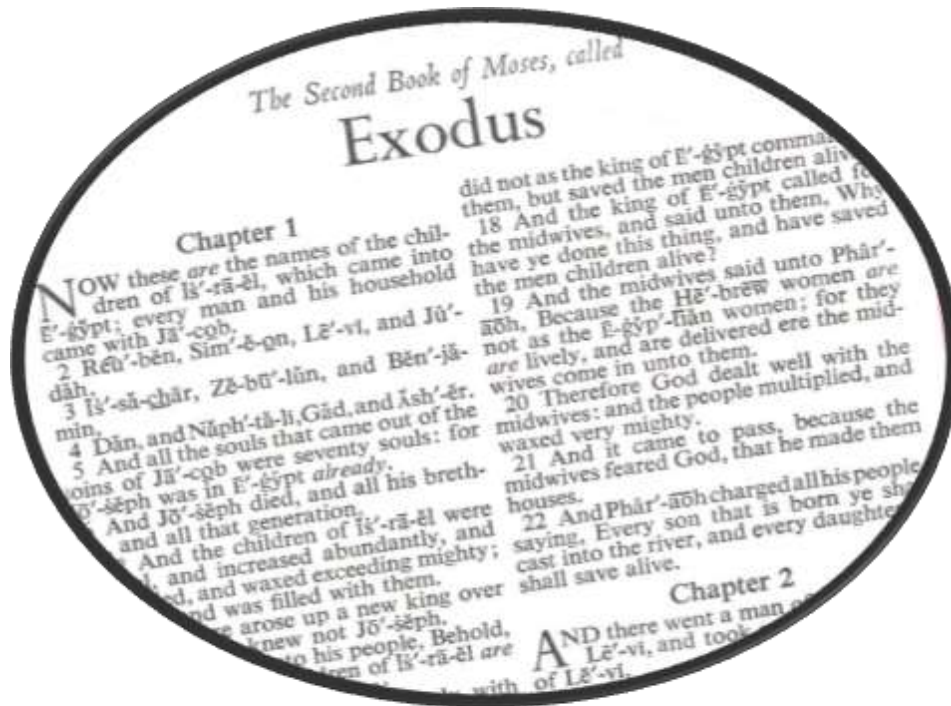


EXODUS – WEEK 5

PHARAOH'S HEART HARDENS



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Exodus 8:15–9:12 – Pharaoh’s Heart Hardens

Pharaoh’s heart continues to harden, while the plagues continue to get worse. The plagues started out mocking the Egyptian gods. They were annoying, but not catastrophic. Now the plagues are starting to really hurt.

This just makes Pharaoh all the more obdurate.

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Thank you.

Exodus 8:15–9:12 – Pharaoh’s Heart Hardens
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1 Exodus 8:15 (NKJV)

But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not heed them, as the LORD had said.

This verse troubles people. Earlier, the LORD said that he would harden Pharaoh’s heart, but here it says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Exodus 7:22 says that the ability of the Egyptian magicians to reproduce one of the miracles is what hardened Pharaoh’s heart. So which is it?

It’s all of them. This can seem confusing, but this manner of speaking is normal in conversation.

For example, suppose I describe driving a nail with a hammer. I may speak of my driving the nail in or I may speak of the hammer driving the nail in. If my description is long, I may even mention both. No one should try to glean some hidden meaning from my switching between the two.

When focusing on the details of the momentum involved in moving the nail, I’ll talk about the hammer. Same for why the nail bent over instead of going in straight.

But when describing how or why the boards were nailed together, I’ll talk about my driving in the nail. There’s nothing mystical about this. Multiple causes for the same things are called “first causes” and “second causes.”

This is what the Westminster Confession of Faith is referring to when it says (at the end of Chapter III, section 1) “*nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.*”

So here, the LORD is the first cause of Pharaoh’s heart hardening; the magicians’ tricks and Pharaoh’s emotional state are second and third causes.

