



Candlewood Church



FREEDOM OF WILL

July 5, 2026

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BIG IDEA – Every will either wields or yields; there is no third option.

Scripture Focus – For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. Galatians 5:13 NLT

Blurb: Everyone loves the idea of freedom. Fewer people love what Paul says it actually requires. The Apostle who wrote more about freedom than almost anyone else in Scripture **wasn't primarily interested in what we're freed from, he was captivated by what we're freed to.** And here's where it gets interesting: **freedom always comes with power, and power always reveals character. Do you consume it, wield it, or yield it?** Paul's answer cuts straight across everything our culture assumes freedom means.

Heather's Story – Brief Version

It was 1985. I was a young pastor in my early twenties, and I got a call from a woman named Karen whose teenage daughter Heather was pregnant, alone, and had already made an appointment at Planned Parenthood. The boyfriend never showed up with the money or the ride. On the way to the clinic, a stranger stopped Heather and begged her to talk to her mom first. That one conversation connected Karen to a ministry called House of Ruth, and somehow, I ended up being the pastor in the room.

I watched Heather grow up over nine months of the hardest decisions a teenager can make: who raises my child, what kind of family do they deserve,

am I strong enough to do the right thing when the right thing costs me everything.

The morning the baby came, Karen called and said, "can you meet us at the hospital." I had no idea what I was walking into.

After the delivery, after a few private minutes alone with her son, they brought the rest of us into the room. The new adoptive parents, the counselor, Karen, and me. Heather was physically and emotionally spent. She was holding her little boy on her chest, and she started to cry, and the whole room tensed up.

Then she did something I will never forget. She lifted him up, kissed him one last time, and said: "I love you. This is for your best."
And the whole room fell apart.

I was crying so hard I almost missed the counselor saying, "I think it's time for our pastor to pray." I thought, that's me. What in the world am I supposed to say to God right now?

I don't remember the prayer. I just remember thinking: **this is what yielding actually looks like. Not easy. Not clean. Not painless. It looks like a teenage girl handing her son to strangers because she loved him more than she loved her own comfort.**

Everyone's got a wield or yield reflex somewhere.

What's yours?

- Was it in a **moment of frustration**, anger, powerlessness or injustice?
- Was it **observing and absorbing the culture around us**, the consumer or comparison trap – never-ending need for more?
- Was it a growing **sense of being lost, unseen, or tagged with being a failure** to thrive or decide what to do with your life?

Every human either wields or yields, and there is no third option.

As adults, we have choices. They are our choices. We own them whether we believe them to be ours or not.

God built genuine choice into human beings as part of his design.

In the perfection of the garden, knowing God, walking with God, listening to God...

**The Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it.
Genesis 2:15 NLT**

God, knowing all things past, present and future said to Adam – **“you may freely eat the fruit.”**

God knew in just the next chapter of our human history, the couple would disobey and eating it would mean **death**. Death for every living being that came after them.

But the Lord God warned him, “You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden— except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die.” Genesis 2:16-17 NLT.

We carry the freedom of choice and the curse of death with us every single day.

We do have power over our will in terms of our choices.

Our choices set our current life and circumstances as well as our future ones.

But the real question freedom asks isn't whether we have choice or power over our will, it's *what we do with it*:

Do we wield it (using it for ourselves or against others), or yield it (using it under and for God)?

It only took a couple thousand years for someone to attempt to test God's power. This isn't a new problem. From the very first human choice, the question has always been the same: will we yield to God or wield against him?

One of the greatest stories of the power of human choice and the will to wield or yield it is found in Exodus.

The Pharaoh of Egypt, fearing the growing population of Hebrew slaves made a proclamation to fix what he believed to be a future problem.

The Pharaoh chose genocide - kill the Hebrew newborn baby boys.

But he created a problem with his royal genocidal decree – he commanded Hebrew women to carry it out.

"Then Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, gave this order to the Hebrew midwives, Shiprah and Puah: "When you help the Hebrew women as they give birth, watch as they deliver. If the baby is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live." But because the midwives feared God, they refused to obey the king's orders. They allowed the boys to live, too." [Exodus 1:15-17 NLT](#)

The Hebrew women told Pharaoh, "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women," the midwives replied. "They are more vigorous and have their babies so quickly that we cannot get there in time." [Exodus 1:19 NLT](#).

When Pharaoh realized his mistake, he commanded all the Egyptians to kill Hebrew baby boys!

