

PHARAOH IN THE MIRROR: CASE STUDY OF A REPROBATE

Selected Texts from Exodus 5-14

In reading through the Bible again this year, God has recently brought my attention again to the OT book of Exodus. For a long time I have pondered the character and behavior of Pharaoh, but now I want to lead you through preaching to meditate on the story of this Pharaoh, perhaps one named Menephtah whose mummy has never been found—for obvious reasons if he was the exodus Pharaoh.¹

Although the biblical history is about a time long ago and people far away and very different in many ways from us, yet Scripture continues to speak as God's Word, with fresh and powerful relevance to every generation. This is a word from the Lord to us right here, right now. May He make us hear for the glory of His mercy and the good of our souls.

PHARAOH THE REPROBATE

Scripture presents Pharaoh as thoroughly villainous, an evil man deserving no sympathy. He was ungrateful (forgot Joseph, 1.8), murderous of innocents (Jewish male infants, 1.15-16), thoroughly oppressive and unreasonable (bricks without straw, 5.6-7), grossly idolatrous (many Egyptian "gods" against whom plagues directed, 12.12; Pharaoh himself considered a god), deceitful (lying king, broke his word repeatedly). Pharaoh is a kind of OT antichrist figure, filled with Satanic zeal, bent on the destruction of God's people. Moses, on the other hand, is a precursor of the Great Prophet who would come, even Jesus Christ (Deut 18.15). Their confrontation is high drama, a clash of good and evil.

Further, Scripture represents Pharaoh as reprobate in the worst sense, not just "a person without moral principles" (OED), but one predestined for hell. "Reprobate" comes from the Latin word meaning "disapproved" or "rejected," and here it means irrevocably rejected by the Lord, the opposite of being one of God's elect or chosen ones. The Lord repeatedly says He hardened Pharaoh's heart (4.21; 7.3; 9.12; 10.1, 20, 27; 11.10; 14.4, 8). In a miraculous way, God killed him in and for his inveterate commitment to wickedness and rebellion. Finally, the NT interprets this Pharaoh as a figure for all the non-elect, the reprobate, divinely-hardened, foreordained to ruin (Rom 9.17, 22; cf. 11.7-8).

Therefore, Pharaoh's words and deeds are the words and deeds of a reprobate man. When we see ourselves speaking and acting like Pharaoh, we have reason for great alarm. Real Christians are vulnerable to the same kind of sins Pharaoh committed, and where Pharaoh's

wicked character reigns supreme in anyone, there you have an unconverted person. We all have an "inner Pharaoh," but in believers he is dethroned.

Pharaoh's true colors come out most vividly in his responses to God's Word and judgments. We assume your basic familiarity with the famous narrative, but allow a quick review. Four hundred years earlier, Jacob (Israel) and his twelve sons moved to Egypt in the Joseph incident, and while there they multiplied greatly. In fear, the Egyptians made them slaves to keep them in control. Under oppression, the sinful children of Israel remembered the God of their fathers and prayed to Him for deliverance. God raised up Moses to lead them out of Egypt, but before they left, God wished to show that He is greater than all gods. He did this by ten awful judgments of increasing devastation upon the Egyptians. Repeatedly God sent Moses to Pharaoh and demanded Israel's release. Repeatedly Pharaoh refused and another judgment came. Finally after the tenth plague, he gave consent, but then he had a change of heart, and as he pursued the fleeing Israelites, God killed him. Pharaoh had completed the divine purpose for his earthly life, and now his eternal punishment in hell continues to glorify the greatness of God's sovereignty, justice, and righteous wrath. Oh! Awful thought! There are people in this world today who are *reprobates* just like Pharaoh, and if you are still in your sins, you might be one!

Now let us see how the Bible teaches this great truth:

Your true character shows in your responses to God's Word and judgments.

PHARAOH'S SEVEN RESPONSES TO GOD

God reveals Himself by His words and deeds and one's responses to Him are an open revelation of one's character. One striking feature of this story is the variety of Pharaoh's responses. He did just about everything except repent of his sins and believe the gospel! This is another reason why studying his life is interesting and useful. He illustrates how sinners today often respond when God confronts them, and this is useful to us for self-examination.