This aspect of Reformed Doctrine is one of the easier ones to explain. We’ll hit the others as they come up.

It’s easy to love people who are struggling with things that are not their fault. We regularly pray for unbelieving loved ones, people struggling with illness, and many other things. That’s great, and please don’t stop.

But what about the ones who, like Pharaoh, could have avoided a lot of grief if they weren’t so mean? What about the folks who are hard to love?

They’re the ones who show us up for what we are – still in need of growth. Time to work on that log in our own eye.

Ask the LORD to teach us to love difficult people.

Thank God He loves them. Otherwise, where would we be?

2 Exodus 8:16-19 (NKJV)

So the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your rod, and strike the dust of the land, so that it may become lice throughout all the land of Egypt.' " And they did so. For Aaron stretched out his hand with his rod and struck the dust of the earth, and it became lice on man and beast. All the dust of the land became lice throughout all the land of Egypt.

Now the magicians so worked with their enchantments to bring forth lice, but they could not. So there were lice on man and beast. Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." But Pharaoh's heart grew hard, and he did not heed them, just as the LORD had said.

The Egyptians have no god of lice; this looks like an insult to Geb, their god of the Earth.

<http://www.touregypt.net/godsofegypt/geb.htm>

By striking the earth and having the dust of the earth turn into zillions of annoying bugs, Geb is shown to be useless. Moses and Aaron have the power over the earth. Furthermore, the Egyptian magicians don't have this one in their bag of tricks.

So they do something surprising; they announce that this is a true miracle – the finger of God. They use the word Elohim here – God with a capital G. This is only plague number three and the magicians have already been converted. No excuses; no tricks. YHVH isn't just a god; He's **the** God.

Pharaoh is now alone in his refusal to see the obvious, and there are still seven plagues to go. It's going to be a rough year.

This has a purpose; God is pounding the message home. This won't end until the Egyptian religion is thoroughly demolished.

The LORD has a thing about other Gods.

The LORD's priorities and His timing can be hard to accept. This is especially true when we're suffering. It's normal to dislike suffering and to want relief; any sane person would pray for deliverance.

But it's distressing to pray for something that seems good and right, and see nothing in return. That's the time to ask for His peace. Don't stop praying for relief, or healing, or deliverance from trials; just add a "if that is not your will" section. Ask for some kind of understanding, even a glimpse of what He's up.

Choose someone specific to lift up for this. That someone can be you. Ask God to give hurting people His peace. Ask God to help them see His hand in things.

It's comforting to know that an affliction isn't pointless.

3 Exodus 8:20-24 (NKJV)

And the LORD said to Moses, “Rise early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh as he comes out to the water. Then say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD: “Let My people go, that they may serve Me. Or else, if you will not let My people go, behold, I will send swarms of flies on you and your servants, on your people and into your houses. The houses of the Egyptians shall be full of swarms of flies, and also the ground on which they stand. And in that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, in which My people dwell, that no swarms of flies shall be there, in order that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the land. I will make a difference between My people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall be.” ’ ” And the LORD did so. Thick swarms of flies came into the house of Pharaoh, into his servants’ houses, and into all the land of Egypt. The land was corrupted because of the swarms of flies.

The Hebrew word for fly (zebug) does not appear in this passage. The Hebrew just says “swarms.” Technically, this is the plague of swarms, not the plague of flies.

Yet the vast majority of English translations say “swarms of flies.” A few (e.g., the Common English Bible, the Complete Jewish Bible) say “swarms of insects.” Why?

Most of the published reasons for why people think that the swarms were flies are natural explanations. The rotting corpses of frogs would have bred flies. Also, flies carry disease and thus could have naturally brought on the next plague (livestock). But searching for natural explanations for God’s miracles can be a source of error. So, what were they swarms of?

Maybe the pattern of the LORD busting on the Egyptian gods can provide a clue. Is there a particular Egyptian god who would be a logical fit?

<http://www.touregypt.net/godsofegypt/>

Nope. None of them here fit the swarms theme, though we can never be sure that any list has them all.