"Then Pharaoh gave this order **to all his people**: "Throw every newborn Hebrew boy into the Nile River. But you may let the girls live." Exodus 1:22 NLT

Pharaoh did not know just how badly his choice would come back full circle to judge and convict him – the justice of God is always right, true and good.

Even when we can't see it or understand it.

"Pharaoh is history's most dramatic portrait of a man who had every opportunity to yield, and chose every time not to."

That water baby would grow up in his own household, raised by his own daughter and become a prince in his own kingdom! But that baby would also become a murderer himself at 40 yrs old.

In Exodus we find this drama so compelling, a saga so saturated with pain, suffering, loss and grief. Yet, it's God's big story of In Exodus 5-12. For eight chapters we see Moses and Pharaoh struggle with their choices: same God, same pressure, same reality of truth right in front of them.

Yet with two opposite outcomes.

Some may read the story and believe that God forced Pharaoh to say no to letting His people go so he could punish him for it. That's not what the text says.

In Exodus 8:15 ESV

“But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.”

We may have read the text as God saying, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart." That's not quite what it says.

Exodus 8:15 is Pharaoh hardening his own heart.

It started with Pharaoh's resistance to listen and eventually obey. But **it led to God applying the appropriate pressure to get Ramesses II or Thutmose III to relent and yield**. God had already told Moses He was going to do this (**Exodus 4:21, 7:3**) well before the plagues ever began.

God did not harden a heart that wanted to soften. Pharaoh chose resistance freely, repeatedly, for five full plagues, with full evidence in front of him.

Only after a sustained, freely chosen pattern of refusal does God confirm Pharaoh in the path Pharaoh himself had already chosen.

This is sometimes called a "**judicial hardening**," not **God overriding a willing heart, but God giving a persistently unwilling heart over to what it already wanted** (The Apostle **Paul explains it in Romans 1:24-28, "God gave them over..."**)



DIG DEEPER

Three different Hebrew words are used, and they're not synonyms because the Hebrew itself distinguishes between *kinds* of hardening:

- **qashah** (קָשָׁה) — "to be hard, severe, difficult." Used only once, Exodus 7:3, God's initial declaration to Moses. Conveys harsh, active resistance.
- **chazaq** (חָזַק) — "to be strong, firm, fixed." Used 12 times, the dominant word. This is the same root used positively elsewhere for courage ("be strong and courageous," Joshua 1:9). It describes a will set *firm*, like mortar that has dried.
- **kabad** (כָּבֵד) — "to be heavy, weighty." Used 6 times, related to *kavod* (glory/weightiness). This is the word used specifically for **Pharaoh hardening his own heart** (8:15, 8:32, 9:34).

The narrative pattern is not random; it follows a progression:

1. **Plagues 1-5:** Pharaoh hardens his own heart (or the text is ambiguous about the source). This is the *kabad* phase, his own will, his own choosing, his own resistance, freely exercised, five separate times.

2. **First mention of God hardening: Exodus 9:12** (sixth plague, boils). This is the turning point. From here forward, the text shifts toward God's active hardening (*chazaq*).
3. **Plagues 6-10:** increasingly described as God hardening Pharaoh's heart.

Pastor's Devotionals about Moses & Pharaoh.

- [Refusing to listen](#) – Exodus 6:6-8
 - [A frog god](#)  ? – Exodus 8:1-4
 - [Negotiating with God](#) – Exodus 10:8-11
 - [The man who defied God](#) – Exodus 12:28-30
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Moses and Pharaoh are the same willful confrontation played out twice; one man yields his will to God and becomes a deliverer, gaining the freedom for God's people. The other wields his and loses everything.

Moses isn't presented as a natural hero who wanted this job. Exodus 3-4 shows him objecting five times (a structural parallel to Pharaoh's five self-hardenings. Five points of decision each, one trending toward yield, one trending toward wield). Moses' will didn't start strong, it became yielded.

The same power that delivered a nation through one man's yielded will destroyed a nation through another man's wielded will.

**"The choice of power wasn't the difference.
It was what each man did with it."**

SOBERING THOUGHT: The wilderness generation that died in the desert was delivered but never yielded.

The Apostle Paul has extensive writings on the freedom of our will – our choice, our responsibility.

It's as if Paul pulls from ancient texts and true stories to help us not just know, not just understand our freedom of will or our choices what we do with the power of those choices.

Paul had started this Freedom theme writing to the churches in Galatia.

For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. Galatians 5:13 NLT

Today - Where are you in this story?