#1: Open Defiance

Exod 5.1-2 presents the first confrontation of Pharaoh by Moses, God's spokesman or prophet, reared among Egyptian royalty, and now returned to Egypt after forty years in exile.

Moses did not preach a long, complicated sermon in God's name to Pharaoh, but issued a simple, direct

¹ Easton's Bible Dictionary, "Pharaoh."

command with a simple, candid explanation. “Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness.’” Notice the appeal to divine authority, the imperative form, the insinuation that the Israelites are not Pharaoh’s people but God’s, their holiness to Him, the priority of true worship, all with the implication of Pharaoh’s moral responsibility to hear and obey this true and living God, the LORD God of Israel.

The right response was immediate submission to the Lord with its follow-through, telling Moses they were free to go, and then doing nothing to hinder them. Pharaoh’s duty was a sincere confession of faith in and loyalty to Yahweh. That is what a good man behaving well *would* have done, but Pharaoh’s response is the complete opposite: “Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the LORD, neither will I let Israel go.” His question is not a solicitation for information, but an irreverent repudiation of Yahweh, since He was not one of the gods Pharaoh recognized as legitimate. That explains why Pharaoh felt justified in disregarding Yahweh’s command. From Pharaoh’s point of view, this would be like someone ordering you to do something because Zeus said so, except that Yahweh is real.

Here is a profound truth. True and spiritual knowledge of God necessarily issues in obedience to His commands, and a characteristic and open defiance of God’s law exposes one’s alienation from Him, whether one acknowledges that candidly like Pharaoh or not. Many people are only nominal Christians (in name only), mere hypocrites, claiming to know God but living in hardened disobedience to His commands (Tit 1.16).

Even when Moses and Aaron assured Pharaoh that God really did meet with them and command them to perform this religious feast and sacrifice in the desert, Pharaoh insinuated they were motivated by laziness (5.3-4), and ordered them back to their slavish burdens.

#2: Crafty Challenge

Discouraged not only by Pharaoh but also by unbelieving Hebrews, Moses was commissioned again by God to confront Pharaoh, this time with ironclad proof of divine authority. When Pharaoh demanded a miracle from them, Moses’ brother Aaron was to throw down his rod and it would become a serpent (7.8-9). So they returned to Pharaoh.

This time, instead of acknowledging the sovereign Author of the command through Moses to let Israel go, Pharaoh called his magicians who also threw down their rods which strangely changed into serpents—but Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods, proving Yahweh’s superiority to any powers of the Egyptians (7.10-13). Pharaoh still refused to let Israel go (7.14). A similar thing

happened with turning the water into blood (7.20-22), the first of the ten plagues.

We classify this response as “crafty challenge” because it is obvious this is what Pharaoh was doing. He was pointing to their own Egyptian religion as a comparable alternative to the religion preached by Moses. “You can do miracles? So can we!” And somehow, the Bible does not explain it here, their magicians did things that seemed comparable.

And [the magicians’ rods] became serpents. Not really such, but in appearance only. The devil’s miracles are mere impostures, phantasms, delusions (Trapp).

Pharaoh was not an atheist but a polytheist. He was evading his responsibility to believe and obey the word of the only true and living God by appealing to another “faith” (there is only one faith, not many; Eph 4.5) as equally viable for religious people, but his subterfuge was disingenuous. If Pharaoh had been a sincere truth seeker, he would have repented of his error when he saw Aaron’s rod swallow up the rods of his deceitful magicians.

#3: Disdainful Disregard

Despite the mountain of mercies God was placing before Pharaoh (speaking to Him with confirming miracles and threatening punishments), he reacted with *contemptuous* unbelief. After this spiritual showdown in which Pharaoh’s magicians lost, he “turned and went to his house, neither did he set his heart to this also” (7.23). This is an idiom which means he did not take it to heart, pay attention to it, or take the time and energy to meditate on the significance of these things and their reasonable application to his life. His magicians were humiliated, the rivers *stayed* bloody (7.24-25), and God’s demand was still ringing in his ears (“Let my people go!”), but Pharaoh went home and returned to “business as usual.”

