

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Exodus 6:28-7:7 “Plagues of the Heart”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 10/8/2023**

Do you know anyone with a serious heart condition? I don't mean blocked arteries, congestive heart failure or a need for cardiac...perfusionism

Those things are bad, but I mean something  
that just might be even more dangerous:

I mean a hardened heart that is greatly limited  
in its ability to receive love or give love.

Pharaoh's heart has been shaped by the history of mistreating  
and blaming the Hebrew people.

We see this in Ex. 5 when Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh the very first time  
and tell him that Yahweh has commanded the children of Israel  
to go worship in the wilderness.

Pharaoh says to the slavedrivers, **“require them to make  
the same number of bricks as before; don't reduce the quota.  
They are lazy; that is why they are crying out,  
'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.'  
Make the work harder for them so that  
they keep working and pay no attention to lies.”**

That's a serious heart condition, folks.

When someone can look at their neighbors and scoff at their humanity  
make up lies about them and actively diminish their ability to live,  
that comes from a deeply hardened heart.

It didn't have to be that way, though  
– the Pharaoh who knew Joseph many generations before  
was willing to hear from Joseph's God, Yahweh,  
and see the blessing that came into Joseph's life  
as something to come alongside.

As a result Egypt was saved from a famine and Joseph's family  
was given a place of safety in a difficult time.

When our hearts are soft, they are receptive to hearing from God  
and from their neighbors.

When our hearts are hard, they are judgmental, unbending, and entrenched.  
What's condition is your heart in today?

After all the promises and the statements of support,  
God now demonstrates full power over the created world  
and the ability to bring about redemption for Israel.

Today we consider the first 9 plagues that God sends on Egypt.  
But what is really happening here is God wrestling with Pharaoh  
over the condition of Pharaoh's heart.

Ultimately, these are plagues of the heart that happened thousands of years ago.  
But if seen through the eyes faith,  
when people and societies live with hardened hearts in our own time  
they also encounter devastating outcomes  
that are a natural consequence  
of living apart from God's love.

Pharaoh, with his hardened heart, is convinced that he is a deity  
and therefore he gets to judge what happens to the Hebrew people.

Whether you are *being judged* or judging someone else,  
judgment is a difficult burden to bear,  
but there are times in life when we all have to do that.

Whether it's a court judgment, a workplace evaluation,  
or the judgment of someone we're in relationship with,  
it's inevitable that our lives will be scrutinized by someone else,  
or we will scrutinize another person's life.

But the condition of our hearts when entering into those times  
will make a world of difference in what we experience  
and in what others experience.

There are some judgments that are appropriate for us to make,  
but God is the one, final judge of all things.

The Exodus story reveals that even injustices that go unaddressed  
for hundreds of years are seen by God and will be judged by God.

We are really looking at chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 today.  
looking more at the big picture and the patterns  
that emerge when we look at these plagues all together.

These four chapters are summarized by God's statement to Moses  
at the beginning of chapter 7.

**1) "See I have made you like God to Pharaoh,  
and you brother Aaron will be your prophet."**

Now, this doesn't mean Moses can let divine status go to his head.  
But it does mean that Moses fully represents God's  
presence and purpose during interactions with Pharaoh.  
And the things that "God" (Moses) needs to say,  
will be communicated through the prophet Aaron.

**2) "Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country."**

Yep. We've heard this many times already, and we'll hear it a bunch more.  
Let. My. People. Go.

**3) "But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and  
wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you."**

This introduces a fascinating and difficult aspect of this story:  
the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

God tells Moses that *God* will harden Pharaoh's heart,  
which may strike you as unfair.

What can a person do if God decides to harden their heart?  
We'll keep track of this as we go along.

**4-5) "I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment will bring  
out ... my people the Israelites. The Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh  
when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it."**

Mighty acts of judgment. This is not merely judgment  
with regard to the request for freedom.