Even at 18 yrs old, Heather held the power of life or death in her hands. She could take the advice of her boyfriend, the one who never showed up. Or, she could bravely follow her conscience and make the willful choice to let her child have a life apart from her and be raised by a couple ready to adopt him.

The Pharaoh, possibly Thutmose III, wasn't a young, impulsive man when he was confronted by God's demands to release the horribly abusive grip he had on the Hebrew slaves. He spent years living as a demigod with no one to ever question his decisions.

Then Moses, at 80 yrs old, spending half his life at that point, in the desert wilderness, stripped of every privilege and promise he'd previously held.

The youngest and least powerful person yields the most courageously. The oldest and most powerful had never yielded to anything or anyone and would not do so even after nine supernatural plagues on his own people. Then Moses who had wielded his choices, his power as a prince but had to learn how to yield to the voice of God in the fire.

APPLICATION

"What power and control does to humans, do we wield it, or yield it?"

I have learned at my age and stage in life...

"Maturity equals fewer choices not more options"

What are you doing with the "FREE CHOICES" you've been given?

Will you WIELD that power or YIELD it?

Communion

John is the disciple that captures this moment that spells it out perfectly –

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off

his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. John 13:3-5 NIV

But after the resurrection it was Luke that wrote in Acts 2:42 that "they" the Church, "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the **breaking of bread** and the prayers." The Lord's supper, communion, has been a practice of remembrance and of devotion to Jesus done with the body of Christ - His Church.

At this last meal before Jesus was arrested, tortured then crucified to death, **Matthew records that Jesus gave a powerful object lesson at this meal. A lesson we are told to continue to practice until he returns and celebrates with us at the final fulfillment of the Kingdom of God – in the new heaven and new earth.**

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Matthew 26:26

Jesus held the unleavened (yeast-less) bread out because the point is clear - he is the bread of life! Then he did three things for us to remember today:

1. **He blessed it.** He blessed the bread because God had blessed him as his son, the one he was very pleased with! Jesus blessed the bread showing us that God blesses us.
2. **He broke it.** Jesus broke the bread showing that He himself would be beaten, bruised and broken for our willful and consistent sin - our own disobedience before God.
3. **He gave it.** Jesus gave the bread to his friends because he was also **given to us to free us from our sin and give us life here today and forever.**

In this regular practice we are **not just to remember**, but **also to practice Jesus' example. We are to bless, be willing to be broken, and to give those blessed, broken pieces of our own bread (our life) to others.**

SCRIPTURES

Genesis 2:15 NLT

The Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it.

Genesis 2:16-17 NLT

But the Lord God warned him, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden— except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die."

Exodus 1:15-17 NLT

"Then Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, **gave this order to the Hebrew midwives**, Shiphrah and Puah: "When **you help the Hebrew women as they give birth**, watch as they deliver. **If the baby is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.**" But **because the midwives feared God, they refused to obey the king's orders. They allowed the boys to live, too.**"

Exodus 1:19 NLT

"The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women," the midwives replied. "They are more vigorous and have their babies so quickly that we cannot get there in time."

Exodus 1:22 NLT

"Then Pharaoh gave this order **to all his people**: "Throw every newborn Hebrew boy into the Nile River. But you may let the girls live."

Exodus 8:15 ESV

"But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the Lord had said."

Galatians 5:13 NLT

For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love.

John 13:3-5 NIV

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

Acts 2:42 NLT

"they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the **breaking of bread** and the prayers."

Matthew 26:26 ESV

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."



DIG DEEPER NOTES



Heather's Story – Full Version

Meet Heather.

I didn't meet Heather directly at first. I met her through a few heartbreaking stories from her mother, Karen. Karen was a divorcee who attended our church from time to time. She was doing her best make a living to raise an "extremely rebellious and worldly" teen (as Karen described her daughter). Karen also attended a small Bible study group. Karen's daughter even showed up at our youth group a few times. Sure enough, within minutes, Heather had a group of guys around her laughing and acting cool. The girls in the youth group just gave her the icy stare telling her to "fish in some other pond." It didn't last too long because Heather lost interest and quit attending. Yeah, she had the stereotypical reputation. Dad and mom divorced when she was younger, Dad's not in her life, Mom has a hard time working and raising a daughter and daughter starts acting out to get attention. I've seen it hundreds of times. Sad huh? Yep, pain all the way around. But Heather had no idea just how much pain she could cause or endure until she got pregnant.

