactly what the Apostle Paul says. He says. But surely then. We can't be held responsible. Why would God harden people's hearts against him?

Well. Here's the answer. Romans 9. From verse 19. Says. One of you will say to me. Well then. Why does God still blame us? Good question. For who is able to resist his will?

But here's the answer. Who are you. A human being. To talk back to God. Shall what is formed. Say to the one who formed it. Why did you make me like this?

Does not the potter have the right. To make out of the same lump of clay. Some pottery for special purposes. And some for common use. What if God. Although choosing to show his wrath. And make his power known.

[23 : 06] Bore with great patience. The objects of his wrath. Prepared for destruction. What if he did this to make. The riches of his glory. Known to the objects of his mercy. Whom he prepared. In advance for glory.

Now this is quite a complex passage. But it's so important. We understand. What it's saying. And it's. It's really shocking. It's a really shocking. And sobering. Truth. That we read in the Bible here. It explains to us. Why. Why there are some. Who God. Literally prepares for destruction. And hardens his hearts against them. Against him. And it says why. Firstly. Because God has every right.

To do what he wants. With what he created. We're in no position. To tell God. To dictate to God. What he can do. With what he created. We're in no position. To tell God.

That he's being unfair. You know why. Because he invented fairness. He's the rule. Of what is fair. And what is not fair. You can't. By definition. You can't call God. Unjust or unfair. And so if he wants to harden.

[24 : 05] The hearts of people. He can. And secondly. Not only do we learn. How he does. But we learn why he does this. Why he hardens people's hearts against him.

You see. Just as much. As saving sinners. Displays God's mercy. Punishing sinners. Displays his justice. And God does both. You see.

God does both. To display his glory. He both. Saves some. And he judges others. In fact. He would be glorified. If nobody was saved. Which is what we all deserve anyway. To be judged.

For our sin. For turning. Against him. He'd be glorified.

If he saved no one. Because. Here's a reality check. God's first priority. Is not our salvation. I'll say that again. God's first priority.

[25 : 01] Is not our salvation. God's first priority. Is his glory. And the glory of his son. And he will do whatever. Best furthers. That goal. Whether that be saving some.

Or hardening others. And so God can do. What he wants. But that still doesn't sit right with us. Because it still doesn't explain. How the punishment is deserved. If God punishes people. That he's already hardened. Against him. You know. How can he punish these Canaanites. For attacking Israel.

If he was the one. Who caused them to do it. Just the same question. How can he punish people.

Today. For rejecting Jesus. If he has hardened them. Against Jesus. Well here's the answer.

He didn't punish the Canaanites. For attacking Israel. He punished them. For generations. Of sin. And rebellion. And the way.

[25 : 55] He punished them. And the way. He punished them. Was to harden their hearts. The way he carried out. That punishment. Was in the hardening of their hearts.

And then facing the consequences. Of that hardening. Which was utter destruction. And so you see. The hardening of someone's heart. Is actually part of the judgment. For sin. The hardening of someone's heart.

Against God. Is the start. Of his wrath. Against their sin. It's like the. The judge's hammer. Coming down in a courtroom. Declaring sentence. To the accused.

Once that. That's down. The sentence is down. You can't undo it. And in the same way. Today. God doesn't punish people. For rejecting Jesus. Per se. He punishes people. For their sin.

For their lifetime. Of unrepentant. Rebellion against him. But the way. He carries out. That punishment. Is to harden. Their heart.

[26 : 50] Against the only rescue available. And to face the eternal consequences. Of that hardening. That is. God's punishment. Romans tells us. That God's punishment. On this world. For their rampant.

Rebellion. And sin against him. Was just to let them go. To. To let them. Carry on. To harden their hearts. God gave them over.

That's the punishment. We read in the. In Romans. God gave them over. God gave them over. See. And so. It's. It's. It's. It's chilling. Isn't it? It's chilling. That. God.

