

## **The Consequences of a Hard Heart**

**Exodus 7:14-24**

**July 16, 2017**

**M. Michelle Fincher**

**Calvary Presbyterian Church**

By the end of Exodus 5, it seems that God's plan to deliver Israel from Egypt has come to a grinding and embarrassing halt. Before Pharaoh, Moses has been bruised. As a result, before God Moses is brazen. Maybe Moses is right—God needs to commission someone more qualified and persuasive if Pharaoh is ever going to let God's people go. But no! God will stick with Moses. As Paul says to the Romans (11:29), "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." To that end, chapter 6 commences with God reaffirming his call to a discouraged, angry Moses.

You'll recall that God has revealed that the divine plan for dealing with a recalcitrant Pharaoh is to do "marvelous deeds." We now discover that those "marvelous deeds" consist of ten plagues, the purpose of which, as God has made clear, is that Pharaoh and Egypt may know that Yahweh alone is God, even in Egypt—or anywhere else, for that matter. Remember that Pharaoh had boasted of *not knowing* Israel's God when Moses first approached him. The plagues will offer him an opportunity to move from ignorance to knowledge and belief. In the process, Israel, too, will come to know God in ever-deepening ways.

Moses and Aaron announce the first plague to Pharaoh as he is walking by the Nile, which is reminiscent of Pharaoh's daughter's walk by the same body of water. In stating that the river's waters will turn to blood, God aims the first blow at the very life-support system of Egypt. He could not commence at a more critical point. Take away the Nile and its benefits, and Egypt dissolves, regardless of which Pharaoh is in charge.

Aaron stretches out his rod and the water turns to blood; in fact, there is "blood throughout the land." Doing so in Pharaoh's presence makes the origin of the sign clear, but Pharaoh is not impressed, in part because his own magicians are able to replicate the feat. Pharaoh misses the point: this sign is more than just a bloody mess, a lot of dead fish, and a headache for waterworks personnel. It is an ominous sign for Pharaoh. God asks that Israel be liberated from their slavery to serve Yahweh; Pharaoh insists that Israel serve him. God's action is intended to show Pharaoh that the land of Egypt, its water, and its people are neither Pharaoh's creation nor his to do with as he pleases. But, if he persists, there will be blood throughout the land.

The image of the second plague is extraordinary: frogs in your house, in your bed, in your oven, in your pots and pans, and jumping all over you! Everywhere, in everything, frogs. The image is both humorous and grotesque. It is not calculated to hurt or kill people but to make life genuinely unpleasant. Pharaoh is given the chance to avoid the mess, but he refuses.

Once again Pharaoh's magicians can do what Aaron and Moses can do but at what a cost. Multiplying the amount of bloodied waters, or adding to the proliferation of frogs—neither seems to be something for which they would want to congratulate themselves. They can bring on bloodied waters; they cannot remove them. They can multiply the number of frogs; they cannot eliminate them. Pagan magic can introduce evil, but once having introduced it, cannot get rid of it.

For the first time, we see some movement in Pharaoh. He asks Moses to pray to Yahweh, using God's name for the first time and in doing so, acknowledging that it is God with whom he must deal. Over the course of the plagues, Pharaoh will ask Moses to pray for him four times. On all four occasions, Moses leaves Pharaoh's presence before he does so. Why? Why leave Pharaoh to pray privately? Wouldn't a man on his knees in prayer impress Pharaoh? By contrast, when Moses prays for his own people, he most often does it right on the spot. As some theologians have suggested, perhaps Moses withdraws to prevent Pharaoh from thinking that Moses is some kind of magician who, with the right words and actions, can command and manipulate his god to perform at his bidding.

Pharaoh asks Moses to pray to remove the frogs; for such a prayer, Pharaoh promises to release the Hebrews. Moses prays. The Lord removes the plague. Pharaoh, however, reneges on his promise and hardens his heart. It's not surprising that Pharaoh backs out on his end of the deal. What is surprising is that the same pattern occurs four times. Wouldn't you think Moses, or God, would see through Pharaoh's duplicity and say something like, "Oh no, you're not going to sucker me again with that ruse?" Does God answer prayer even when he knows the asking person has ulterior motives? Does God answer "foxhole religion" prayers even if he knows that the pray-er will, if delivered, forget any promise made to God? Apparently, yes. At least sometimes.

