

Let Not Pharaoh Cheat Again
Exodus 8
July 5, 2020
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(In the interest of time, I'm not going to read the Scripture beforehand as I have been doing.)

Introduction: Nobody Likes a Cheater

There once was a man who seemed to be super-human. A man who seemed to be unbeatable in the sport that he competed in. A man who made America care about a sport that it had barely acknowledged before: cycling. Lance Armstrong's life story of beating cancer after beginning his career as a triathlete and a cyclist and then coming back to win seven straight Tour de France races because of his incredible discipline and training regimen was so inspiring. It made us all root for him in the early 2000's, wear those yellow "Live Strong" bracelets, and believe that we could conquer anything in life. Until it all came crashing down and we found out that his success was built on cheating and lies. There had been rumors and accusations for years, but Armstrong always strongly denied them, claimed that he had never failed a drug test, and sued some of the people making the accusations. But in 2012, the US Anti-Doping Agency said that Armstrong was the ringleader of "the most sophisticated, professionalized and successful doping program that sport has ever seen."¹ And by 2013, Armstrong himself admitted his use of steroids in an interview with Oprah. He lost \$75 million of sponsorship income in one day. CNN said that, "the epic downfall of cycling's star, once an idolized icon of millions around the globe, stands out in the history of professional sports."² The fact that this came out around the same time as the steroid scandal in baseball that revealed some of the greatest players of the early 2000s – Barry Bonds, Mark Maguire, Alex Rodriguez – had used steroids disillusioned a lot of people to professional sports. It became natural to wonder, or to assume, that if someone was at the top of those sports that they were cheaters too. And nobody likes a cheater.

In today's passage we're going to encounter a cheater. He wasn't an athlete or a con artist trying to make money. He was a king. A king who made promises that he knew he wouldn't keep. Or if he meant them at the time that he said them, it didn't take much for him to change his mind and withdraw his promises. You may say, well politicians do that all the time! Campaign pledges are only worth the paper their printed on. And you may be right, but this man was lying to God and to God's representatives. And he will be called on the carpet for his lying – Moses will look Pharaoh in the eye and say, "don't cheat me again by not letting God's people go."

For the most part, when Moses goes to Pharaoh time after time to ask for the release of the Hebrew people, Pharaoh responds like Barbosa in the first Pirates of the Caribbean movie: "I'm disinclined to acquiesce to your request. It means no." But throughout the plagues, when things get really bad, he will negotiate and try to get Moses to take the plagues away with half-hearted promises. But his cheating heart doesn't mean it! Last week we looked at the first plague. And next week we'll bundle plagues 5-9 together. Today we are looking at plagues number 2, 3, and 4. But we're not going to look at them individually – I want to look at them in their patterns. So we'll group them together (jump around in the text) and group the sending of the plagues together as the first point, then Pharaoh's responses in the second point, then Pharaoh's changing his mind as the third point.

¹ BBC News, "Lance Armstrong: USADA report labels him 'a serial cheat,'" October 11, 2012. Found at <https://www.bbc.com/sport/cycling/19903716>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lance_Armstrong

I. The Lord Sends the Plagues (vv. 1-7, 16-17, 20-24)

¹ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord, "Let my people go, that they may serve me. ² But if you refuse to let them go, behold, I will plague all your country with frogs. ³ The Nile shall swarm with frogs that shall come up into your house and into your bedroom and on your bed and into the houses of your servants and your people, and into your ovens and your kneading bowls. ⁴ The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your servants.'"" ⁵ And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, over the canals and over the pools, and make frogs come up on the land of Egypt!'" ⁶ So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. ⁷ But the magicians did the same by their secret arts and made frogs come up on the land of Egypt.

¹⁶ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, so that it may become gnats in all the land of Egypt.'" ¹⁷ And they did so. Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and there were gnats on man and beast. All the dust of the earth became gnats in all the land of Egypt.

²⁰ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Rise up early in the morning and present yourself to Pharaoh, as he goes out to the water, and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord, 'Let my people go, that they may serve me. ²¹ Or else, if you will not let my people go, behold, I will send swarms of flies on you and your servants and your people, and into your houses. And the houses of the Egyptians shall be filled with swarms of flies, and also the ground on which they stand. ²² But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth. ²³ Thus I will put a division between my people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall happen.'" ²⁴ And the Lord did so. There came great swarms of flies into the house of Pharaoh and into his servants' houses. Throughout all the land of Egypt the land was ruined by the swarms of flies.

Plague #2 - Frogs were associated with the goddess Heka, who was thought to assist women in childbirth. Remember how God is undermining Egypt's false gods and idols. Frogs are not particularly dangerous, but that doesn't mean I want them all over my house and in my bed, right? Frogs invaded everywhere, even Pharaoh's most private rooms. His royal bakers would be baking things with frogs jumping in and out of the ovens and the mixing bowls. Disgusting! Notice that the court magicians were able to duplicate the frogs, just like they were able to duplicate the staff turning into a snake and the Nile turning into blood. But you can just hear Pharaoh say something like, "No, you idiots, we don't want more frogs! How about figuring out how to remove the frogs?!? That would actually be helpful."

Some translations say that the third plague was lice, not gnats. Have you ever had your kids come home with lice from school or the playground? That is a nightmare, I remember having lice as a kid and then as parents having to deal with it. It's so gross and you feel so bad if your kids have been around other kids, and possibly shared it with them. But imagine it striking every person and animal; whether it's gnats or lice, it's more invasive than the frogs have been because they're invading bodies not just homes. When Pharaoh's court magicians try to reproduce the gnats or lice, they cannot, and are forced to admit, "*This is the finger of God.*" Wow! These guys get convinced relatively early on, but Pharaoh is in de-Nile.

With the fourth plague, for the first time, God differentiates between the Egyptians and the Israelites. He spares the Israelites from having to deal with the flies. Which is great because flies all over the place are annoying and gross. We had a number of flies the first week we moved into our house because the guys doing renovations would leave the doors open. Imagine so many flies that, as verse 24 said, "*the land was ruined.*"

So we've read about these three plagues being sent, now we read the two places where Pharaoh begs Moses for relief, and

II. Pharaoh and Moses Make a Deal (vv. 8-11, 25-29)

⁸ Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, "Plead with the Lord to take away the frogs from me and from my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the Lord." ⁹ Moses said to Pharaoh, "Be pleased to command me when I am to plead for you and for your servants and for your people, that the frogs be cut off from you and your houses and be left only in the Nile." ¹⁰ And he said, "Tomorrow." Moses said, "Be it as you say, so that you may know that there is no one like the Lord our God. ¹¹ The frogs shall go away from you and your houses and your servants and your people. They shall be left only in the Nile."

(after the fourth plague; there's no conversation after the third:)²⁵ *Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, "Go, sacrifice to your God within the land." ²⁶ 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? ²⁷ We must go three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord our God as he tells us." ²⁸ 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." ²⁹ 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."*

Remember how Pharaoh just walked away from first plague when the Nile turned to blood? He just shut himself up in his palace and didn't concern himself with the fact that his people would have major problems without the water of the river. And that plague only lasted seven days, so he didn't have to relent. But with the frogs, Pharaoh can't go anywhere without stepping on one. So he turned to Moses and Aaron in desperation, bargaining: if you plead with God to take these frogs away, I'll let the people go. Moses has him set the time so that when the frogs disappear at exactly that time, Pharaoh can't claim that it's just a coincidence – you say tomorrow and when it happens tomorrow, you'll know that it was God's hand.

There was no bargaining like that after the third plague for whatever reason, but after the fourth plague, in verses 25-29, Pharaoh granted part of Moses' request – you can worship your God, but do it here in Egypt. Remember that Moses had asked that they go a three days journey away from Egypt to worship; Pharaoh is only willing to let them worship, but not to leave. And Moses pointed out that they sacrificed animals that the Egyptians would get very upset about and incite them to violence; this is probably equivalent to slaughtering a cow in a Hindu temple. So Pharaoh relented a little – you can leave, but don't go far. And Moses agrees, but wants to make sure that Pharaoh is not going back on his word like before. This is where Moses calls him out as a cheater – "*only let not Pharaoh cheat again by not letting the people go to sacrifice to the Lord*" (v. 29). It's one of those "fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me" situations.

The back and forth between Pharaoh and Moses is reminiscent of buyers and sellers in a marketplace haggling over the price, or businessmen trying to figure out what the other person will accept that will cost them the least. But freedom and deliverance are not something the Lord will allow Moses to compromise. And as much as Pharaoh thinks he has the upper hand in these negotiations because he's king of a great empire, Moses *knows* he actually has the upper hand because God has promised victory and deliverance; it's just a question of how long it will take. There's a parallel to us. Some people are willing to accept just coming to church, just having the appearance of being godly, but they never actually turn their lives over to follow Jesus. They never

fully get released from their bondage, never repent of their sins and find the beautiful freedom and love in God's forgiveness and abundant life. They could get to freedom, but the Pharaohs in their minds say, "No, no, stay here. Don't leave." The bottom line is that that is the worst place to be, it's what God calls being lukewarm, and the only thing to do with lukewarm water is to spit it out of your mouth. God calls us to be completely free of our sin, completely forgiven in Him.