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Karen let her Bible study group know right away that she had a major crisis going on in her daughter's life. She had always kept Heather in prayer through her small group, but now things were really out of hand. I'm not sure if the Mom knew who the boy-father was or not. It seems that Heather was on her own. The immediate issue, Heather wanted an abortion. Again, the details of what went down are a little fuzzy, because I was getting scattered information from Karen and it's been over 30 years ago. Somehow, without Karen's consent, Heather was able to connect with Planned Parenthood and they promised to "take care of this" for her.

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The boyfriend was supposed to come up with some money and provide transportation to get the abortion, but he didn't show up. Heather tried to make her way to the clinic on her own but then she ran into a woman who begged Heather to "think it through" a little bit. The woman convinced Heather to at least let her Mom know what was going on and for Heather to please give her baby a chance by at least talking to someone about adoption. This amazing moment was just enough time for Heather to have a difficult conversation with her mom, Karen and for Karen to connect with Calvary Chapel's House of Ruth ministry.

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As a part of the adoption process, House of Ruth recommends having the family's pastor present during the consultations with the family. Because Karen had been keeping me informed of their family crisis, she asked me to be their family Pastor. I was honored to do it but I had no idea how emotionally gut-wrenching that decision would be. I met with the House of Ruth counselor along with Heather and her mom, Karen. Sometimes the House of Ruth counselor wanted to meet without her mother being present to make sure she was taking responsibility for her decisions going forward. They wanted me to be a part of those meetings as well. I was able to watch this "rebellious," very self confident teenager grow up over the 9 months of pregnancy. As the time of the baby's delivery got closer, Heather was asked to choose and meet with the family that would be adopting her child. This was not easy for Heather. How was she supposed to choose parents for her baby? Was it based on their faith, their social or financial status, or simply just the way they looked in the portfolio she was given. It seemed like such a big decision for a teenager to make over the future of a child's life. To say that we all needed prayer was an understatement. We were all praying! Heather settled on a family who would become the new parents to her baby.

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I received a call one morning from Karen, "Heather's baby is coming, can you meet us at the hospital?" At the time I was not a father and really had no idea what pregnancy or having children was really all about. Because of my own chaotic family background, having children was more a fearful decision to me and I was in my early twenties myself, not much for being a wise, learned Pastor at the time.

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So the way it worked: Heather delivers the baby, then the hospital staff, a county social worker and the woman from House of Ruth would all be present afterwards. Heather would have a little bit of time to spend alone with her baby and with her mother, Karen. It was obvious, that it wasn't a lot of time because the longer the mother waits, there is more of a chance she will change her mind and decide to keep the baby - which by law she was allowed to do. After those private moments, the woman from House of Ruth, myself and the new parents (whom I had just met in the waiting room - talk about tension!) would come into Heather's room and go through the process of giving the baby (willfully) to the new parents. I thought I was going to die of emotional tension! It was unbelievably painful to be in that room.

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I had never really experienced the paradoxical moment of love and such intense, emotional trauma coexisting in space and time. Heather was coherent but you could tell she was physically and emotionally spent. Now, in this sphere of hard decisions, was the real-life cause and effect of getting pregnant, and not being married. The effects on a young infant to vulnerable to survive on their own. The painful separation of mother and child verses the fact that 8 months

prior a traumatically cruel surgery would have ripped a tiny little life from the womb of its teenage mother's body. I thought about what would have happened juxtaposed with what was happening and thought - this is the right thing to do. This situation, this very emotionally messy moment is likely what causes people to choose to terminate their baby and fight for the rights over their own body **instead of the awful, painful truth of what sacrificial love** (not euphoric physical feelings of love) looks like. Producing an unwanted life inside your body is nothing compared to the pain of not being ready to be a mother or the pain of terminating a life that God gifted you to love, nurture and protect.

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Heather started to cry and held on to her little boy tightly. That's right, her child was a boy. All the support folks in the room tensed up. The new adoptive parents, took a little step backward to allow the counselor and Karen to gently remind Heather to "think about his future." His future, a future filled with hopeful possibility with a family who wants to adopt, wants to raise a child. Heather had some support, but it was already fragile and she knew it. Heather relaxed her hold and began to lift her son off her chest and towards the adoptive parents standing away from the bed.

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As the new parents stepped forward, Heather gently kissed her little boy one last time and said, "I love you, this is for your best," and the whole room shook with tears. The new parents cried, Heather cried. The grandmother, Karen, cried, the House of Ruth counselor cried. I was crying uncontrollably, then I heard the counselor say, "I think it would be good for our Pastor to pray for all of us." "What?" I thought to myself. "Did she say our Pastor needs to pray?" Holy cow, that's me. "What in the world am I supposed to say?" I couldn't possibly remember the prayer I prayed over the family and the bravery of the now "adult" mom, Heather. I was so proud of her, so proud of this excruciating process of saving a little boy's life and giving him an opportunity to live out this marvelous story of sacrifice, grace and redemption. That little boy is now around 30 years old, who knows, maybe I'll get to meet him someday and tell him about how brave his birthmother was.



