

## Sermon 24, A River of Blood, Exodus 7:14-25

**Proposition:** God shows His identity as Yahweh by smiting Egypt to teach Pharaoh to obey His command and let His people go.

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### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come tonight to the first plague, or first strike, with which God smote Egypt in the days of Moses and Aaron. That plague, of course, was the one in which water was turned into blood. We will look at Moses' account of what went down on that Egyptian morning, perhaps in late summer. And we will see what the text is interested in showing us. Primarily, its point is to reveal the identity of Yahweh as the one who will not be thwarted or prevented from delivering His people. He is capable of taking Egypt and making its source of life into a realm of pollution and death. He is the one who threatens and carries out His threats. He is Yahweh, and Pharaoh must obey His command and let His people go.

#### **I. Motivation: Pharaoh's Resolute Heart Becomes Heavy, vv. 13-14**

A major theme of the plague cycle is what we call in English the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. This is a good translation of one of the terms used to describe what happened, but there are actually three different words that Moses uses to describe what happened to Pharaoh's heart, or what Pharaoh did to his own heart. Two of them occur here, back-to-back. In v. 13 we are informed that Pharaoh's heart grew resolute. He was firm in his intentions; he had not the slightest plan of heeding Moses and Aaron. In other words, Pharaoh was approximately as interested in listening to the two Hebrew prophets as you are in clicking on that link that says "Drivers in Gillette, Wyoming are saving hundreds on their car insurance!" You know that it's

clickbait and that what's on the other end of that link is pure garbage. So you just plan on ignoring every ad you see.

In the same way, then, Pharaoh goes into these plagues with a resolute heart. He has already determined that whatever these upstart prophets throw at him, *he's* not going to budge. He is going to be tough and freeze them out by his hauteur. And, after all, God had said that just such a thing was going to happen, anyway.

But then v. 14 uses a different word to describe Pharaoh's heart. Instead of "resolute," this time God says "Pharaoh's heart is heavy." Now, by the idiom "heavy heart" we mean sadness. If my heart is in my boots, if it got so heavy that it sank all the way down there, I'm just down in the mouth and dispirited and sadder than a surfboard in Wyoming.

Well, as you've probably guessed, God did not get Moses and say to him, "Pharaoh is just as sorrowful as a coyote's howl. Poor guy." No. The Almighty pulled Moses aside to tell him "Pharaoh's heart is heavy." What does that mean? Well, according to what we know of Egyptian religion in this period, it was thought that when you died, your soul would descend to the underworld and there be weighed in the balance against the feather of justice and righteousness. If your soul proved heavier than that feather, the afterlife was off to a bad start.

Well, commentators disagree on whether this Egyptian background is why Moses describes Pharaoh as heavy-hearted. But it makes an awful lot of sense to me: Pharaoh is not motivated by justice and righteousness. His heart is sinking downwards, towards Hell, not rising up toward God and higher things. Because his heart is so unrighteous, he will not listen to the word of God, and he will refuse to let the people go.

Brothers and sisters, standing here at the head of the first plague as it does, this clause supplies something of the motivation that powers the entire plague sequence. Yes, the Pentateuch mentions twice that God was fighting against the gods of Egypt. So He was — and the plagues thoroughly discredit all of Egypt's false gods. But more than, and on the surface of the text, the plagues are a contest between Yahweh and Pharaoh. Pharaoh's heart is resolute in its unrighteousness; he will not let the people go. So God smites him with three sets of three disasters apiece, and his heart only gets more resolutely set on having it all his own way. Finally, then, God sends the ultimate plague, the one which breaks through Pharaoh's resolution and unsettles him long enough for him to allow Israel to leave Egypt. We are about to see how far the human heart can go in its resolution to stand firm against everything that might save it or bring it joy. As a type of the sinner in rebellion against God, then, Pharaoh has much to teach about the nature and deadliness of sin. It is the hardness of his heart, his resolution to never bow to Yahweh, that motivates all ten plagues.

## **II. Announcement, vv. 15-18**

Yet God is not easily beaten. In fact, He is not even possibly beaten. There is no wisdom, nor counsel, nor understanding against the LORD. The king of Egypt maybe didn't know that; more likely, just like us sinners today, he knew that but didn't care. He was going to have his sin if it killed him.

So God says to Pharaoh, “I see what you did there. I know you will not hear. Therefore, I will send disasters so disastrous to you that you will learn who I am and learn that you must listen to me.”

#### **A. Pharaoh, You Won’t Listen, vv. 15-16**

God instructs Moses to go meet Pharaoh early in the morning at the river. The speculation on this verse is endless: Why the river? Why the morning? The text simply doesn’t say. God has His reasons for everything He commands, but God’s reasons are frequently opaque to us.

So Moses is commissioned to go and say “Pharaoh, you’re not listening.”

Why not? Because his heart is heavy with sin. Because his heart is resolved to reject God under any and all circumstances. And God is going to call him on it.

#### **B. Pharaoh, You’ll Learn that I Am Yahweh, v. 17a**

The most important thing that Moses needed to know, as we have seen repeatedly in our tour through Exodus, is that God is Yahweh. He needed to know who his God was and is. And that is the most important thing that Pharaoh needed to know too — not who to make his next grand vizier, or how to deal with the fractious Hittites, or what method of taxation would have the highest net takings for the Egyptian state, but rather, who Yahweh is. God is actually doing Pharaoh a favor when He reveals Himself to him. He’s showing Pharaoh that which he most needs to know!

Do you believe this? Do you know that He is Yahweh? And do you believe that knowing He is LORD is the most important thing you can ever know? That suffering, pain, and trial are worth it if they result, on the other side, in the knowledge of Jesus as Lord? Paul said that he counted everything as dung compared to the knowledge of Christ. Do you believe that your bank account, your sex life, your computer or your truck or your relationship with your children or anything else is (compared to knowing Christ) about as valuable as a gallon of raw sewage? That is the teaching of Scripture. Being independent, autonomous, lord of Egypt — all of that should have meant nothing to Pharaoh beside the excellency of the knowledge of God. But, like him, we all too often sell the knowledge of God for a few moments of sexual thrill, or for the cheap satisfaction of yelling at that annoying individual, or for stolen goods, fraudulent business expenses, or the like. Pharaoh’s heart was resolute; he preferred this world’s goods to any good that could be had through knowing Christ. The Christian is, or should be, the exact opposite: a man whose heart is resolute, set on knowing Christ no matter what.

Are you ready to learn who Yahweh is from all that He does, up to and including the crucifixion of His only begotten Son? Pharaoh wasn’t. How can you be? Only by begging for the grace to resolutely incline your heart to know Him.

#### **C. I Will Strike the River, Turning it to Blood, vv. 17b-18**

Well, the first way in which God is going to manifest His identity to Pharaoh is through the transformation of the Nile into blood. This is not just a miracle of timing, as though Pharaoh saw red dirt making the river look bloody. This miracle is an actual transmutation of one substance (water) into another (blood). Put differently, blood is water with a bunch of red and white cells and some other nutrients and stuff floating in it.

God is going to show His power to turn the source of cleansing into a source of contamination, to turn the source of life into a source of death, to overturn the order of nature for the sake of the order of grace.

Yes, this plague was a threat and a disaster and blow. But it was all of those things for the sake of the gospel — so that God could free His people and so that He could offer Pharaoh the chance to stop living for himself and start living for the knowledge of the Almighty.

We have a little rivulet that runs through our town that we call Donkey Creek. I guarantee that we would be worried if that rivulet turned to blood. But the fact that God turned the world's longest river into blood is nothing short of chilling.

### **III. Performance, vv. 19-22a**

And that's exactly what happened. Pharaoh's resolute heart was treated to a sight that should have made the stoutest heart quail.

#### **A. Moses and Aaron Turn Water into Blood, vv. 19-21**

Moses and Aaron, working together, ended up turning the water into blood throughout Egypt.

##### **1. In the Nile**

They did it in the river — notice how the words of v. 17 make it sound like God is going to hold the staff and stretch it out over the Nile.

##### **2. In other Bodies of Water**

But the blood was not confined to the river; it appeared in ponds, canals, lesser rivers, and every other large body of water.

##### **3. Throughout the Land of Egypt**

In fact, the water became blood through the whole land of Egypt, in wood and stone too.

God was sending a definite message. The message was “No matter how hard your heart, my power is greater than your ability to resist it. Surrender now.”

#### **B. The Magicians Do the Same, v. 22a**

But Pharaoh, in line with his preconceived notions and his steadfast, resolute heart, refused to pay any attention. Why? Because his court magicians were able to duplicate the sign. In other words, he had plausible deniability. “That sign that Moses and Aaron did? A cheap magic trick. ‘Yahweh,’ whoever He is, doesn't need to be invoked as the explanation for this. It is a phenomenon that my hired magicians can duplicate; therefore, it is a phenomenon about which I need have no worries.”

Where did the magicians get water? How did they do this trick? Those questions are totally unimportant for the narrative. It does not matter where the water came from (it could have been sea water, could have been water obtained from the Israelites, could have been drawn from the wells around the Nile); what matters is that Pharaoh took this as a sign that he was right and that Yahweh had no special powers after all — certainly no powers greater than the power of Pharaoh's stubborn heart to deny them.

### **IV. Outcome, vv. 22b-25**

So what was the upshot of this first plague? Well, it didn't work. Indeed, the first nine plagues don't work. Egypt's king is learning about the king of the universe — but he's a slow pupil.

### **A. Pharaoh's Heart Grows Yet More Resolved, v. 22b-23**

Pharaoh got even more resolute after he saw the magicians magically do, at some level, what Moses and Aaron had accomplished by the power of God. God had predicted this; there is nothing surprising about it. And yet we like to think that if we saw a tenth of this much power coming at us from God, we would be so good that we would never even think about sinning again! But in actual fact, we see great demonstrations of God's power to save and sanctify sinners all the time. And yet we get more resolved on our sin, more eager to overeat, more sure that our sexual sin isn't really so bad, more committed to having it our own way rather than God's way.

### **B. The Search for Water, v. 24**

Ordinary Egyptians looked for water all around the river. They dug for it, though whether they found any the text does not say. Surely this is at least a metaphor, a picture of how our hard-heartedness can result in all kinds of ridiculous coping behaviors that would be unnecessary if we simply obeyed God in the first place. If you weren't so hard-hearted that you had to be plagued, you wouldn't have to go to such extraordinary lengths to get water!

### **C. The Lapse of Time, v. 25**

Well, finally, the text tells us that this situation lasted a week. Only one other plague has a specific duration recorded: the 9th plague, which lasted three days.

God was teaching Pharaoh about His might. He was teaching Pharaoh who He was. He is a God who will strike in order to free His people, strike in order to demonstrate His character. God is not a pacifist or a believer in nonviolence. Nor is He mean, cruel, or pushy. He is perfect, perfect in everything including His use of force. Trust Him. Know Him. And if you do, you will have learned the lesson of the river of blood. Amen.