God plagued Egypt with frogs next, and the magicians could duplicate this too (8.6-7). The third was a plague of lice, and when the magicians could not imitate it, they confessed to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God,” but even then, “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them,” that is, to his own magicians (8.19)!

Next came flies (the fourth plague), and then the “murrain” on animals (the fifth), a terrible disease on the cattle, horses, donkeys, camels, oxen, and sheep, killing many of them, but none of those belonging to the Jews (9.3-6). Pharaoh’s response? His “heart was hardened, and he did not let the people go” (9.7).

The sixth plague was “boils breaking out with sores” (ESV) “upon man and upon beast throughout all the land

of Egypt” (9.9). Again, “the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them” (9.12).

Even though Pharaoh’s disdainful disregard of God’s word and judgments was the outworking of divine providence, Pharaoh was still responsible for his own freely-made and wicked choices, as Calvin explains:

The hardness of heart, to which God had devoted Pharaoh, was voluntary; so that the sin rested in himself, nor did the secret appointment of God avail anything to lessen his culpability, for his folly is condemned, because he did not “set his heart to this also.” Whence it follows that he was the author of his own obstinacy, because, being blinded by pride and contempt, he took no account of the glory of God. Thus the wicked, although as being vessels of wrath, they are cast of God into a reprobate mind, still harden themselves, because wittingly and willfully they run against God, and thus their security, audacity, and perverseness take away from them the excuse of ignorance or error (on 7.23).

Disdainful disregard is a very common response to God today, but few recognize its horrendous guilt!

#4: Deceitful Negotiation

We are handling the story topically, not chronologically, so we will be doubling back to earlier plagues. As disdainful disregard characterizes Pharaoh’s response repeatedly, so it was with deceitful negotiation. Several times Pharaoh arrogantly tried to negotiate with God—think of *chutzpah* of that—and if that weren’t bad enough, Pharaoh did not even try to negotiate in good faith. He was trying to swindle God!

The first instance of deceitful negotiation is in 8.8-15. Both Aaron and the magicians had just brought up frogs upon the land of Egypt—only the second plague. Pharaoh promises that if Moses will get the Lord to take away the frogs, then he will let the people go. Moses asks Pharaoh to set a time. Pharaoh wants it done tomorrow. Moses prays. The frogs died. The problem was solved. Now it is Pharaoh’s turn to make good on his promise, “but when Pharaoh saw that there was respite [relief], he hardened his heart, and hearkened not unto them” (8.15).

The same pattern was repeated in the plague of flies (fourth), but with a twist. Pharaoh proposes a compromise of God’s demand. The key phrase of 8.25 is “in the land,” that is, not in the wilderness as God wanted, but within Egypt, as Pharaoh wanted. Pharaoh would not have lost his slave labor force if he could keep them close by, but Moses would have none of it. It is “not right to do so” (8.26 ESV). The first reason sin is evil is that it is a lack of conformity to the Word of God. Besides, Moses reasons, the Egyptians would be highly offended

by Jewish worship and persecute them, even to the death. “We will go three days’ journey into the wilderness, and sacrifice to the LORD our God, AS HE SHALL COMMAND US” (8.27, emphasis mine). True worship is obedient worship. No compromise with Pharaoh is possible. Pharaoh relented with a protest, “I will let you go, that ye may sacrifice to the LORD your God in the wilderness; only ye shall not go very far away: intreat [pray] for me” (8.28). Here is a wicked man asking a holy man to pray for him, but it was only that he might have relief from punishment, not forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. Moses prayed, the flies departed, and Pharaoh reneged again.

Even by the time of the eighth and ninth plagues (locusts and darkness), Pharaoh was the same old arrogant and shifty man, first proposing that only the Hebrew men go into the wilderness, without their wives and children, to worship the Lord, but this was unacceptable (10.8-11). Then Pharaoh agreed to let the entire Hebrew families leave but without their flocks and herds. Moses again refused to compromise, and Pharaoh would not let them go at all (10.24-27). The Devil will let you have a form of worship, as long as you fall short of devoting your all, your family and goods, to God.

In all this Pharaoh behaves wickedly, exercising no true faith whatsoever, and showing no genuine repentance at all. His deceitful negotiations are just so many insults to God.