Freedom of Will

1. THE THESIS IN ONE LINE

God built genuine choice into human beings as part of his design, but the real question freedom asks isn't *whether* we have power over our will, it's *what* we do *with it*: do we wield it (use it against others or use it for ourselves), or yield it (use it for and in God)?

2. GOD'S DESIGN: FREE WILL AS GIFT, NOT GLITCH

Before getting into Exodus, it's worth grounding *why* God gave humans real choice at all. This isn't a side issue, it's the foundation the whole week stands on.

- **Genesis 2:16-17** — God places Adam in the garden with a genuine option: eat freely from any tree, except one. The prohibition itself is evidence of real choice; you can't be commanded not to do what you're incapable of doing.
- **Deuteronomy 30:19** — "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life." God doesn't coerce covenant loyalty; he appeals to it.
- **Joshua 24:15** — "Choose this day whom you will serve." Again, an appeal, not a command that removes choice.

The theological point: freedom of will is not a flaw in God's design that he's managing around. It's a *feature*, because love, worship, and obedience that aren't chosen aren't really love, worship, or obedience, they're just programming. God wanted sons and daughters, not machines.

This is worth saying plainly to your congregation: **the fact that we can choose against God is the cost of being able to choose him at all.**

3. THE MOSES/PHARAOH CONFRONTATION: TWO MEN, TWO WILLS

Same God, same era, same power encounter, two completely different outcomes, because of what each man did with his will.

Moses — called at the burning bush, objects repeatedly (Exodus 3-4), but ultimately *yields*. His will bends toward God's purpose. Result: he becomes the deliverer, the lawgiver, the man who sees God "face to face" (Exodus 33:11).

Pharaoh — confronted repeatedly with undeniable evidence (nine plagues building to a tenth), and *wields* his will against God, against Israel, against his own people's wellbeing. Result: he becomes the cautionary tale, the man whose name is now shorthand for stubborn self-destruction.

Same pressure. Same evidence. Opposite postures of the will. That's the sermon in miniature.

4. THE PLAGUES AS A CONTEST OF GODS, NOT JUST A CONTEST OF POWER

This isn't about the plagues from "God flexing power" to "God systematically dismantling Pharaoh's entire belief system, one false god at a time." **Each plague targets a specific deity Egypt worshipped:**

Plague	Egyptian deity it confronted
Nile to blood	Hapi (god of the Nile), Khnum

Plague	Egyptian deity it confronted
Frogs	Heqet (frog-headed fertility goddess)
Gnats/lice	Geb (god of the earth)
Flies	possibly Khepri (a fly/scarab associated deity)
Livestock death	Hathor, Apis (cattle/bull deities)
Boils	Sekhmet, Imhotep (gods of healing)
Hail	Nut (sky goddess), Set
Locusts	Seth (protector of crops)
Darkness	Ra (the sun god himself, Egypt's chief deity)
Death of firstborn	Pharaoh himself (considered divine) and his heir

This shows **Pharaoh wasn't just stubborn about letting people go, he was watching his entire religious worldview get dismantled in real time and still chose to wield rather than yield**. That's a much more interesting picture of **hardened will verses simple obstinance**, it's a man clinging to a collapsing belief system because letting go would mean **admitting he was never actually divine**.

5. THE HARDENING TEXT: WHAT THE HEBREW ACTUALLY SAYS

The popular version ("God forced Pharaoh to say no so he could punish him for it") is not actually what the text presents. Here's the data.

The correction on Exodus 8:15

You cited Exodus 8:15 as "I will harden Pharaoh's heart." Worth knowing: that's not quite what 8:15 says. **Exodus 8:15 is Pharaoh hardening his own heart**: "But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them." The "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" language belongs to other verses, most notably **Exodus 4:21** and **7:3**, spoken *before* the plagues even begin, as God's forewarning to Moses of what would ultimately happen.

Three different Hebrew words are used, and they're not synonyms

This is the detail that makes "consume, wield, or yield" preach so well, because the Hebrew itself distinguishes between *kinds* of hardening:

- **qashah** (קָשָׁה) — "to be hard, severe, difficult." Used only once, Exodus 7:3, God's initial declaration to Moses. Conveys harsh, active resistance.
- **chazaq** (חָזַק) — "to be strong, firm, fixed." Used 12 times, the dominant word. This is the same root used positively elsewhere for courage ("be strong and courageous," Joshua 1:9). It describes a will set *firm*, like mortar that has dried.