Since no specific insect is named in the text, maybe this isn’t about a specific insect (or god). The point of this plague seems to be the separation of the land of Goshen from the rest of Egypt. The target this time isn’t an Egyptian god; it’s the Egyptians. The plagues are starting to hurt (*the land was corrupted because of the swarms*) yet the people of Israel are miraculously spared.

The Egyptian people have to be wondering what the heck is going on. As things develop, they will become increasingly anxious for this nightmare to end. Eventually, they will be so desperate to be rid of the Hebrews that they’ll be willing to give up everything to get them to leave.

Our situation is the opposite of what the ancient Egyptians were going through. We have challenges, but they’re nothing compared to theirs. This is amazing, and we don’t thank God for it often enough.

Also, let’s lift up our nation’s leaders. Many of the biggest challenges lie with them. Specifically, pray for the ones you disagree with. May the LORD bless them and give them wisdom. Pray for reconciliation.

4 Exodus 8:25-32 (ESV)

Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, “Go, sacrifice to your God within the land.” But Moses said, “It would not be right to do so, for the offerings we shall sacrifice to the LORD our God are an abomination to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice offerings abominable to the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us? We must go three days’ journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the LORD our God as he tells us.” So Pharaoh said, “I will let you go to sacrifice to the LORD your God in the wilderness; only you must not go very far away. Plead for me.” Then Moses said, “Behold, I am going out from you and I will plead with the LORD that the swarms of flies may depart from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people, tomorrow. Only let not Pharaoh cheat again by not letting the people go to sacrifice to the LORD.” So Moses went out from Pharaoh and prayed to the LORD. And the LORD did as Moses asked, and removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people; not one remained. But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go.

Pharaoh tries some shrewd bargaining. He’s worried that if he lets Israel out of the country, they won’t return. So, he offers to let them do the sacrifices, as long as they don’t leave Egypt.

But Moses makes an airtight counter-argument. The Egyptians worship many kinds of livestock. The Israeli sacrifices involve some of these sacred animals. That would be an abomination to the Egyptians – enough of one to start a riot.

So, Pharaoh caves. Desperate to be rid of the swarms, he says, *“I will let you go to sacrifice to the LORD your God in the wilderness; only you must not go very far away. Plead for me.”* Moses prays to the LORD and the swarms go away. Then Pharaoh reneges on the deal.

But Moses had anticipated this saying, *“Only let not Pharaoh cheat again by not letting the people go to sacrifice to the LORD.”* That wasn’t a whine; it was a threat.

So, guess which Egyptian god is going get hammered next.

Reneging on a deal with God sounds like the dumbest thing imaginable. Yet, we do it all the time.

Confessing Jesus as Lord and savior is a commitment to follow Him. What does “Lord” mean anyway?

But we fail, over and over. Our failures may not rank up there with Peter denying Christ three times, but they still count as reneging on a deal. How awful is that?

Well, it’s not the unforgivable sin. Like Peter, we grow in Christ over time, agonizingly slow though.

But here’s the point – we need to be agonized. Taking a lackadaisical attitude about our failures is poisonous. This leads to an unusual kind of prayer – for God to open our eyes to the ugliness of our failures.

This is actually asking for more, not less, pain.

5 Exodus 9:1-7 (ESV)

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, “Let my people go, that they may serve me. For if you refuse to let them go and still hold them, behold, the hand of the LORD will fall with a very severe plague upon your livestock that are in the field, the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks. But the LORD will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing of all that belongs to the people of Israel shall die.”’” And the LORD set a time, saying, “Tomorrow the LORD will do this thing in the land.” And the next day the LORD did this thing. All the livestock of the Egyptians died, but not one of the livestock of the people of Israel died. And Pharaoh sent, and behold, not one of the livestock of Israel was dead. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go.

This time, the Egyptian livestock gods get whacked – Apis (and the Apis bull – Ptah), Hathor and Khnum, just to name a few.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apis_%28god%29

<http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/bull.htm> (see the 6th paragraph).