#5: Hypocritical Humiliation

The seventh plague (hail) evoked a new response from Pharaoh, at first one that appeared more hopeful: a public admission of his sin—no doubt his first ever. When the strange fiery hail had come (9.23-24), ruining plants and trees, and killing all people and animals still outdoors, though the Jews in the land of Goshen were completely spared, then Pharaoh sent and called for Moses and Aaron and said, “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 thundering and hail; and I will let you go, and ye shall stay no longer” (9.27-28). But as soon as Pharaoh saw that the miraculous storm had ceased, “he sinned yet more, and hardened his heart,” and he would not let the Israelites go (9.34-35).

“I have sinned” may be three of the hardest words for sinners to say, but Pharaoh said them. Moses knew, however, because of the Lord’s repeated statements that He would harden Pharaoh’s heart, that this was an insincere confession (9.30). Pharaoh has basically been forced to admit that he has made a big mistake this time in not letting the Hebrews go, and that the Lord is Victor in this contest. Pharaoh is saying some right things, but he falls short of a humble confession of sin and

evangelical repentance, and therefore he remains under God's wrath. Even the form of Pharaoh's admission, and especially the consequent retraction, make it plain that he was only interested in relief, not God's honor. Calvin's assessment is judicious:

Pharaoh did not lie designedly; for when seized by terror, he caught at every means to appease God, but soon after relapsed into his former state of mind. For although with fox-like cunning the wicked pretend submission, when they see themselves caught, in order to escape from the snare, still they do not mean to mock God by their soft words; but rather under the pressure of necessity they are ready to do anything, and therefore offer propitiations and satisfactions; but when their fear has departed, because whatever they promised was forcibly extorted from them, they directly break out afresh (on 9.27).

A similar hypocritical humiliation appears in connection with the plague of locusts (eighth), but this one is even more extravagant, because Pharaoh calls for the prophets "in haste," with a sense of real urgency, and not only admits sinning against the Lord, but also against Moses and Aaron (10.16). Then Pharaoh asks them to forgive his sin (10.17), and he had never done that before. Further, Pharaoh seems to be pleading modestly, because he asks forgiveness "only this once," which seems to imply a promise of reformation. He also asks for only one thing from the Lord through Moses: "take away from me this death" (10.17).

Pharaoh's double emphasis on "only" uses two different words and was meant to deceive. He was trying to give Moses the impression that he had finally come to his senses, and that he would let the people go. But he had no intention [or only a shallow one, as Calvin said—DSM] of letting them out.²

Desperate sinners often resort to this technique as if they could pull the wool over God's eyes, or appease Him with sufficient self-deprecation, but without Spirit-wrought faith and lasting repentance, it only provokes God more.

#6: Personal Hostility

God had turned up the heat on Pharaoh using nine plagues—blood, frogs, lice, flies, deadly diseases on man and beast, hail, locusts, and darkness—and a deep and senseless rage finally came to a boil in Pharaoh's malicious soul. Trials without accompanying inner grace only make sinners worse. The same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay. Recklessly, Pharaoh reviled Moses, threatening him (10.28). A paraphrase captures the

emotional intensity well: "Get out of here!" Pharaoh shouted at Moses. "I'm warning you. Never come back to see me again! The day you see my face, you will die!" (NLT).

Prodigious [huge] madness! Had he not found that Moses could plague him without seeing his face? Or had he forgotten how often he had sent for Moses as his physician to heal him and ease him of his plagues? And must he now be bidden to come near him no more? Impotent malice! To threaten him with death who was armed with such a power, and at whose mercy he had so often laid himself. What will not hardness of heart and contempt of God's Word and commandments bring men to? (M. Henry).

When sinners cannot justify themselves or effectively gainsay the prophetic word, then personal hostility against the faithful preachers comes out. Moses suffered this, and much later, the Spirit-filled deacon Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Acts 6.5, 10-11; 7.54, 57-58). Now consider Pharaoh's final wicked response.

#7: Grudging, Temporary Surrender

This may be the most frightening response of all for you who profess faith in Christ. Let me show you why.