- **kabad** (כָּבֵד) — "to be heavy, weighty." Used 6 times, related to *kavod* (glory/weightiness). This is the word used specifically for **Pharaoh hardening his own heart** (8:15, 8:32, 9:34).

The actual sequence (this matters for your "free will then sovereignty" point)

The narrative pattern is not random; it follows a deliberate progression:

4. **Plagues 1-5:** Pharaoh hardens his own heart (or the text is ambiguous about the source). This is the *kabad* phase, his own will, his own choosing, his own resistance, freely exercised, five separate times.
5. **First mention of God hardening: Exodus 9:12** (sixth plague, boils). This is the turning point. From here forward, the text shifts toward God's active hardening (*chazaq*).
6. **Plagues 6-10:** increasingly described as God hardening Pharaoh's heart.

The pattern most conservative scholars draw from this without wading into the full Calvinist/Arminian fight. **God did not harden a heart that wanted to soften. Pharaoh chose resistance freely, repeatedly, for five full plagues, with full evidence in front of him. Only after a sustained, freely-chosen pattern of refusal does God confirm Pharaoh in the path Pharaoh himself had already chosen.** This is sometimes called a "judicial hardening," not God overriding a willing heart, but **God giving a persistently unwilling heart over to what it already wanted** (compare Romans 1:24-28, "God gave them over," same concept, different story).

Romans 9:17-18, Paul's own commentary on this

Paul directly addresses Pharaoh in **Romans 9:17-18**: "For **Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I raised you up, 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." This passage is central to discussions of predestination and free will, suggesting that **God's sovereign will is ultimately beyond human comprehension, yet operates without negating human responsibility.**

God knew what Pharaoh would choose. God did not make Pharaoh choose it.

And by the time God confirmed Pharaoh in his hardness, Pharaoh had already shown five times over, in the face of overwhelming evidence, exactly who he was going to be.

This is the **responsible way to hold foreknowledge and freedom together** without collapsing into either **hyper-determinism or open theism**. Pharaoh's freely chosen pattern is **an illustration of someone repeatedly wielding power rather than yielding it, until wielding became who he was.**

6. CONSUME / WIELD / YIELD: A FRAMEWORK FOR THE WILL

- **Wield power** — using freedom/power *against* others, as a weapon, to **dominate or control**. Pharaoh by the later plagues, openly defiant, increasingly destructive to his own people in the process. **Or, consuming it** for yourself. **Using freedom/power purely for self; appetite driven.**
- **Yield power** — surrendering freedom/power to God, letting your will bend toward his. Moses, repeatedly, despite his own objections and inadequacies.

7. SUPPORTING NEW TESTAMENT TEXT: GALATIANS 5:13

This is a key verse: "**For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.**" Paul's **freedom is never freedom from constraint for its own sake, it's freedom for something**, in this case, serving others in love. That's the "**freedom to, not just freedom from**" thesis in one verse, and it's the difference between wielding freedom (opportunity for the flesh) and yielding it (serving one another in love).

8. THINGS TO HANDLE CAREFULLY

- **The free will/predestination question.** The research above gives you a defensible, text-honest middle path (**judicial hardening following freely chosen resistance**) **without forcing a Calvinist or Arminian conclusion.**
- **The plague/deity table** is compelling but some individual associations (especially flies/gnats) are less certain than others. If you want a clean, defensible version for a slide or handout, use the six strongest (Nile, frogs, livestock, hail, darkness, firstborn) rather than presenting all ten with equal confidence.
- **Exodus 8:15 specifically:** This needs to be cited correctly (it's Pharaoh hardening himself, not God) it is a common misreading.

9. POSSIBLE BIG IDEA DIRECTIONS (not finalized, just raw material)

- "Freedom isn't the absence of a ruler, it's the choice of one."
- "Every will either yields or wields, there is no third option."
- "God didn't take Pharaoh's choice away. He let Pharaoh keep making it until it became who he was."
- "The same power that delivers a nation through Moses can destroy one through Pharaoh. The difference isn't the power. It's the posture."

