

Sabbath School Lesson #4 – The Plagues – 19-25 July 2025

Christ would have us not harden our hearts as did Pharaoh. Our memory text reads, “And the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, neither would he let the children of Israel go; as the Lord had spoken by Mose” (Exodus 9:35). But did not God harden the heart of Pharaoh, if so, how then could Pharaoh be blamed for hardened heart? When the Lord sent Moses to Pharaoh to demand the release of the children of Israel, He said, “I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, no not by a mighty hand,” or, “but by a strong hand;” and again, “I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go” (Exodus 3:19; 4:21). This is by many supposed to show that Pharaoh could not help himself, but that he was obliged to exhibit stubbornness, and to refuse to allow Israel to go forth. Consequently, they doubt the justice and mercy of God. They think that God purposely made Pharaoh just what he was, in order that He might make an exhibition of him. If that were true, it would be an exhibition of God’s denial of Himself. For justice and judgment are the habitation of His throne; mercy and truth go before His face (Psalm 89:14). He is love (1 John 4:8). “He doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men” (Lamentations 3:33). He is longsuffering, “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). We will see at the section for Monday below, how it was that the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart. He did it by His manifestations of mercy. The king was very humble in the face of death, but as soon as the cause of fear was removed, he became stubborn. Had he not been so wilful, the mercy of the Lord would have moved Pharaoh to repentance; but he was one of those persons who think that an exhibition of kindness is a manifestation of weakness. Having nothing like mercy or kindness in his own nature, he was unable to appreciate it in others.

Sunday: God vs gods – Read Exodus 12:12; how did God prevail against Egyptian gods? We are told, after they let Israel go from Egypt, Egyptians sought to bring them back, “Pharaoh prepared a well-equipped army, composed of the priests of their idol gods, and of the rulers, and all the great men of his kingdom. They thought if their priests accompanied them, they would be more sure of success.” With their gods, Egyptians “came up to the Red Sea, and saw the Hebrew host walking upon a dry path prepared for them in the sea, while high walls of water stood upon either side, congealed by the power of God. This exhibition of God’s power only increased their feelings of rebellion, and they had so long resisted such manifestations, that they were hardened, and in their blindness rushed into the path God had miraculously prepared for his people. Then were fulfilled the words which the Lord spake to Moses, “And against all the gods of Egypt, I will execute judgment. I am the Lord.” The judgment of God was manifested in the utter destruction of the Egyptian host” {3SG 246.2}.

Monday: Who Hardened Pharaoh’s Heart? – “And the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh and he hearkened not unto them” (Exodus 9:12). With what avidity sceptics seize upon this passage! They say, ‘if the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, he was not to blame for what he did, and the Lord was arbitrary and cruel to punish him for what he could not help.’ Thus, the sceptics talk and having once satisfied themselves that God is a hard taskmaster, and a cruel tyrant, the sceptics feel justified in refusing to serve Him. But before we jump at such a conclusion, let us see just how it happened that Pharaoh’s heart was made hard.

God says that He raised up Pharaoh to show in him His power, and that His name might be declared throughout all the earth (Exodus 9:16). Is it not strange that people should from this at once jump to the conclusion that God raised up Pharaoh on purpose to cast him down? Is that the only way that God has of showing His power, and making His name known? Most assuredly not. His power is shown in His salvation; and His wondrous works declare His excellent name (Psalm 13). To conclude that God wilfully hardens men’s hearts, and makes it impossible for them to do right, in order that He may torment them, argues very little, if any, acquaintance with God. We note few points in the narrative of God’s dealings with Pharaoh, which will indicate how Pharaoh’s heart was harden. When Moses and Aaron first appeared to Pharaoh, certain miracles were performed. These were counterfeited by the magicians, so that the king, who loved a lie better than the truth, refused to believe Divine message, although evidence was given that the power with Moses was superior to that with the magicians. This was repeated several times. The magicians, however, could not remove

the plagues, and so, Pharaoh appealed to Moses, saying, "Intreat the Lord, that He may take away the frogs from me, and from my people; and I will let the people go, that they may do sacrifice unto the Lord" (Exodus 8:8). Pharaoh had learned who the Lord is. Moses prayed, "and the frogs died out of the houses." "But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he harden his heart, and hearkened not unto them; as the Lord had said" (Exodus 8:15).

Again, swarms of flies plagued the people, and Pharaoh again relented, Moses again prayed, "And the Lord did according to the word of Moses; and he removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh" (Exodus 8:30-32). Pharaoh still refused to keep his word. Then hail and fire came, crops and flocks were destroyed. "Pharaoh sent, and called for Moses and Aaron, and said unto them, I have sinned this time; the Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked. Intreat the Lord (for it is enough) that there be no more mighty thunderings and hail; and I will let you go, and ye shall stay no longer" (Exodus 9:26-28). Here was a confession of sin, acknowledgment of the Lord and His righteousness. The result showed that Pharaoh's sorrow was not a godly sorrow, but only the sorrow of the world, due to fear (2 Corinthians 7:10); nevertheless, God took him at his word. This is evidence of the kindness of the Lord, and of His unwillingness that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9). Although God knew Pharaoh's insincerity, He acted as though Pharaoh was sincere, so that he could have no excuse.

So, Moses again prayed, thunders and hail ceased, and "when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunders were ceased, he sinned yet more, and hardened his heart, he and his servants. And the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, neither would he let the children of Israel go; as the Lord had spoken by Moses" (Exodus 9:33-35). Thus we see that it was the mercy of the Lord that hardened Pharaoh's heart. When the judgments of God came, he repented; but as soon as favour had shown him, he became stubborn again. Where can the Lord be blamed in this affair? If a man will not be moved either by judgments or by favours, what can be done for him? He despises the goodness and forbearance and longsuffering of God, and after his hardness and impenitent heart treasures up unto himself wrath. He brings his own destruction upon himself, and God is clear. The mercy of the Lord endureth for ever. Even in the punishment of the wicked, God does not forget mercy. The sun that melts the wax, hardens the clay. The same glory that transforms those who yield themselves to God, consumes those who are contentious and do not obey the truth. And so, the dealing of God with Pharaoh is cited by Paul, Romans 9:14-18, as evidence of the mercy and longsuffering of God. The Lord put Pharaoh in the channel in which God's mercy and power is revealed to him, in order that he might know God and be saved; but Pharaoh would not have it. So, it is for many, the judgment will reveal wonderful opportunities men have recklessly flung away.

Tuesday: The First Three Plagues – Read Exodus 7:14-8:19; what happened in these plagues? We read in the passage that the magicians finally told Pharaoh that the miracles that Moses and Aaron performed were of God, but Pharaoh refused to let Israel go (Exodus 7:14). We are told, "The magicians could not produce the lice. The Lord would not suffer them to make it even appear to their own sight, or to that of the Egyptians, that they could produce the plague of the lice. He would remove all excuse of unbelief from Pharaoh. He compelled even the magicians themselves to say, "This is the finger of God." {3SG 243.1}.

Wednesday: 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? When God sent the boils, even the magicians who were helping Pharaoh to resist, were affected, yet even the magicians rejected God. "The Lord then sent the plague of the murrain upon their cattle, and at the same time preserved the cattle of the Hebrews, that not one of them died. Next came the plague of the boil upon man and beast, and the magicians could not protect themselves from it" {3SG 244.1}.

Thursday: Hail, Locusts, and Darkness – Read Exodus 9:13-10:29; how successful are these plagues in getting Pharaoh to change his mind? Pharaoh was stubborn. "It was very hard for the Egyptian king and a proud and idolatrous people, to yield to the requirements of the God of Heaven. Very slow was the king of Egypt to yield. While under most grievous affliction he would yield a little, but when the affliction was removed, he would take back all he had granted. Thus plague after plague was brought upon Egypt, and he yielded no more than he was compelled to do by the dreadful visitations of God's wrath" {3SG 245.1}.