In the tenth plague God killed all the firstborn in Egypt, both of man and of cattle, except in the households of the Jews who had killed the Passover lamb and sprinkled the blood on their doors. Even Pharaoh's own firstborn son and heir was lying dead right there in front of the impotent king (12.29). Pharaoh got up in the middle of the night and went out for a walk, and he heard a great cry throughout the land, multitudes of Egyptians bewailing the dead in every home (12.30), and that was the last straw! Pharaoh finally capitulated—or so it seemed, ordering Moses, Aaron, and the Israelites to go, "serve the Lord, as ye have said. Also take your flocks and your herds, as ye have said, and BE GONE; and bless me also" (12.31-32, emphasis mine). And so that is what they did! Pharaoh grudgingly waved the white flag.

But when the Israelites had just left and found themselves up against what appeared to be a dead end (14.1-3), and God hardened Pharaoh's heart one last time in this world, that Pharaoh changed his mind, and as commander in chief of all the Egyptian troops, ordered them into battle to slaughter the infant Jewish nation (14.4-9). If Pharaoh couldn't have them, he would not let the LORD have them either! That is why we describe this last response as grudging, temporary surrender. Pharaoh was coerced into "repentance," and then repented of his "repentance." All seven responses of Pharaoh have the most practical implications for us, but we must leave them until next Lord's Day.

² NET Bible notes, in loc.

LOOKING FOR PHARAOH IN THE MIRROR

Don noticed it one day while he was shaving. A small, oddly-shaped spot on his face. Over the next several weeks, it grew ever so slowly, changing in shape and color, and finally, he thought he must have it examined by a doctor. That day came, and the doctor returned with a book in his hand. “See this, Don? This spot in the photo is a malignant melanoma, and it looks exactly like yours.” Pastors are physicians of the soul and have to diagnose spiritual diseases all the time. Sin is a cancer we all have had from conception. Real Christians still have spots but the cancer is in remission and will completely vanish. Unbelievers have a terminal case of sin. In both cases, our only hope is Christ the Savior/Healer.

Our study of Pharaoh is all very interesting and could remain an academic exercise, a mere study of human psychology and behavior, as long as we leave it “out there” as a matter between Pharaoh and Moses, but each one of us should apply the truth to himself or herself. Don’t think now about Pharaoh. Don’t consider how well some of these things describe other people you know personally. Look straight into the mirror of God’s Word, and behold your own face. Is Pharaoh’s sin-plague spreading on you (lost), or is it in remission (saved)?

#1: Open Defiance. “Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go?” (Exod 5.2). This spirit of open defiance against the Lord is more widespread than many realize. You might even be guilty.

Do you openly repudiate the Christian faith? I just read of an atheist who said he liked to tell Christians that he is a Satanist,³ apparently just for fun. The media has given much attention to some who dismiss all religion, especially Christianity.⁴ Open atheism seems to be on the rise. As we advocate the biblical gospel and biblical morality, some respond by saying, in effect, they do not recognize our God.

Even some professing Christians exhibit open defiance by a fundamentally-averse attitude toward God’s commands. Relatively few will do this openly and publicly, as it would open them to fair charges of gross hypocrisy, but an insidious heresy permeates even modern evangelicalism, a heresy called “theological antinomianism.” Its advocates are generally dispensationalists, early ones being J. N. Darby, C. I. Scofield, Alva J. McClain, and Lewis Sperry Chafer, and the pernicious tradition is continued by John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, and Zane Hodges—the last four associated with Dallas Theological Seminary. This error is a complex system of teachings that make obedience to God strictly

optional for Christians and distinguishes two kinds of “saved” people, the *carnal* (practicing sin) and the *spiritual* (yielded to Christ). A perceptive lawyer summarized some of its typical doctrines:

You can have Jesus as Savior and not Lord. Salvation and discipleship are not the same thing. Repentance means to change your mind about Jesus, not about sin. Christians can fall away and not come back, and if they then die they will go to heaven. If you believe that repentance does lead to a changed life and a changed mind about sin, then you cannot have assurance because you sin every day.⁵