The third plague is the first in which no request is made of Pharaoh and no warning is given to him about what's coming. The land is suddenly inundated with gnats, which some scholars say would be better translated as lice. Egypt's magicians finally meet their match. Their report to Pharaoh is simple and

straightforward: these lice are the result of the finger of God. Their word is a public testimony which Pharaoh once again refuses to hear.

In the fourth plague, swarming flies now join the gnats, but a couple of important distinctions occur with this plague. For the first time, the Lord protects the Hebrews from the plague's impact. They did not escape the bloodied waters, the inundation of frogs or the pervasive lice. But, here, Israel is exempt from the plague's effects. This God-ordained sparing of Israel shows that Israel's survival is no fluke. It is the result of divine intervention. This shield of protection is intended to be another means by which Pharaoh can know Yahweh. It also makes clear that Pharaoh is not the only one who must make a choice. God chooses to side with the oppressed. God chooses redemption and life and creation.

Pharaoh again asks Moses to intercede on his behalf but this time he makes a partial concession to the request for the people's departure. They can leave, but they can't go too far. Moses prays. God does as Moses asks and not one fly remains. But Pharaoh, not surprisingly, reverts to form and fails to live up to his end of the bargain.

The fifth plague takes a significant step beyond nuisance and discomfort. All the livestock in Egypt die of a severe plague while not a single creature of Israel's is harmed. Pharaoh should begin to see that God is bringing this matter very close to home; for the first time his own possessions are affected. But, Pharaoh only becomes more stubbornly entrenched.

A major shift occurs with the sixth plague. To this point, the language of scripture to describe Pharaoh's intransigent rebelliousness against God has been that Pharaoh "hardened his heart." In the Hebrew, it means that Pharaoh's heart is tough; he makes it tough or it remains tough. After the plague of boils which is a visible and very uncomfortable disease afflicting the Egyptians only, we have the first reference to God toughening or hardening Pharaoh's heart. To this point, God has offered Pharaoh opportunity time and time again to repent, even answering Moses' prayers on Pharaoh's behalf, but to no avail. Pharaoh has remained consistently oppressive, deceitful, and arrogant. He will not bow his will to the will of anyone, not even Yahweh, even though his entire nation suffers the consequences of his hubris. It is a reminder of the disastrous consequences that one malevolent human being can have. The ripple effect of one's stubbornness and stupidity can be massive.

There is an intensity, a pervasiveness, about the 7<sup>th</sup> plague that separates it from its predecessors. With the exception of the Hebrews in Goshen, no animal is safe, no person is safe, no vegetation is safe from the effects of a hailstorm the likes of which Egypt had never before seen and hasn't seen since. Pharaoh thinks that there is none like him in all the earth. Wrong! What he desperately needs to discover is that there is none like *Yahweh* in all the earth. The God of the Israelites is incomparable. There is, literally, none like this God in both character and wonder-working power. Pharaoh, like all of us, owes every breath he breathes to a gracious and merciful God and despite everything, God will use even Pharaoh for God's redemptive purposes.

This hailstorm is massive, but notice that loss of property and limb is not inevitable. The Lord gives advance warning to the Egyptians to seek shelter for themselves and for their livestock, inside the safety of their homes and barns. God wants survivors, not victims.

God's warning of coming disaster produces two opposite reactions: those who listen to, embrace and respond to the warning with due haste, and those who scoff at it. These are always the two options to the word of God. We can obey or disobey, listen or refuse to listen, respond or ignore, fall at God's feet in worship or demand proof, soften our hearts or harden them.