This is judgment for ignoring the fact that Joseph saved all of Egypt  
from 7 years of famine by listening to God's voice  
and properly interpreting dreams,  
for 400 years of slavery and unjust treatment.

This is judgment not on individuals, but on a society  
that had oriented itself against Yahweh  
and subjugated the people of Yahweh.

It is not fashionable to think of God as one who inflicts judgment.

People sometimes say, "Oh, that was just the God of the Old Testament,  
not the God of the New Testament."

But this is not true. God's judgment is strongly and prominently  
featured in the New Testament.

We do not have two different God's described  
in the Bible.

We also need to consider the alternative:

What kind of God would we serve if upon seeing horrific abuse  
and oppression on both a personal and societal scale,  
God simply said, "Well, that's really too bad,  
but I don't want people to think I'm angry or mean  
or judgmental"?

These mighty acts of judgment in the form of 10 plagues.

We will consider the first nine of them today, and then the 10<sup>th</sup> next week.

Though these plagues that befall Egypt are just and proper,  
they are also, nonetheless, terrible and awful.

We should not see them as things that are funny or to be celebrated.  
They, like the climate disasters we face in our own time,  
are the unfortunate outcome of living  
with hardened hearts for generations and generations.

Now they will know who Yahweh is through judgment.

But at any point Pharaoh could have softened his heart  
and known Yahweh's goodness, generosity, and mercy.

**6) “Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded them.”**

It seems obvious, but it’s important to note because whatever happens,  
there can’t be any blame placed at the feet of Moses and Aaron.  
They did just what they were told.

**7) “Moses was eight years old and Aaron eighty-three when they spoke to Pharaoh.”**

I won’t ask for a show of hands, but I’m pretty sure  
there are a number of us here today who are in that same age range.  
I don’t know how old Pharaoh was, but he was facing  
an octogenarian tag-team duo that he wouldn’t soon forget!

**First Encounter**

The first encounter in chapter 7:8 is a demonstration of God’s power  
prior to the plagues.

Aaron throws his staff down before Pharaoh and his officials,  
and it becomes a snake. But then Pharaoh’s wise men  
and sorcerers duplicate the magic trick –  
they throw down their staffs and they also become snakes.

The snake is the great symbol of Egyptian power –  
you notice them on the hoods of many Pharaohs.  
Well after the wise men throw down their staff-snakes,  
Aaron’s staff-snake *eats* them, swallowing them all up.

This scene foreshadows a later confrontation.  
The same Hebrew word for “swallow up” will later be used  
when the Red Sea “swallows up” the Egyptian army.

This should have been an indication to everyone in the room  
that Pharaoh (the highest god worshiped in Egypt) was outmatched.  
Instead (v. 13) “Pharaoh’s heart *became* hard and he would not listen to them.”

Notice – we aren’t told here that God did the hardening.  
That *will* happen later, but at this point Pharaoh’s heart  
becomes hard without any outward influence.

## The Plagues

One of the most important things to note about the plagues is that they are not random bad things that happened. Each of them pertained to a particular Egyptian deity.

Like many pagan religions, Egyptian worship was focused on different elements of creation.

Jewish / Christian worship is focused on the One God, Yahweh, who created all things.

Remember that line from 7:5, “**The Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh**”?

So here is a run-down of the first nine plagues and one *possible* Egyptian god who would be humiliated or discredited by the plague.

This list is not impervious to criticism, and there are sometimes three or four alternate possibilities, so just consider this to be a possible example:

### *First Egyptian Plague- Nile Water Turned to Blood*

Hapi- Egyptian God of the Nile This Egyptian God was a water bearer.



### *Second Plague: Frogs coming from the land of Egypt*

*Heket: Egyptian Goddess of Fertility, Water, Renewal*

Heket the Egyptian Goddess, had the head of a frog.



***Third Plague: the dust of the earth becomes gnats***

**Geb: Egyptian God of the Earth**

The Egyptian God Geb, was over the land.