Dear friends, some of these false teachers may generally lead a godly life. We freely admit that their experience of grace may be greater than their understanding of it. However, many professing Christians who openly scorn this kind of “theological antinomianism” are guilty of a “practical antinomianism,” living *way beneath* their orthodox theology. Such people are much more likely to be a part of *this* congregation, where we openly teach the Reformed position. Paul may have had hypocrites like that in view in Tit 1.16, “in works they deny” God—not in words, but *in* works. As the Puritan Joseph Alliene put it,

Conversion is not the taking upon us the profession of Christianity. Christianity is more than a name. . . . Are there not many that name the name of the Lord Jesus, that do not depart from iniquity, and profess they know God, but in works deny Him? And will God receive these for true converts? What! Converts from sin, when they still live in sin? It is a visible contradiction. . . . We find not only professing Christians, but preachers of Christ, and wonder-workers, rejected, because they are evil-workers (Matt 7.22-23).⁶

Beware of this Pharaoh-like response of open defiance to God’s Word and judgments, even if you profess Christ.

#2: Crafty Challenge. “Then Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers: now the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with enchantments” (Exod 7.11).

Every religious competitor to biblical faith comes under this category. A popular modern form of this sin is skepticism about the Christian faith that often masquerades as innocent truth-seeking and zeal for

³ British chess grandmaster Nigel Short, quoted in *The King’s Gambit* by Paul Hoffman, p. 362.

⁴ E.g., atheist Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*.

⁵ John W. Gunderson, quoted by John Gerstner in *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, p. 301.

⁶ *A Sure Guide to Heaven, or, An Alarm to the Unconverted*, p. 19.

reason. Timothy Keller's new book answers seven of these challenges.

1) There can't be just *one* true religion. 2) How could a good God allow suffering? 3) Christianity is a straightjacket. 4) The church is responsible for so much injustice. 5) How can a loving God send people to hell? 6) Science has disproved Christianity. 7) You can't take the Bible literally.⁷

Many people consider the Christian faith on a level with other religions, perhaps better in some respects, but not as good in others. Friends, here is the truth of the matter. Biblical Christianity is *true* because it alone is revealed from heaven; other religions are *false* because they have other sources. To challenge the claims of gospel truth is to challenge the authority of God Himself who spoke it.

It is very politically-correct today for professing Christians to deny the exclusivity of the Christian faith, and to speak respectfully—even reverently—about other religions. The RCC has been a leader in “interfaith dialogue” and gross ecumenism. Vatican II (1963-1965) speaks glowingly about Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christless Judaism.⁸ Further, even some modern evangelicals have lately signed a document exalting Islam.⁹ These are Pharaoh-like sins of crafty challenge to God's Word.

Some people esteem the RCC because of alleged miracles like famous appearances of the Virgin Mary associated with supposed healings, but these have no more authority than the tricks of Pharaoh's magicians. The “man of sin” or “antichrist” will have Satanic power to do “signs and lying wonders” (2 Thess 2.8-10), and Protestants for centuries have interpreted this prophecy as fulfilled in the RCC papacy.¹⁰

Beware of being deceived by Pharaoh's magicians!

#3: Disdainful Disregard. “And Pharaoh turned and went into his house, neither did he set his heart to this also” (Exod 7.23).

“Disdain” is not necessarily so obvious, as it is merely “the feeling that someone or something is unworthy of one's consideration and respect.”¹¹ Disregard is the action that follows, simply not paying attention to something or someone. This reaction to the Word of God preached is so common, it is almost amazing that anyone should

⁷ First seven chapter titles of *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Dutton, 2008).

⁸ “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” (1965).

⁹ http://www.bereanbeacon.org/articles_pdf/IslandsTactics.pdf

¹⁰ For example, 1689 LBCF XXVI.4. See my essay, “The Papal Antichrist: A Call to Recognition and Opposition” (Feb 2007).

¹¹ Pocket OED.

actually take the Word seriously, meditating on it and actually changing one's thoughts, attitudes, and actions because of it. And yet *only this* evidences a real and saving faith.