10. SCRIPTURE LIST FOR REFERENCE

- Genesis 2:16-17 (the first real choice)
 - Deuteronomy 30:19, Joshua 24:15 (choose life / choose this day)
 - Exodus 3:19, 4:21, 5:1-2, 7:3, 7:13-14, 8:15, 8:32, 9:12, 9:34-35 (the hardening sequence)
 - Romans 9:17-18 (Paul's commentary on Pharaoh)
 - Romans 1:24-28 (parallel concept: God "gave them over")
 - Galatians 5:13 (series anchor: freedom for love, not flesh)
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Was Egypt punitive or formative?

The whole Exodus narrative **isn't just a story about Pharaoh's wielding will, it's a story about what God was doing *through* 430 years of what looked like abandonment**. Here are the primary conservative theological positions, in order of their textual strength:

1. The Covenant with Abraham was always the explanation

Genesis 15:13-16 is the anchor text here, and it's striking because God tells Abraham *in advance*, centuries before it happens: "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions."

So, from a conservative theological standpoint, the **430 years wasn't a reaction to Israel's sin, it was a *predetermined sovereign plan* disclosed to Abraham before Israel even existed as a nation. The captivity was always part of the covenant architecture, not a detour from it.**

The reason God gives in that same passage is fascinating: "the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." In other words, God was also on a timeline with the *Canaanite* nations, waiting until their moral condition justified the judgment that would come through Israel's conquest of the land. The 430 years in Egypt was partly about Israel's formation and partly about God's patience toward another people entirely. That's a remarkably complex picture of divine sovereignty operating on multiple tracks simultaneously.

2. Egypt was a furnace of formation, not a punishment

Deuteronomy 4:20 uses a striking image: "But the Lord took you and brought you out of the iron-smelting furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance." The furnace metaphor is deliberate, Egypt wasn't a penalty box, it

was a forge. You don't put something in a furnace to destroy it, you put it there to purify and strengthen it.

From this angle, the **430 years produced something that couldn't have been produced any other way: a people with a shared history of suffering, a shared cry for deliverance, and therefore a shared experience of God's rescue.** The Exodus becomes the defining national memory of Israel precisely because of the depth of the suffering that preceded it. A people who hadn't suffered together couldn't have been delivered together in a way that bound them permanently to the delivering God.

Moses and Pharaoh aren't just two individuals making individual choices. **They're representatives of two peoples, one being formed through yielding to suffering, one being hardened through wielding against it.**

3. Israel had drifted significantly, but captivity wasn't punitive

Ezekiel 20:5-9 and Joshua 24:14 both suggest that during the Egypt period, Israel had absorbed significant Egyptian idolatry and was worshipping Egyptian gods alongside or instead of Yahweh. Ezekiel is particularly blunt: God considered destroying them in Egypt before the Exodus because of their idolatry, but relented for the sake of his own name among the nations.

So, **while the captivity itself wasn't caused by Israel's sin, their condition during the captivity included real spiritual drift.** This is a theologically honest position that avoids two extremes: Israel wasn't in Egypt because they sinned, but they weren't spiritually pristine during those 430 years either. The Exodus delivers a people who are simultaneously chosen and compromised, which is actually a very honest picture of grace operating toward imperfect recipients.

4. God was building a testimony that would outlast the event

Exodus 9:16, which Paul quotes directly in Romans 9:17, gives **God's own stated reason for the whole confrontation with Pharaoh: "I have 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."** The 430 years and the ten plagues together produce a story so dramatic, so undeniable, and so specifically targeted at Egypt's entire religious system that **it becomes the defining testimony of God's power for the entire ancient Near East.**

Rahab in Jericho (Joshua 2:10) references the Exodus decades later as the reason she feared Israel's God. **The Exodus wasn't just Israel's story, it was God's announcement to every surrounding nation about who he was and what he could do.** From this angle, the length and intensity of the captivity was proportional to the size of the testimony it would produce.

The conservative theological consensus isn't that Israel sinned their way into Egypt. It's closer to this: **God had a purpose that required a process, and the process was longer and harder than anyone inside it could see.**

- Abraham knew it was coming.
- Israel forgot it was purposeful.
- Pharaoh thought he was in control of it.
- And God was working all three of those realities simultaneously toward a single moment of deliverance that would be talked about for the rest of human history.

Israel yielded to a suffering they didn't fully understand, and God formed a nation. Pharaoh wielded against a God he didn't fully understand, and God made a testimony.



If Egypt was supposed to be formative, didn't it fail?

The wilderness narrative is genuinely one of the most sobering stretches in all of Scripture precisely **because it exposes the gap between *being delivered* and *being transformed*. God got Israel out of Egypt in one night. He couldn't get Egypt out of Israel in forty years.**

And that's not a small theological footnote; that's actually the whole point.