We move to the end phase of each of these plagues where Pharaoh cheats,

III. Pharaoh Breaks His Promise (vv. 12-15, 18-19, 30-32)

12 So Moses and Aaron went out from Pharaoh, and Moses cried to the Lord about the frogs, as he had agreed with Pharaoh. 13 And the Lord did according to the word of Moses. The frogs died out in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. 14 And they gathered them together in heaps, and the land stank. 15 But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

18 The magicians tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, but they could not. So there were gnats on man and beast. 19 Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

30 So Moses went out from Pharaoh and prayed to the Lord. 31 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. 32 But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go.

As each plague dies out, so does Pharaoh's resolve to give in to Moses' demands. He probably thought that they had reached the end of the plagues - with each one passing, maybe that was the last one? That if he could just be stubborn and strong, outlasting these crazy plagues of insects and animals, that he would win and Moses would go away. But the plagues just keep coming because God is not going to leave him alone until he bends to God's will. We have to remind ourselves as we read through these accounts of the awful plagues that Pharaoh always has a choice. He can always avoid these plagues by letting the people go. What keeps him from doing that?

- his pride in thinking that he is a god and cannot be told what to do,
- his desperate need to keep building his kingdom on the backs of the Hebrew slaves
- and, of course, his hard heart that will not soften to obey the Lord

Conclusion:

Everybody knows the saying, "There are no atheists in foxholes"? The idea that when your life is threatened, you start believing and bargaining with God very quickly. But when the danger passes, very rarely do people actually change their lives and hold up their end of those bargains. We plead with God to make things better, when He does, we forget all about Him and go back to living our lives the way we want. That's Pharaoh's way.

Many people will call on pastors to help them with something, but they never really want to connect with God. They want some benefit that religion can give them, but they don't really want to start believing in God. I think of the times that I was called in as a youth pastor to help a parent basically convince a teenager that they needed to do what they were being asked to do. Happened often, even from people outside of my church. I was essentially being treated as a second line of defense for these parents. But they often didn't really want to submit themselves to the Lord and try to parent and live in a way that was pleasing to the Lord. They didn't want to shepherd their children as a way to make disciples for God, they just wanted kids that did what they were told. Pharaoh calls in Moses and Aaron to get them to call off the plagues, but he's not exactly ready to make his life right with God and repent or acknowledge God's power.

And meanwhile, every Egyptian living under Pharaoh's rule is suffering under the plagues as he plays these games with Moses. We could have a long conversation about how just God's judgments are, and how we reconcile them with His love, but we don't have that much time. But I would say that we can't forget that God sending us things to break us of our sin now is actually grace and love. We all kind of say, "He's showing great love and favor to the Israelites, but He's hating the Egyptians. Right?" But I see grace and patience extended to these Egyptians. He could have just wiped them out, but He is giving them a chance to repent and to realize that they have unjustly enslaved an entire race of people and have been serving false gods. He is giving them the chance to worship Him and be saved. It is always love for God to break people of their lies and bring them face-to-face with the truth, even if they reject it. Have you ever heard a prison testimony, where a guy has to completely hit rock bottom before he turns to the Lord? WORLD magazine had an interview a few years ago with a man named Michael Franzese, who was part of the La Costa Nostra Mafia in the 70s and 80s. He claimed that he ran scams that at their height brought in 8 to 10 million dollars a week. But then he went to prison, and he says: "I spent 35 months... in prison, and 29 months... were in a 6-by-8 hole 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Just me and God. I didn't come to God easily. I challenged God. I didn't believe. But only God knows how many times I read my Bible. I came out of there believing that the Bible is God's Word and Jesus my risen Savior... prison is fertile ground for God to do His work, because God does his best work when we're at our lowest point."³ God was merciful in taking Michael down; what we see as harsh punishment can be God's path to salvation.

Don't be like Pharaoh. Don't let the ways that God is trying to get your attention come and go without any heart change. Take the opportunity to repent of your sins, embrace His forgiveness, His salvation, and His love. There were some guys working on our HVAC system last week and I got to talking to one of them. He really opened up to me about his life: his brother had died at age 38 and his mom had recently had open-heart surgery. He told me that those things made him wake up, smell the roses, appreciate what he's got, "work to live not live to work," several clichés like that, that were really heart-felt. Nothing wrong with realizing those things, but I tried to steer the conversation to the Lord and eternity, and how appreciating this life is great but how are you ready for the rest of eternity? But he was unwilling to go there. He was more like Pharaoh, thinking he could ignore the ways that God was trying to get his attention. I pray that God gets ahold of him.

(Move to communion table)

Benediction - Isaiah 55:6-7

"Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon."

³ WORLD Magazine's November 28, 2015 issue.