***Fourth Plague: Swarms of Flies***

**Khepri: Egyptian God of creation, movement of the Sun, rebirth**

Khepri, the Egyptian god had the head of a fly.



***Fifth Plague: Death of Cattle and Livestock***

**Hathor: Egyptian Goddess of Love and Protection**

Usually this Egyptian Goddess was depicted with the head of a cow.



***Sixth Plague: Ashes turned to Boils and Sores***

**Imhotep: Egyptian God of medicine and guardian of healing sciences**



***Seventh Plague: Hail rained down with lightning and thunder***

**Nut: Egyptian Goddess of the Sky**



***Eighth Plague: Locusts sent upon the crops***  
**Seth: Egyptian God of crops**



***Ninth Plague: Three Days of Complete Darkness***  
**Ra: The Sun God**



Through these plagues Yahweh demonstrates total control over the natural world that is worshiped by Egypt under the names of various gods.

Peter Enns suggests that in contrast to what God has done in creating a good world, “The plagues are creation reversals: Animals harm rather than serve humanity; light ceases and darkness takes over; waters become a source of death rather than life.”

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So ... what impact did all of this judgment have on Pharaoh?  
There are five times that Pharaoh begs or temporarily gives in due to the terrible plagues.

This happens once in the first three plague, once in the second set of three, and then all three times in the final set of three.

I’ll give you one example of this pattern. During the seventh plague of hail, Pharaoh says in 9:27 and following.

**“This time I have sinned,” he said to them. “The LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. <sup>28</sup>Pray to the LORD, for we have had enough thunder and hail. I will let you go; you don’t have to stay any longer.”**



**And again, <sup>34</sup>When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned again: He and his officials hardened their hearts.”**

It sounds crazy to read about it, but I can relate.

I can remember times that I softened my heart for a moment  
only to harden it again when the storm seemed to have passed.

These nine plagues set up the 10<sup>th</sup> and final plague that we will look at next week.

It's quite a story. An amazing story. Perhaps an unbelievable story for some.  
But what does it mean for us? How do we bring something  
so totally outside our experience into our own lives and world?

In the end, this is an account of how God deals with evil.

This is a pulling back of the veil that ordinarily covers over things,  
and allows us to see what is really happening.

Who among us has felt rage about the terrible impact of slavery and racism  
in our own country that continues to impact our society today?

Who has wondered when men will be brought to account for their  
treatment of women for thousands of years?

Who has wondered if warlords around the world will ever be brought to account?

Who has heard of bankers and CEOs stealing money at a huge scale  
that would never be possible at a dime-store robbery,  
and yet they face none of the consequences?

Who has wondered about restitution for personal attacks, betrayals, abuse, rape,  
lying, cheating?

Can legal recourse and civil punishment ever really account  
for the toll that humanity's collective heart condition?

The story of God judging Pharaoh brings some insight.

- 1) We do not carry the burden of judging others or ourselves for their sins / our sin
- 2) God's judgment is not chaotic or haphazard, but ordered and purposeful.
- 3) Judgment does not necessarily bring about change of heart.
- 4) Wrong-doing will ultimately be judged.

God knew humanity could never survive such judgment.

And so God preserved Israel, a people of promise in a land  
of promise so that God's own son, Jesus, born of a woman,  
would come as a fulfillment of those same promises.

Jesus lived among us, was tempted as we are – and yet was without sin.

We were the ones with hard hearts,  
but Jesus received the plague of separation.

Jesus became our representative,  
bearing the terrible consequence of sin on our behalf.

God's own heart remained soft, malleable, merciful, generous, and longsuffering  
so that through Christ and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit,  
our hearts may shed their armor and take on those same qualities.

Consider your own heart condition and ask the Holy Spirit to help you assess  
where you are given to harsh judgment of yourself or others.

We cannot change our hearts alone, but we can choose to yield to God  
in those places. We can ask the Spirit of renewal and healing  
to soften our hearts that we may relent and encounter  
the everlasting way of grace.