

## “THE SERVANT OF THE LORD” – A Study of the Life of Moses

### “Preaching Plagues” (Exodus 7:1-25)

Moses was still arguing with the Lord over his ability to represent Jehovah before Pharaoh. His fifth and final argument was, “Behold, I am of uncircumcised lips, and how shall Pharaoh hearken unto me?” (Exod. 6:30) One of the amazing things in this whole story is the weakness of Moses and the greatness of God. The Lord continually was gracious and merciful to not just Moses but also to the Egyptians and the Israelites.

*And the LORD said unto Moses, See, I have made thee a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet. Thou shalt speak all that I command thee: and Aaron thy brother shall speak unto Pharaoh, that he send the children of Israel out of his land. And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt. But Pharaoh shall not hearken unto you, that I may lay my hand upon Egypt, and bring forth mine armies, and my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch forth mine hand upon Egypt, and bring out the children of Israel from among them. (v1-5)*

The Lord did not try to persuade Moses but simply revealed in majestic terms what He will do, “See, I have made thee a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet.” In other words, Moses would speak as the voice of God Almighty to Pharaoh and the proud monarch would recognise that. The Lord then ordered Moses, “Thou shalt speak all that I command thee.”

The Lord promised once again to exhibit great miracles through Moses. He assured him that He would, “multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt.” The Lord also reminded Moses that He was fully aware that Pharaoh, “shall not hearken unto you.” God is even sovereign in foreknowledge. This rejection of Pharaoh was all part of God’s sovereign plan, “that I may lay my hand upon Egypt, and bring forth mine armies, and my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments.”

### **HARDENING OF PHARAOH’S HEART**

Now when the Lord says that, “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart” many people are confused. In Exodus 7-14 we read of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart at least 15 times. Sometimes the Scripture records that Pharaoh hardened his heart and other times we are told that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. So which is right? The answer is **both** things were happening in the life of this evil man. However, we must always bear in mind that Pharaoh first hardened his heart and then the Lord responded by hardening Pharaoh’s heart. All God did was to give Pharaoh up to the evil inclination he had towards Israel and the authority of the Lord.

The Bible makes it clear that God does not create sin or tempt a man into sin, “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed” (James 1:13-14). So the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was God simply allowing Pharaoh to aggravate his sinful nature and passions. Pharaoh was not a mere puppet in the hand of God, but was responsible for his own rebellion. God does not harden the hearts of innocent people. So how did God harden the heart of Pharaoh?

- (a) The Apostle Paul teaches us that God hardens rebellious sinners by giving them over to their sin by simply withdrawing from them His restraining influences, “*Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves*” (Romans 1:24).
- (b) In Romans 7 Paul made clear that when the law of God confronts the unregenerate man it aggravates the sinful nature of man.
- (c) When God’s mercy and power are displayed to others it provokes greater rebellion and hatred by sinners. We see this exemplified in the attitude of the Scribes and Pharisees to the ministry of Christ.
- (d) When God gives a person over to the forces of evil. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul speaks of giving a person over to the devil and in 1 Kings 22 we read of God handing Ahab over to a lying spirit.

Now some people will say that for God to harden Pharaoh’s heart is unfair, as He should intervene to prevent Pharaoh sinning more. But why should God be obliged to do so? Pharaoh was fulfilling God’s purpose of His greater glory in his increasingly hardened state. Besides, if God cut Pharaoh off sooner or restrained him then this would reduce the ultimate punishment for Pharaoh’s sin. That would be grace to Pharaoh – grace that he does not deserve! So, God did no injustice by allowing Pharaoh’s heart to be hardened in his sin. Pharaoh obtained justice.

*And Moses and Aaron did as the LORD commanded them, so did they. And Moses was fourscore years old, and Aaron fourscore and three years old, when they spake unto Pharaoh. (v6-7)*

Finally, Moses obeyed the Lord. This was not the end of his failures in his spiritual life but it was a turning point in his ministry. The Holy Spirit reminds us that it had taken him 80 years to reach this point, but at least Moses did. The fact that these two men were old enough to be grandfathers demonstrates that we are never too old for the Lord to call us and use us.

*And the LORD spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, When Pharaoh shall speak unto you, saying, Shew a miracle for you: then thou shalt say unto Aaron, Take thy rod, and cast it before Pharaoh, and it shall become a serpent. And Moses and Aaron went in unto Pharaoh, and they did so as the LORD had commanded: and Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh, and before his servants, and it became a serpent. (v8-10)*

We are not told what Moses and Aaron felt when they had to face Pharaoh but just that they obeyed. It is not about our feelings but our obedience. The Lord now directly led them as they stepped out in obedience to go again before Pharaoh. When Pharaoh demanded a miracle Aaron cast down his rod and “*it became a serpent.*” The serpent was an important symbol in the religious beliefs of the Egyptians. It was thought to possess divine and magical power. Pharaoh’s crown had a coiled serpent on it. So in a way God here was directly challenging the authority of Pharaoh.

*Then Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers: now the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments. For they cast down every man his rod, and they became serpents: but Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods. And he hardened Pharaoh’s heart, that he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had said. (v11-13)*

Pharaoh was not prepared to submit so easily. The fact that he summoned his magicians is indicative of this. No amount of evidence was going to satisfy Pharaoh. He and his people had access to occult powers. It is interesting that these magicians were able to imitate some of the divine powers, as we are told, *“they also did in like manner with their enchantments”* and *“For they cast down every man his rod, and they became serpents.”*

This reminds us that we should never assume a person is a spiritual believer just because he or she is able to do miraculous signs. The devil and his followers have access to certain supernatural powers also, *“Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders”* (2 Thess. 2:9; cf. Matt. 24:24; Rev. 13:11-15). That may well explain some of the supernatural signs that abound in false religions and perversions of Christianity.

We should never test a person’s integrity and righteousness by his or her ability to do signs and wonders. The test of their spiritual state is ultimately how close their life and teaching conforms to God’s perfect word, *“To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them”* (Isa. 8:20; cf. 2 Peter 1:19). The Apostle Paul gives us a further insight in the NT to two of the prominent magicians of Egypt. Speaking of evil men who will infiltrate the church in the last days, Paul warns they will be like the magicians of Pharaoh,

Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith. But they shall proceed no further: for their folly shall be manifest unto all men, as theirs also was. (2 Tim. 3:8-9)

God demonstrated even in this sign His superior power over the miracles of the occult world for, *“Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods.”* Despite the fact that Pharaoh had specifically asked for a sign, he rejected the clear manifestations of God’s sovereign power in these signs, *“And he hardened Pharaoh’s heart, that he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had said.”* God in His mercy gives Pharaoh a demonstration of His power. Therefore, Pharaoh hardened his heart *despite* the evidence, not *because* of it.

## THE TEN PLAGUES

The Lord now was going to unleash the ten plagues as part of His promised, *“great judgments”* (v4b) upon Egypt. Each of the plagues conveyed a direct message from God. Although this was a judgment on the sins of Egypt (cf. Gen. 15:13-14), there were other purposes. One of the purposes of these plagues was to demonstrate to the Egyptians, *“And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch forth mine hand upon Egypt, and bring out the children of Israel from among them”* (v5). God would reveal that He is Jehovah the One and True Living God to these pagan people. Often when God is punishing men for sin, He is not silent about it.

This whole confrontation was more than one between Moses and the Egyptians. There is a great spiritual battle between God and the forces of darkness, *“against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the LORD”* (Exod. 12:12 cf. 18:11; Num. 33:4). The Egyptians were said to worship more than eighty different deities. This was not just for the benefit of the Egyptians. Many of the Israelites were involved in the worship of the Egyptian gods (cf. Josh. 24:14). When it was all said and done, they would know that He alone was the one true God.

These judgments are also a warning to us today in our “feel-good Christianity” that God is a God who judges sin. He takes sin seriously. No one should ever think they could sin and

“get away with it.” It may seem like that at times, but every sin will ultimately be punished. The plagues are a foretaste of future plagues that will strike this earth in the Great Tribulation period for the sins of this world.

We should also note that these plagues were not random judgments but with a clear order and logic. They were predicted by God through Moses and followed His divinely predicted timeline. There is also a gradual severity in the nature of the plagues, which culminates in the death of the firstborn. They progress in groups of three from discomfort (plagues 1-3) to destruction (plagues 4-6) to dread (plagues 7-9) before the ultimate final plague of death. This progression over time was grace to the Egyptians to give them time to repent. Indeed, the fact that some Egyptians fled Egypt in the Exodus with the children of Israel may indicate that some were converted (cf. Exod. 12:38).