<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/17.190.62>

<http://www.landofpyramids.org/hathor.htm>

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Khnum>

But the main point of this passage isn’t the gods; it’s Pharaoh’s intransigence. Moses gives him plenty of warning this time – “*Tomorrow the LORD will do this thing in the land.*” He also gives the Egyptians an easy out; the plague will only fall *upon your livestock that are in the field.*

This is the first plague that does long-term damage, but it doesn’t have to be that way. All they have to do is bring the animals in overnight and they’re saved.

The Bible doesn’t say anything about whether Pharaoh got the word out to his people to save their animals. Given that, it seems unlikely that he did. The Bible does say that Pharaoh checked to see if the Israelis really had been spared the disaster. That’s creepy.

Pharaoh’s hard heart makes him incompetent. Everyone (especially Pharaoh himself) can see the damage accumulating. His denial is being hammered, and it’s affecting his emotional stability.

Denial isn’t just a river in Egypt – nor is it restricted to Egyptian kings. Our sinful nature causes us to operate in a kind of fog. This is one of the reasons a serious accountability relationship is so precious. A friend will tell us things that we should be able to see ourselves but don’t. We’re in denial.

For example, have you ever broken a promise to yourself? Of course you have. Does anyone ever keep New Year’s Resolutions? What’s up with that?

Part of growing in Christ is opening our eyes to how incredibly messed up we are.

6 Exodus 9:8-12 (NKJV)

So the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Take for yourselves handfuls of ashes from a furnace, and let Moses scatter it toward the heavens in the sight of Pharaoh. And it will become fine dust in all the land of Egypt, and it will cause boils that break out in sores on man and beast throughout all the land of Egypt.” Then they took ashes from the furnace and stood before Pharaoh, and Moses scattered them toward heaven. And they caused boils that break out in sores on man and beast. And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils were on the magicians and on all the Egyptians. But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh; and he did not heed them, just as the LORD had spoken to Moses.

All the Egyptian gods of medicine, particularly Imhotep, are powerless to do anything about the boils. Imhotep is especially interesting because he had been a real person. Will Durant, in his authoritative reference on world history, “The Story of Civilization” says of Imhotep, “*He did so much for Egyptian medicine that later generations worshiped him as a god of knowledge, author of their sciences and their arts; and at the same time he appears to have founded the school of architecture which provided the next dynasty with the first great builders in history.*”

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/science-news/3293164/How-Imhotep-gave-us-medicine.html>

But the big story here isn’t about the Egyptian gods. With them mostly debunked, the plagues are starting to move on. Notice how they’re getting more unpleasant and more personal. The magicians cannot even stand before Moses. Did they kneel, crawl, what? This must have been a painful moment for them, figuratively as much as literally.

By dismantling the Egyptian deities, the LORD established the point of all this – YHVH is the one true God. That theme remains, but now He’s cranking up the volume by attacking the Egyptians personally. The Egyptian Gods are still mocked as useless, since they can’t protect the Egyptians from the plagues.

When you can’t even stand up, the message starts to come in loud and clear.

The Egyptians were told why they were being afflicted. We rarely are. That makes suffering worse.

This is especially true for illness. Being sick feels like being punished, but that’s not it. Thus, we should ask the great physician for healing. We should also pray for emotional comfort. If you know someone struggling with illness, ask the LORD to encourage them and give them peace.

However, it’s a mistake to leave it at that. Part of caring is being there. Being sick is lonely. Friends need to call and show up. Sick people may need help with chores, shopping or cooking, but they mostly need someone to talk to. Emotional support enhances healing too.

Be the friend who makes a difference.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you ever learned to love someone you hated?
2. Have you ever had a prayer request denied, but you were comforted instead?
3. How can we best pray for our nation?
4. When have you been most grieved about your own sin?
5. What's the worst example of denial you've seen?
6. Have you ever seen a healing miracle?

Items for prayer: