

Don't fight God, surrender to Him

Exodus 8-10

Everyone loves watching a big showdown. The final of a sports tournament. The epic battle at the end of a film. The fight in the playground, or in the boardroom. But it's less fun being *in* a big showdown. When the stakes are high, and the heat of conflict rises, there's a hundred places you'd rather be.

Imagine, then, being *in* the ultimate showdown with God. That's where Pharaoh is in Exodus 8-10. We get to watch that unfold - but somehow, it's not tantalising reading. It's really uncomfortable. It raises all sorts of questions:

'Okay, God, you want to reveal yourself and your amazing power - but why in a horror story of 10 plagues? Why not skip to the 10th one that made the difference and cut out the first 9 experiences of suffering? What's up with God saying that *He* hardened Pharaoh's heart so that Pharaoh wouldn't change his mind?'

I wonder whether the disturbance that we can feel about these questions is to do with the people in the story we most identify with. If you see yourself mostly in Pharaoh - resistant to God, and asking why you should listen to Him when you've got gods of your own or you think you are your own god - then reading about how the LORD deals with that will make you wince.

What we're going to see is that *when it comes to God, you don't fight Him, you surrender to Him.*

We're going through this plague narrative in Exodus 8-10 in one sweep. I'm going to sum up some of what you'll find reading Exodus 8 and 9, and we'll pick up our earlier reading from Exodus 9:13 on into chapter 10 as we go through here.

In Exodus 7 we get the plague of the Nile turning to blood that Stuart explained last week, then in Exodus 8 the plague of frogs being all over people's homes, and the plague of gnats covering people and animals.

These plagues are bad, but they're not as devastating as later ones. They're deeply disruptive and very inconvenient. That's where God starts to wake them up and get their attention.

The first two of these signs, the magicians of the Egyptian court can emulate - they do the many-frogs thing just like they did the river-to-blood thing. But when it comes to the gnats, they find they can't do it - and there's a progression there where the Egyptian court says 'This can only be God.'

After these signs, you see Pharaoh described as 'hardening his heart' or 'having a hard heart.' He won't budge. Actually, he does what lots of people do - he budes for a minute when things look bad, and asks Moses to pray for the frogs to go away and then he'd do what God says - but then he hardens up and sticks with his original proud 'no to God.'

Q - Do you ever tell God, 'If you do this, then I'll do that?' What does Pharaoh's story show us about that way of relating to God?

Then from 8:20-9:12 you can read about the plagues of flies covering the land, then killing the livestock of the Egyptians, then the boils on people and animals. You see God stepping up the intensity of His judgement on Pharaoh's refusal to obey God. It's moved from a socially disruptive to a destructively disastrous power - the land ruined, livestock wiped out, people struck with nasty illness. It's getting more sobering.

But Pharaoh keeps saying no to God. As he does, he goes through some other things that people do before going back to 'no, God.' In the plague of flies, he gradually agrees to do what God has told Him, only to go back on it again when everything went back from crisis to normal. In the plague on the livestock, he investigated the evidence about God's claims - that God's people weren't affected by the plague. He found the evidence to be true. But he still rejected God and His authority. People still do all this today.

Read Exodus 10

God steps it up another gear, and says so in 9:14 - the 'full force of my plagues against you.' The level of destruction in the hail and locusts is huge. As chapter 10 says three times, what the hail doesn't destroy, the locusts do. Egypt is really and truly ruined at this point. Then the terrifying 3 day darkness comes.

And the madness of Pharaoh is to keep proudly saying no to God, even though all this has happened. His hardened pride has ruined him and ruined everything and everyone around him. But he still won't budge. Again, plenty of people today are still doing the same.

Pharaoh gets closer and closer to humbly surrendering to God as the plagues go by. Each time he gets a little further, but then he snaps back to square one. You ever been on one of these? Bungee runs...

Here, it's not just a casual 'pray for me 'cos it's bad oh that's better thanks bye.' And it's even more than truly listening to God, saying he'll obey and investigating the truth of God's claims. He gets as far as saying, 'I'm a sinner' (9:27 and 10:16). 'I'm a sinner... God is in the right, I am in the wrong. Forgive me...'

There in the heat of the crisis, he might even think he means it. But he doesn't. When the bad stuff goes away, he bungees right back to proud, hard, no-to-God self-authority. And again, how many people today get this far and bungee back! He never gets to the point of completely surrendering to God - he wants to negotiate...

Pharaoh: 'I'll let the men go'

Moses: 'No, God says let us all go - men, women, children, livestock.'

Pharaoh: 'No!'

God: *Plague of locusts*

Pharaoh: 'I'm sorry! Forgive me!'

God: *Plague of darkness*

Pharaoh: 'Okay, I'll let the men, women and kids go, but the animals stay.'

Moses: 'No, I told you - God says let go of the whole lot, the animals too'

Pharaoh: 'No! Get out! And don't come back or I'll kill you!'

Pharaoh is still not surrendering. Maybe he's ready to stop fighting God. Maybe he's ready to call a truce and negotiate terms. But when it comes to God, you don't negotiate a truce, you surrender to Him.

But why isn't Pharaoh surrendering? Why's his heart hard? These chapters of Exodus use three phrases, 3 or 4 times each, about Pharaoh's heart. You see all three phrases running together as chapter 9 runs into chapter 10:

Pharaoh hardened his heart (9:34)

Pharaoh's heart was hard (9:35)

God hardened Pharaoh's heart (10:1)

So you've got this heart that isn't yielding to God, and the Bible says, that responsibility is on Pharaoh, and it's also on God. Why's *God* hardening his heart so that Pharaoh won't listen?

God gives the short answer a few times in the narrative: 'I've hardened his heart to perform my great deeds and for people to see my glory.' God has saving purposes for other people, including other Egyptians as we'll see, through the hardening he's doing in one stubborn ruler's life.

Romans 9 speaks in a similar way, and uses Pharaoh as an example, before saying in vv.22-23, 'What if God, choosing to show His wrath and make His power known, bore with great patience the objects of His wrath - prepared for destruction? What if He did this to make the riches of His glory known to the objects of His mercy, whom He prepared in advance for His glory?'

There's another angle on this. We see the language shift at the end of the plague of boils from 'Pharaoh hardened his heart' or 'Pharaoh's heart was hard' to 'The LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart.' In the plagues that follow, that becomes the theme. It could be we've hit a tipping point here, where God's judgement is to hand Pharaoh over to the disobedience he kept choosing by hardening that habit.

Romans 1 speaks in a similar way; that God 'gives people over' to the disobedient lifestyles, attitudes and actions that they keep choosing over Him, and it's an expression of God's judgement on that in to harden people into their habit of rejecting Him.

With the Bible saying both 'People harden their own hearts' and 'God hardens hearts' there's two big things to take from that: For God's part, He won't be refused. He won't be beaten, frustrated or prevented from doing as He wants to do. So you don't fight Him, you surrender to Him. And for our part, we're called to not harden our hearts to Him. Psalm 95, quoted again in Hebrews 3, says, 'Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.' You don't fight God, you surrender to Him.

Interestingly, there is an actual change of heart for the Egyptian court. Remember, at the start of the plagues we saw them try to do what God had done and find they couldn't keep up. Come the plague of boils in chapter 9, they find themselves knocked down and out of the contest with God: 'The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and on all the Egyptians.'

They can't even stand in the ring anymore - God's making it very clear now that there can and will only be one winner in a contest with Him. You don't fight God, you surrender to Him. At the end of chapter 9, we read that their

hearts are hard to that too. Like Pharaoh, when they see any let up in their circumstances, they are numb and deaf to God.

But in 10:7, after God has warned them about the locusts, but before it actually happens, they... *change their minds. Change their hearts. They repent.* They encourage Pharaoh to do as the LORD has said and let Israel go, and they try to show Pharaoh that proceeding in ruin is madness. Next week in chapter 11 we'll see them start to 'hold Moses in high regard'). They are coming around to God and His authority over them. They are ready to surrender.

Q - How hard or soft is your heart to God? What's God saying to you about that today?

Ignoring/Fighting/Hearing what He has to say/Making a deal/Telling Him you're sorry but springing back to what you want to hold on to/Surrendering

The plagues together teach the big strong lesson that when it comes to God, you don't fight Him, you surrender to Him. But you *must* be thinking, 'Why, God? Why 10 massively destructive plagues? And if you had to do it this way to get Pharaoh to let Israel go, why not just the tenth one? What's with the other 9?'

Again, the short answer is the one God gives a few times through the narrative, that 'you may know that there is no-one like me in all the earth.' God wants His unique power, authority and greatness to be known to all the world. So He put it on show. There's a few things going on beneath this.

God was *undoing false gods*. As Stuart mentioned last week, this whole thing was a contest between the one true God of the Bible, and the false gods set up by the culture in Egypt. Her gods get shown up one by one by successive plagues as empty and unreal.

Hapi the river-fertility god can't do anything about the river turned to blood. The frog-headed fertility goddess Heket can do naff all about the frogs spoiling the mood in people's homes. Neither the bull-god Apis nor the cow-headed goddess of love Hathor can do a thing about the destruction of livestock.

Sekhmet the goddess of plagues can do diddly squat to copy the LORD or to reverse His plagues. Nut the sky goddess has no control over winds or hail

that the LORD raises. And Re, the sun-god relied upon every single day can't get up for three days of darkness.

By the end of all these meaningful plagues, there are signs that some of Egypt are getting it - their gods are rubbish, their lives built on a lie, and there was a true God whose authority they should get under. We see signs of the Egyptian court doing it. We see in 12:28, when the Exodus actually happens, evidence of many of the rest of Egypt joining God's people on the move.

It took some patient and painful work over time for God to dislodge and unmask the false gods in people's lives - but many in Egypt were saved because He did it this way. The gods of our world aren't normally named or recognised by the people who worship them - but there are things that people make bigger than God that need to be shown up as hollow, sometimes quite slowly and painfully, before you come and turn to the only true and mighty God.

God was also *undoing creation*. In the creation stories of Genesis, we see God bring about order from the chaos; we see Him speak 'let there be light!'; and we see Him bring life about in abundance. In the plagues, we see God bring about chaos in the ordered society of Egypt; we see Him speak 'let there be darkness!'; and we see Him bring about death.

Egypt was being unmade. Their world was falling apart. God was acting in power to show the world, 'This is the end game for disobeying and fighting with me.' Like with Pharaoh and the Egyptians, God warns us and warns us and warns us about this, because He would rather bless and save and restore than destroy and cut off. But the end point of not surrendering to God is being unmade. Chaos. Dark. The world falling apart. And finally, death.

We're in a broken world where we've tasted this stuff. You know what chaos is. You know what darkness feels like. You know what it's like to have your world fall apart. And you've felt death sucker punch you, though you haven't experienced its finality yourself yet.

I'm sure you don't like the sound of all this 'God visits judgement on our disobedience to Him' stuff. But that's where there's good news, and good news that you need to take seriously. The totally remarkable thing about this God of intense judgement on our rebellion is that not only can He take what He dishes out, but He'd rather dish it out to Himself than to you.

Jesus went to the cross for this purpose. Tim Chester puts it like this: 'At the cross, the plagues fell on Jesus, the Son of God. At the cross, the Maker came to be unmade so that we can be remade! The Son was unravelled under the judgement of the Father. He experienced chaos, darkness and death.'

When it comes to God, you don't fight Him, you surrender to Him. Because those who surrender to Him are blessed beyond measure. Since God gave us the gift of Jesus, we have the gift of God taking the un-making, the destruction and judgement for our rebellion, on Himself. So that our destiny completely changes. *Things are different for those who belong to God.*

As the plague stories unfold, we see God making clear distinctions between Egypt and His people Israel. God says in 8:23 'I will make a distinction [in Hebrew, a 'deliverance'] between my people and your people.' God deals with the people who belong to Him differently - for them, there is powerful shelter, rescue and protection. We're told specifically that the plagues of flies, livestock, hail, darkness - and next week, crucially, death - will *not* fall on God's people.

In store for us are a life set in order, the good order that God's Spirit brings. A life lived in light, overpowering the darkness. And a life ending in - more life! Eternal, unending life, and *not* death!

Again, we get to taste this stuff now. Those who surrender to God, who trust in what Jesus did on the cross for them, taste something of life being set right and put in order. We know and we feel more 'in the light', aware of seeing things clearly and joyfully. And our hearts and minds are filled with assurance that death is not the last word for us.

It might be that God's people suffered some of the things the Egyptians did that we're not told there was a distinction in - we don't know, we're not told. We might still taste what the world does - chaos, darkness and death. But for us, it's the aftertaste of something Jesus has swallowed up for us. And we've been given a taste of something far sweeter, that beyond this life will be perfected - order, light and life.

When it comes to God, you don't fight Him, you surrender to Him. Because as He showed Pharaoh, there really is no other choice in the end. And because as He showed us in Jesus, there really is no better choice you could ever make.