### PLAGUE ONE – WATER TURNED TO BLOOD

*And the LORD said unto Moses, Pharaoh's heart is hardened, he refuseth to let the people go. Get thee unto Pharaoh in the morning; lo, he goeth out unto the water; and thou shalt stand by the river's brink against he come; and the rod which was turned to a serpent shalt thou take in thine hand. And thou shalt say unto him, The LORD God of the Hebrews hath sent me unto thee, saying, Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness: and, behold, hitherto thou wouldst not hear. Thus saith the LORD, In this thou shalt know that I am the LORD: behold, I will smite with the rod that is in mine hand upon the waters which are in the river, and they shall be turned to blood. And the fish that is in the river shall die, and the river shall stink; and the Egyptians shall lothe to drink of the water of the river. And the LORD spake unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Take thy rod, and stretch out thine hand upon the waters of Egypt, upon their streams, upon their rivers, and upon their ponds, and upon all their pools of water, that they may become blood; and that there may be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in vessels of wood, and in vessels of stone. (v14-19)*

The Nile river was absolutely vital to the survival and prosperity of Egypt. They drank its water, it watered their crops, and they fished from it. When the Nile overflowed its banks in its annual floods it left behind fertile silt which they planted crops on. The river had a religious significance for the Egyptians. John Davis explains,

Were it not for this inundation Egypt would be as desolate as the deserts on either side. The Egyptians fully recognized this fact, and in thanksgiving for the blessings of the Nile, hymns were written. Not only were gods associated with the Nile, but fertility, blessing, and happiness were also associated with the faithfulness of this river. From the New Kingdom period comes a document known to us today as the “Hymn of the Nile,” a composition which may have originated in the Middle Kingdom period. The words of this hymn best tell the story of the importance of the Nile River to the Egyptian.

So when God struck at the Nile river for seven days, we can imagine what a devastating blow this was to the Egyptians. It was an attack on the heart of their economic power and religious devotion. They would feel deeply such a demonstration of God’s sovereign power.

*And Moses and Aaron did so, as the LORD commanded; and he lifted up the rod, and smote the waters that were in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh, and in the sight of his servants; and all the waters that were in the*

*river were turned to blood. And the fish that was in the river died; and the river stank, and the Egyptians could not drink of the water of the river; and there was blood throughout all the land of Egypt. (v20-21)*

Moses and Aaron obeyed the Lord's direction again as recorded in verse 10. As they did so, the Lord demonstrated His supremacy over another supposed god of Egypt - the Nile river. This was clearly seen by all the Egyptians including Pharaoh and his servants. So these plagues are both judgments and signs.

*And the magicians of Egypt did so with their enchantments: and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, neither did he hearken unto them; as the LORD had said. And Pharaoh turned and went into his house, neither did he set his heart to this also. And all the Egyptians digged round about the river for water to drink; for they could not drink of the water of the river. And seven days were fulfilled, after that the LORD had smitten the river. (v22-25)*

Although the magicians of Egypt were able to replicate the miracle, they cannot reverse the effects. Indeed, they merely succeeded in adding to the pain of the plague against their own people. Pharaoh heart was further hardened to the power of God. He is a classic case study in the rebellious and stubbornness of the unregenerate heart.

It may seem remarkable to us that Pharaoh was so hardened. That is because we underestimate the depravity of the human heart. It is not that man *cannot* hear the commands of God but it is that he *won't* hear! The greatest miracle in the world cannot change a human heart. It has to be the sovereign regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. That is why Christ taught, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44)

*Grace first contrived the way  
To save rebellious man;  
And all the steps that grace display  
Which drew the wondrous plan.*

*Grace first inscribed my name  
In God's eternal book;  
'Twas grace that gave me to the Lamb,  
Who all my sorrows took.*

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. What were God’s purposes in sending the plagues?

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2. Can the devil do supernatural signs and wonders?

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3. What does Pharaoh teach us about total depravity?

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4. What have you learned from this chapter?

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