

The Plagues



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 7:8–10:29; Num. 33:4; Rom. 1:24–32; Ps. 104:27, 28; Isa. 28:2, 12–17; Isa. 44:9, 10, 12–17.*

Memory Text: “So the heart of Pharaoh was hard; neither would he let the children of Israel go, as the LORD had spoken by Moses” (*Exodus 9:35, NKJV*).

A farmer was trying to get his donkey to move; the beast wouldn't budge. So, the farmer took a thick branch and walloped it. He again spoke to the donkey, who then started moving.

When someone asked the farmer why that worked, he replied, “Well, first you have to get its attention.”

Putting aside whatever issue one might raise about cruelty to animals, there is a point to be made here, especially in the context of the Exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt. Moses has been given his marching orders and goes to Pharaoh with God's famous words, *shalach et ami*, which is, “Let My people go!”

Pharaoh, however, does not want to let God's people go. The Scriptures never explicitly explain why Pharaoh was so reluctant, despite the military threat that the Egyptians feared the Hebrews could pose (*see Exod. 1:10*). Most likely, as is often the case with slavery, it was pure economics. They were cheap labor, and so he didn't want to lose whatever economic advantages these slaves gave him. Thus, he was going to need some persuasion not only to get his attention but also to change his mind.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 26.

God vs. gods

Read Exodus 7:8–15. What lessons are here in this first confrontation between the God of the Hebrews and the gods of Egypt?

The upcoming battles were going to be between the living God and the Egyptian “gods.” What made things worse was that Pharaoh considered himself to be one of those gods. The Lord did not fight against the Egyptians, or even Egypt per se, but against their deities (the Egyptians venerated more than 1,500 gods and goddesses). The biblical text is explicit: “On all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD” (*Exod. 12:12, ESV*). Later, it is once again emphasized, this time when Israel’s journey from Egypt was recounted: “The LORD had brought judgment on their gods” (*Num. 33:4, NIV*).

An example of this judgment on their gods was well demonstrated by the miracle of the rod turning into a serpent (*Exod. 7:9–12*). In Egypt, the Uraeus goddess Wadjet was personified by a cobra and represented sovereign power over lower Egypt. The symbol of a cobra appeared in Pharaoh’s crown, a sign of his power, deity, royalty, and divine authority, because this goddess would spit venom at Pharaoh’s enemies. The Egyptians also believed that the sacred serpent would guide the Pharaoh to his afterlife.

When Aaron’s staff became a snake and ate all the other serpents before the king, the supremacy of the living God over Egyptian magic and sorcery was manifested. Not only was the emblem of Pharaoh’s might conquered, but Aaron and Moses clutched it in their hands (*Exod. 7:12, 15*). The initial confrontation demonstrated God’s power and lordship over Egypt. Moses, as God’s representative, had greater authority and power than did the “god” Pharaoh himself.

It is also significant that the ancient Egyptians considered a snake god, Nehebkaui (“he who harnesses the spirits”), to be sacred, adored, and worshiped. According to their mythology, this serpent god had great power because he swallowed seven cobras. Thus, God communicated to the Egyptians that He, not the serpent god, has sovereign power and authority. After such a powerful confrontation, they were able to understand this message immediately and distinctly.

How can we allow the Lord to have sovereignty over any of the “gods” seeking supremacy in our lives?

Who Hardened Pharaoh's Heart?

Read Exodus 7:3, 13, 14, 22. How do we understand these texts?

Nine times in Exodus the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is ascribed to God (*Exod. 4:21; Exod. 7:3; Exod. 9:12; Exod. 10:1, 20, 27; Exod. 11:10; Exod. 14:4, 8; see also Rom. 9:17, 18*). Another nine times Pharaoh is said to have hardened his own heart (*Exod. 7:13, 14, 22; Exod. 8:15, 19, 32; Exod. 9:7, 34, 35*).

Who hardened the king's heart—God, or Pharaoh himself?

It is significant that in the Exodus story of the ten plagues, in each of the first five plagues, Pharaoh alone was the agent of his heart hardening. Thus, he initiated the hardening of his own heart. From the sixth plague on, however, the biblical text states that it was God who hardened Pharaoh's heart (*Exod. 9:12*). What all this means is that God *strengthened or deepened Pharaoh's own choice, his willful action, as God had told Moses He would do* (*Exod. 4:21*).

In other words, God sent plagues to help Pharaoh repent and to free him from the darkness and error of his mind. God did not create fresh evil in Pharaoh's heart; instead, He simply gave Pharaoh over to his own malign impulses. He left him without God's restraining grace and thus abandoned him to his own wickedness (*see Rom. 1:24–32*).

Pharaoh had his free will—he could choose for or against God—and he decided against.

The lessons are obvious. We have been given the ability to choose between right and wrong, good and evil, obedience or disobedience. From Lucifer in heaven, to Adam and Eve in Eden, to Pharaoh in Egypt, and to us today—wherever we abide, we choose either life or death (*Deut. 30:19*).

An analogy: imagine sunshine that beats on butter and clay. Butter melts but clay hardens. The heat of the sun is the same in both cases, but there are two different reactions to the heat, and two different results. The effect depends on the material. In the case of Pharaoh, one may say that it depended upon the attitudes of his heart toward God and His people.

What freewill choice(s) are you going to make in the next day or so? If you know what the right choice is, how can you prepare yourself to make it?

The First Three Plagues

The ten plagues in Egypt were aimed not at the Egyptian people but at their gods. Each plague hit at least one of them.

Read Exodus 7:14–8:19. What happened in these plagues?

God instructed Moses that the dialogue with Pharaoh would be difficult and almost impossible (*Exod. 7:14*). However, God wanted to reveal Himself to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians. Thus, He decided to communicate with them in a way that they could understand. Also, the Hebrews would benefit from this confrontation because they would learn more about their God.

The first plague was aimed against Hapi, the god of the Nile (*Exod. 7:17–25*). Life in Egypt was totally dependent on water from the Nile. Where there was water, there was life. Water was the source of life, so they invented their god Hapi and worshiped him as the provider of life.

Of course, only the living God is the Source of life, the Creator of everything, including water and food (*Gen. 1:1, 2, 20–22; Ps. 104:27, 28; Ps. 136:25; John 11:25; John 14:6*). Changing water into blood symbolizes transforming life into death. Hapi was not able to provide and protect life. These are possible only through the power of the Lord.

God then gives Pharaoh another chance. This time the frog goddess, Heqet, is directly confronted (*Exod. 8:1–15*). Instead of life, the Nile produces frogs, which the Egyptians fear, detest, and abhor. They want to get rid of them. The precise time when this plague was taken away demonstrated that God's power was also behind this plague.

The third plague has the shortest description (*Exod. 8:16–19*). The type of insect here (Heb. *kinnim*) is not clear (gnats, mosquitoes, ticks, lice?). It was directed against the god Geb, the Egyptian god of the earth. Out of the dust of the earth (echoes of the biblical Creation story) God brought forth gnats, which spread throughout the land. Unable to duplicate this miracle (only God can create life), the magicians declared, "This is the finger of God" (*Exod. 8:19*). Pharaoh, however, still refused to budge.

Think how hard Pharaoh's heart was. Repeated rejection of God's prompting only made it worse. What lessons are here for each of us about the constant rejection of the Lord's prompting?

Flies, Livestock, and Boils

Read Exodus 8:20–9:12. What does this account teach about how great may be the manifestations of God’s power and glory, humanity still has freedom to reject Him?

The Egyptian god Uatchit was the fly god and of swamps and marshes. The god Khepri (of the rising sun, creation, and rebirth) was depicted with the head of a scarab beetle. These “gods” were defeated by the Lord. In this account (*Exod. 8:20–24*), while the Egyptians were suffering, the Hebrews were protected. In fact, no further plagues affected them.

Again, all this was an attempt by God to let Pharaoh know that “ ‘I am the LORD in the midst of the land’ ” (*Exod. 8:22, NKJV*).

Thus, Pharaoh began to bargain. No doubt the pressure was mounting. He was willing for Israel to worship their God and to sacrifice to Him, but only in the land of Egypt (*Exod. 8:25*). His conditions could not be met because some of the animals were considered sacred in Egypt, and sacrificing them would have caused violence against the Hebrews. Also, this was not God’s plan for Israel.

Meanwhile, the next plague (*Exod. 9:1–7*) falls on the livestock. Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of love and protection, was depicted with the head of a cow. A bull god Apis was also very popular and highly regarded in ancient Egypt. Thus, in this fifth plague, additional principal deities were defeated when the Egyptians’ livestock died.

In the sixth plague (*Exod. 9:8–12*), the total defeat of Isis, the goddess of medicine, magic, and wisdom, is made manifest. We also see the defeat of such deities as Sekhmet (goddess of war and epidemics) and Imhotep (god of medicine and healing). They are unable to protect their own worshipers. Ironically, now even the magicians and sorcerers are so afflicted that they cannot appear in court, which shows that they are helpless against the Creator of heaven and earth.

For the first time in the story about the ten plagues, a text says that “the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart” (*Exod. 9:12, NIV*). However confusing this phrase might be, when understood in the full context, it reveals again that the Lord will let us reap the consequences of our own continual rejection of Him.

Pharaoh’s problem wasn’t intellectual; he had enough rational evidence to make the right choice. Instead, it was a problem of his heart. What should this tell us about why we must guard our hearts?

Hail, Locusts, and Darkness

Read Exodus 9:13–10:29. How successful are these plagues in getting Pharaoh to change his mind?

Nut was the Egyptian goddess of the sky and heavens and was often depicted as controlling what happened under the sky and on the earth. Osiris was the god of crops and fertility. In the Bible, hail is often associated with God's judgment (*Isa. 28:2, 17; Ezek. 13:11–13*). During this plague, those who hide their property in a safe shelter will be protected (*Exod. 9:20, 21*). Everyone is now tested: will they, or will they not, believe God's Word and act accordingly?

God announces that His purpose in letting Pharaoh live is for the whole earth to know Him (*Exod. 9:16*). The king of Egypt now confesses that he has sinned, but later he changes his mind.

The Egyptian god of storm, war, and disorder was called Seth. Together with Isis, they were considered agriculture deities. Shu was a god of the atmosphere. Serapis personified divine majesty, fertility, healing, and afterlife. Not one of the Egyptian gods could stop God's judgments (*Exod. 10:4–20*) because idols are nothing (*Isa. 44:9, 10, 12–17*).

Pharaoh's servants urged him to let Israel go, but he refused again. He offered a compromise, which Moses rightly rejected because women and children are a vital and inseparable part of worship and the faith community.

Finally, Ra was the principal Egyptian god, the sun god. Thoth was a moon god. Neither was able to give light. Pharaoh again tries to bargain, but in vain. A three-day period of darkness struck Egypt, but there was light where the Israelites lived. The separation could not be more spectacular.

Yet, no matter the battering that his nation took, Pharaoh was determined to fight back and not to relent. Though we don't know his deeper motives, at some point it could have become purely a pride thing. No matter how powerful the evidence, no matter how obvious it was what was happening (even his own servants declared, " 'How long shall this man be a snare to us? Let the men go, that they may serve the LORD their God. Do you not yet know that Egypt is destroyed?' " [*Exod. 10:7, NKJV*]), and no matter that the correct choice was right there before him—after a bit of waffling, Pharaoh still refused to surrender to God's will and let the people go.

What a dramatic example of the words "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (*Prov. 16:18, NKJV*).

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Plagues of Egypt,” pp. 265–272, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“His [God’s] people were permitted to experience the grinding cruelty of the Egyptians, that they might not be deceived concerning the debasing influence of idolatry. In His dealing with Pharaoh, the Lord manifested His hatred of idolatry and His determination to punish cruelty and oppression. . . . There was no exercise of supernatural power to harden the heart of the king. God gave to Pharaoh the most striking evidence of divine power, but the monarch stubbornly refused to heed the light. Every display of infinite power rejected by him, rendered him the more determined in his rebellion. The seeds of rebellion that he sowed when he rejected the first miracle, produced their harvest.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 268.

“The sun and moon were objects of worship to the Egyptians; in this mysterious darkness the people and their gods alike were smitten by the power that had undertaken the cause of the bondmen. Yet fearful as it was, this judgment is an evidence of God’s compassion and His unwillingness to destroy. He would give the people time for reflection and repentance before bringing upon them the last and most terrible of the plagues.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 272.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell more on the question of why Pharaoh allowed himself to be so hardened that, in the face of what must have been the obvious and correct choice—*Let the people go!*—he still refused. How could someone become so self-deceived? What kind of warnings should we take from this for ourselves about how we can truly get so hardened in sin that we make utterly disastrous decisions when the correct decision and the right path have been right before us the whole time? What other Bible characters have made the same kind of error? Think, for example, of Judas.
- 2 At one point, amid the devastation that Pharaoh had brought upon his own land and people, he declared, “ ‘I have sinned this time; the LORD is the righteous one, and I and my people are the wicked ones’ ” (*Exod. 9:27, NASB*). Though a wonderful confession of sin at the time, how do we know that it wasn’t a genuine one?

Strange and Silent World

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

No one in town had ever converted to Christianity, and townspeople burned with anger when Kokila's father and four other families decided to keep the seventh-day Sabbath. Kokila was nine, and her life changed forever.

Kokila's mother had died when she was a baby, and she lived with her father, four older sisters, and an older brother in southern Asia.

Father, an impoverished farmer, was barred from working in the field after he started to keep the Sabbath. He and the other Sabbath keepers also were forbidden from buying food in shops.

In addition, town leaders announced that anyone who spoke to the Sabbath keepers would have to pay a large fine.

As a result, neighbors refused to talk to Kokila and her family. Kokila also didn't talk to her neighbors. Nobody wanted to pay the fine. Kokila had had many friends, and she lost them all. It was a strange and silent world for the girl.

When Father refused to give up his faith, the neighbors turned violent. They angrily swooped down on Kokila's home, scooping up furniture, clothing, and dishes, and dumping them on the street. They also beat her father and brother.

One neighbor, however, proved to be a bright light during that dark time. He also wasn't a Christian, but he didn't belong to the same major world religion that the townspeople did. He helped Kokila's family to buy rice. He talked to Kokila, and he willingly paid the fine for violating town rules.

For seven years, Kokila lived in horrible circumstances. Three of the families who had accepted the Sabbath at the same time as Kokila's father changed their minds and left the church. Only two of the five families, including Kokila's family, remained faithful to God.

Kokila never complained, but she cried a lot. Father saw her tears, and he decided to send her to an Adventist boarding school. It was like a piece of heaven on earth for the girl.

"The teachers were very kind and loving," recalled Kokila, who today is 39 and works as a secretary at the boarding school, E. D. Thomas Memorial Higher Secondary School in Thanjavur, India. "The teachers spoke to me! The children spoke to me! It was so nice to have friends again."

Thank you for your mission offerings, which support Seventh-day Adventist schools around the world. E. D. Thomas Memorial Higher Secondary School received part of a Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in 2020.