Here's the honest conservative theological read on why the elders didn't make it:

1. Deliverance and formation are not the same event

The Exodus was complete and instantaneous. **The formation was supposed to happen in eleven days, Deuteronomy 1:2 tells us the journey from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea was eleven days on foot.** Even though God knew it would take them forty years, from our perspective it was never God's plan A. It was **the consequence of a people who experienced the most dramatic divine rescue in human history** but even then, at the threshold of the promised land, decided **God probably couldn't handle the giants.**

Numbers 13-14 is the hinge moment. **The ten spies who brought the bad report weren't atheists, they were eyewitnesses of the plagues, the Red Sea, the manna, the water from the rock. They had more direct evidence of God's power than almost any humans who ever lived, and they still defaulted to "we seemed**

like grasshoppers in our own eyes." **That's not a formation failure, that's a will failure.** The furnace of formation produced a people who knew about God's power without trusting it! information without transformation, which connects directly back to your Matthew 7 conviction about knowledge alone not being enough.

2. Egypt didn't just mark them physically, **it marked them in their imagination**

Numbers 11:5 is almost darkly comic: the people are receiving supernatural food from heaven every morning and they're saying "we remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, the garlic." **They're romanticizing slavery because at least slavery was familiar.** Egypt had formed their imagination of what "good" looked like so deeply that even miraculous provision couldn't dislodge it.

This is actually a profound psychological and spiritual observation that the text is making: **you can leave a place without your imagination leaving with it. The wilderness generation was physically free and mentally still enslaved.** Their complaints weren't really about food or water, they were about the **unbearable vulnerability of trusting a God they couldn't control.** Manna required daily dependence with no stockpiling allowed. That was the actual lesson Egypt couldn't teach them, because **in Egypt you always knew where tomorrow's food was coming from, it came from Pharaoh, and Pharaoh was predictable even if he was cruel.**

3. The wilderness was judgment, but it was also mercy

God's response to the faithless generation wasn't to abandon the project, it was to let the generation that couldn't trust him die out while preserving and forming the next one. Caleb and Joshua, the two spies who came back with a minority report of faith, made it through. So did every person under twenty at the time of the rebellion (Numbers 14:29-31).

So the wilderness wasn't a total formation failure, it was a generational reset. The children of the people who romanticized Egypt grew up with no memory of Egypt at all. **Their entire conscious life had been wilderness, manna, pillar of fire, the presence of God moving ahead of them.** They were **formed by dependence in a way their parents never could be, because their parents had a different reference point for security.**

4. Connecting to wielding or yielding our will

The wilderness generation was delivered but never yielded. They yielded enough to leave Egypt, but not enough to enter Canaan. And the gap

between those two acts of yielding cost them everything. They got freedom from but never fully inhabited freedom to.

That's not ancient history, that's the person who got saved, got delivered from the obvious thing, but never let God touch the deeper Egypt still running in their imagination, **their need for control, their preference for familiar misery over unfamiliar trust**, their tendency to romanticize the life before surrender because at least that life was predictable.

The promised land isn't just a geography, it's what yielded freedom actually produces over time. And **a lot of people in the room are living in the wilderness not because God hasn't delivered them, but because they keep looking back at Egypt.**



Choices in Freedom

In the biblical narrative, the concept of freedom is intricately linked with the responsibility of making choices. The Bible presents freedom not as an end in itself but as a means to live in accordance with God's will. This entry explores the biblical understanding of freedom and the choices it entails, drawing from various scriptural passages.

- Old Testament Foundations
- New Testament Fulfillment
- The Role of the Holy Spirit
- Practical Implications



Paul's Assessment of Christian Freedom

In an awkward but memorable phrase, the Apostle Paul declares: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." The story of Jesus Christ, as it comes to life in his followers, is a story of freedom, to be sure, but a freedom constrained by the Cross and deeply at odds with individualistic notions of liberty.

- *Freedom from moral libertinism.*
- *Freedom from self-interest.*
- *Enslavement to one another.*



The Gospel and Thorny Issues: Paul on Christian Freedom in 1 Corinthians 10

"We have the great gift of freedom. But it is not the only gift. We also have the gift of conscience, and we have the gift of love."

- Paul explores and probes the implications of the Gospel where the Law used to strictly and narrowly apply.
- Fear is driven out and its place is overtaken by love.
- Love is the real answer lurking behind every ethical or moral issue Paul tackles.