Jas 1.21-25 warns against disdainfully disregarding God's Word, and it does so in a context of salvation. This Word “is able to save your souls” (v. 21), but only if you believe and do it. To hear it and not do it is to deceive yourselves (v. 22)—that is, to possess only a vain religion (cf. 26). The hearer-only is like a man who sees himself in a mirror, and then goes his way, forgetting what kind of man he was (vv. 23-24). He does not “peer into” the Word, continue peering into the Word, remembering what he heard, and putting it into practice, and so he remains under the curse of sinners (v. 25).

Listen, your eternal destiny is related to whether you really and truly take the Word to heart! Do you read the Bible each day, not only to check off the next passage on your list, but to commune with God, be changed from the inside out, and get your spiritual orders? Or do you seek refuge *from* God in other things? How do you spend Sunday evenings after hearing the Word of God in church? Do you waste the rest of the day in empty recreation, or seize it greedily as a special opportunity for spiritual edification? Exod 7.23 describes how some of you habitually respond to Sunday sermons! An hour later, can you even remember what you heard? Beware of this Pharaoh-like cancer of the soul!

#4: Deceitful Negotiation. “Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron, and said, 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. . . . But when Pharaoh saw that there was respite, he hardened his heart, and hearkened not unto them” (Exod 8.8, 15).

I know a certain old man who claimed to be a Christian for three years when he was a teenager, but has since said it “didn't work” for him. I heard that during that time, he thought up and drew a religious cartoon mocking sinful human nature. As I recall the description, the first frame pictured a young man very sick in bed, praying to the Lord, “God, if you will only heal me, I will serve you for the rest of my life.” The next frame showed him up and better. The last frame portrayed him out sowing his wild oats again, riding in a car with his friends, as if nothing had happened. The irony is that the teenage cartoonist apostatized from the faith just like the fool he had ridiculed.

How often has your seeming piety increased just when you felt most desperate, and then the crisis passes, and you remain unchanged? Do you irreverently try to make deals with God? How many broken vows are going to haunt you on Judgment Day? Vowing is not wrong, but

Scripture warns against breaking them (Eccl 5.4-5). This sin of Pharaoh, too, is alarmingly common.

#5: Hypocritical Humiliation. Pharaoh said, “I have sinned this time: the LORD is righteous, and I and my people are wicked” (Exod 9.27).

We remarked before that the phrase “I have sinned” may be one of the hardest to pronounce in any language, but Pharaoh managed it as a reprobate man. Yet it is easy enough to say those words if we only do it *superficially*, without a deep appreciation of what they mean, or while harboring excuses for our sin, or to be seen by others.

Practically everyone realizes that humility is a Christian virtue, so if one would be thought of as a Christian, he must be willing to engage in self-deprecation. However, many speak that way with a secret pride that they do! Many would pray “the sinner’s prayer,” “God be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18.13), and then think to themselves, “God, I thank you that I am not like that proud Pharisee,” when they are *exactly* like him and totally unlike the humble publican.

My Calvinism taught me many years ago that I was by nature a depraved sinner, full of sinful pride, and thus I dutifully confessed the same. But the first time someone told me they had noticed this sin in me, I was angry with them! Years later hearing the same accusation, I was crushed and responded in prayer with great contrition and many tears, all to the credit of God’s grace alone.

Do you only confess your sins without feeling, or just because you think that by doing so, you can claim 1 John 1.9 and escape the wrath of God? Do you find yourself confessing the same sin again and again and again without any sincere intention to stop, or at least no real turning away from that sin? If so, yours is a hypocritical humiliation! See Prov 28.13.

But we must not overlook the distinctive feature of this confession. It is not that of Pharaoh, extorted on the rack; or of Saul and Judas, the stinging of remorse; or of the Pharisees and Sadducees, mere formal profession; or of the harlot, a cover for sin. Penitent faith confesses in the act of laying the hand upon the great sacrifice, and hence draws strength of purpose to forsake all that has been here confessed. For while the hypocrite confesses without forsaking, the hearty forsaking is here the best proof of the sincere confessing. And this first act of the penitent is matured into the daily habit of the saint. The further we advance, the deeper will be the tone of confession. The moment sin is seen to be sin, let it be laid on the Surety’s Head.¹²

Is this not a convicting word? When was the last time you blushed with shame, and your heart truly mourned over your sin. How long has it been since you pled with the Lord to forgive you, and then were amazed when you felt some assurance that He had? How zealous are you to forsake all your sins, and to do everything you can to make things right, and repair the harm your sin caused other people? Oh, friends, beware the Pharaoh-like plague of hypocritical humiliation!