As. As. The punishment. As the just consequence. For sin. The punishment. Of that. Is actually a hard heart. That causes a person. To reject. The salvation. That's offered out to them. It causes a

person.

Who's drowning. To look at the rescue helicopter. And go. I need none of that. I don't want that. And try to swim to the shore themselves. That hard heart. And so.

[27 : 46] God hardening the hearts of people. Is not unfair. It's. It's fair. It's his fair judgment against their sin. If anything's unfair. It's that he chooses to save some from that judgment.

By giving them the eyes of faith. To believe and trust in Jesus. Jesus. And so. If that's you this morning. If you have the eyes of faith. If you believe and trust in Jesus.

As your Lord and Savior. I hope. You can be filled. With a new sense. Of. Overwhelming. Gratitude. That God. Didn't harden. Your hearts. Against him.

Which he has every right to do. In which we all deserve. I hope you can just be filled. With. With a new sense of. Or. That he's given you. Eyes of faith. The fact.

That you believe. And follow Jesus. Is by God's grace. Alone. That faith. That you possess. If you possess it. Is the most valuable gift. That God has ever. Given you.

[28 : 44] So be thankful for it. And nurture it. But maybe that's not you. Maybe you're still drifting.

Maybe you haven't. You've. Reached up. And grabbed the rescue. And trusted and followed Jesus.

Maybe you have all these questions. Maybe you. You still. In the back of your mind.

Want to call the shots. In your life. I don't know. Does that mean. That God's hardened your heart.

And that there's no hope. Well. No. Not necessarily. The very fact. That you're here this morning.

Or listening to this recording. Shows that something's going on. That your heart. Is not yet hardened. And perhaps. Perhaps. God is calling you. To himself. Right now.

Maybe. Maybe. Maybe. Right now. He's starting to shine light. Where there was only darkness before. And you're starting to realize that now. Well. If that's true.

[29 : 38] Then. Respond to it. Respond to it. Don't delay. Don't put it off. If you're in the ocean.

Drowning. And the rescuer. Offers out. His hand. You've got to do something. You've got to take it.

You've got to grab it. You can't just stare. At the rescuer. And nod. And go. Oh. That's. That's a nice rescuer. It's a lovely rescue. Helicopter.

You've got to respond. If the rescue is offered to you. You've got to reach up. And grab it. Well. You see. In the gospel of Jesus. God is putting out his hand.

So. Will you take it? Will you reach up. And grab it. And let him take you. Where he calls you to be.

In your life. Because that's what reaching up. And grabbing Jesus is. It's putting control of your life.

In his hands. And going where he leads. Do you want to do that? Do you want to reach up. And grab. The hand that God is offering you.

[30 : 34] Today. Or do you want to stay. Drifting in the water. You've got to ask yourself that. But if you want to do that this morning. I want to give you an opportunity. To do it right now. I'm going to pray a prayer.

And if you want to reach up. And grab the rescue. That Jesus offers you. Then. I invite you to pray this prayer. Silently. In your heart. After me. I'll pray it line by line.

So you can do that. Maybe if you. If you've been drifting away. Maybe. You grab the rescuer.

Sometime in your life. Before. But your hand has slipped. And you actually. As you're being hauled up.

You decided. You wanted to swim again. And so you jumped in. And you're now stuck in the water again. Well reach up and grab. The rescuer again. His hand. As long as you draw breath. His hand is out. And he's holding out the gospel to you.

To respond to. Why don't you do that now? Pray this prayer in your heart. After me. Let's bow our heads. Sovereign God. My creator.

[31 : 32] You are the potter. And I am the clay. You made me for your purposes. But I have lived life for my own.

I have ignored you. And broken your laws. And I deserve your punishment. But I know that you sent Jesus to rescue me.

I believe that he died for my sins. And I put my faith in him now. Help me to turn to him.

And help me to follow him. All the days of my life. Amen.