One wonders if something is starting to get through to Pharaoh. He finally confesses, "I have sinned; the Lord is in the right," but given another opportunity to return to his old ways, Pharaoh jumps at it. He acknowledges his guilt, but then goes right on being guilty. But true repentance is more than serial apologies. We are not to continue in sin so that grace may abound, to use Paul's words. No; repentance is meant to lead to *change*. Any repentance that does not lessen our impulse to commit the same sin again is not genuine repentance. (DeNeff)

At Pharaoh's request, Moses prays for the plague to stop. Moses agrees to pray once more not because he believes in Pharaoh's sincerity but because of what he believes about God and God's sovereign purposes. If Jesus prays three times for his painful reality to pass, surely Moses can pray three times, or four. The frogs pass. The flies and the lice pass. The hailstorm passes. The cup does not pass.

It is important to note that even after God hardened Pharaoh's heart in the previous plague, Pharaoh is still able to make his own heart hard, which he chooses to do now. Divine hardening does not remove human responsibility for our choices, nor does it preclude the opportunity for us to choose a different path.

Unlike any previous plague account, the eighth one is the only one to *begin* with a reference to God hardening Pharaoh's heart. To put it at the beginning shows that for Pharaoh, the window of opportunity has closed. The plagues to this point have been for the benefit of Pharaoh and his people, that they may know who Israel's God is. Here, the emphasis shifts to Israel knowing God, and sharing that knowledge through the generations. So, the locusts come, in an invasion so massive that it destroys and consumes everything edible in its path.

The ninth plague, darkness, erupts without warning. This is no ordinary darkness. The text conveys that it is a darkness like that found in Genesis, before God speaks the first words of creation. This is a darkness you can feel, a claustrophobic, palpable, absolute blackness.

But in the Hebrews' homes, there is light. This is the way it should always be. Light should always stream out into the darkness from the homes of God's people. Let the houses of people of faith be lighthouses for all those plunged into darkness. Let the family of God be a light to all the darkened Egypts of the world.

Pharaoh makes his third attempt at negotiating a compromise: first it was "Go, but do not go very far." Next, "Go, but leave your children and women behind." This time, "Go and take your children, but leave your sheep and cattle behind." In other words, worship God, but keep a lid on it. Worship God, but leave your family out of it. Worship God, but keep your possessions out of it. It's amazing how little the world's message has changed in 3500 years.

I mentioned on the very first Sunday of this sermon series that one of the major themes, woven like a thread throughout Exodus, is the tension between divine agency and human action. The language of God hardening anyone's heart sounds strange and disturbing to our modern-day ears. We may not be able to resolve all the tension between these two poles, but as we wrestle with where God's sovereignty and Pharaoh's—and our—free will begins and ends, I will ask you to keep in mind several things:

- Even though there is language early in the narrative about God's intent to harden Pharaoh's heart, God does not actually do so until after the 6<sup>th</sup> plague, giving Pharaoh plenty of time and opportunity to turn to God
- Even after God's hardening occurred, there was still room for Pharaoh to harden or soften his own heart. Pharaoh is not pre-determined to remain obstinate

- For all the emphasis on God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart, there are several ways in which God seeks to soften Pharaoh's heart:
  - by the prayers of Moses
  - by the testimony of Pharaoh's own magicians and courtiers
  - by moving Pharaoh to partial repentance
  - by continually giving Pharaoh another chance
  - by miraculously sparing the Hebrews from some of the plagues, thereby providing witness to Pharaoh of what could be
- Each time Pharaoh refuses God makes it easier to refuse the next time. And each time brings him closer to a point of no return, when God's judgment is imminent.

The purpose of the plagues was always to make Yahweh's name known throughout the earth and secondly, to promote God's purposes for all of creation: life, freedom, healing, wholeness and redemption. The forces that promote evil, injustice, oppression and death—the Pharaohs of this world—will find themselves in opposition to God. And, God's judgment will be decisive. It is a word that can be hard for us to hear, but it is meant as a word of hope as well as inspiration. Whose side will we be on? Who are we for? We will not get away with sitting on the fence. There comes a time when we all must choose. The plagues offer us a dramatic reminder of the choice that is before us.