#6: Personal Hostility. “Pharaoh said unto him, Get thee from me, take heed to thyself, see my face no more; for in that day thou seest my face thou shalt die” (Exod 10.28).

This sinful reaction to God’s Word can be much more subtle it appears in Pharaoh’s case. Have you ever lost your temper toward someone who has been pressing your conscience to convict you of sin? Have there been times when your wife or your husband has been doing this, even with love and patience, and still, you were angry? If so, you are guilty of this kind of personal hostility (Matt 5.22).

Sometimes the hostility is completely internalized. Do you resent faithful preachers, and prefer those who flatter you and assure you that everything will be fine because God loves you unconditionally? Oh, my endangered hearer, beware of this wicked attitude! Time after time supposed brethren have begun to worship with us here and soon after we “step on their toes,” they complain about feeling “uncomfortable” and leave us for a “nicer church.” That is *not* a hopeful sign concerning their spiritual state.

The phrase “I hate him” only occurs twice in the Bible, and both are telling the same story (1 Kgs 22.8; 2 Chron 18.7). The speaker was Ahab the wicked king of Israel, and he was referring to Micaiah, a faithful prophet of the Lord, because he “doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil.” This courageous man of God was constantly telling wicked Ahab the truth that God was against him until he would repent of his idolatry and immorality! And God’s preachers have always aroused the personal hostility of sinners. Paul lamented that even among the Corinthian church members, that “though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved” (2 Cor 12.15). His preaching painfully exposed their pride, divisiveness, sexual immorality, and many other sins.

How different is the attitude of a sincere Christian! See Psa 141.5; Prov 9.8-9; 25.12; 27.6, etc. It is a matter of love to rebuke your neighbor because of his sin, and the person of spiritual discernment is grateful in return (Lev 19.17-18).

¹² Charles Bridges, in loc.

#7: Grudging, Temporary Surrender. “Why have we done this, that we have let Israel go from serving us?” (Exod 14.5).

Spiritually waving the white flag before God is no sign of true faith if it is only done under duress. In these cases, it is only a cessation of hostile action, not a heartfelt recognition of God’s supreme worthiness to be worshipped! Just like in Pharaoh’s case, repentance only coerced by the threat of hell is bound to be repented of, and your hatred for God will return stronger than ever before! Have you just grudgingly acquiesced to God’s demands without love to Him, and then you keep returning to the same old sins again and again?

A spiritual surrender consistent with genuine salvation is complete and permanent. True Christians have always known that. Saul the Pharisee was totally and forever transformed into the Lord Jesus’ willing and loyal servant. Seeing the glorified Savior on the road to Damascus, Saul only had two questions: “Who art thou, Lord?,” and “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts 9.5-6). Hear several other testimonies of Christians with insight on this:¹³

- If you lay yourself at Christ’s feet He will take you up into His arms (William Bridge).
- The child of God has only one dread—to offend his Father; only one desire—to please and delight in Him (Charles Bridges).
- Christianity is the total commitment of all I know of me to all I know of Jesus Christ (William Temple).
- If religion be worth anything it is worth everything (Matthew Henry).
- Whatever the cost in rearrangement, including bravely coming to terms with loved ones, friends, not to say pursuits, pleasures and indulgences, you must turn to the Lord and give yourself afresh to Him (William Still).
- We are not truly converted if we are not intellectually and morally converted, and we are not intellectually and morally converted if we have not subjected our minds and wills to the yoke of Jesus Christ (John Stott).
- Jesus will not be a Savior to any man who refuses to bow to Him as Lord (Walter Chantry).

Now what kind of surrender appears in your life, if any—the grudging, temporary kind, or that glad and reckless abandon to Christ in all those who are truly saved? As we said from the beginning,

Your true character shows in your responses to God’s Word and judgments.

PHARAOH’S END A MERCIFUL WARNING TO US (Exod 14.28-31)

Pharaoh’s destruction in the Red Sea remains to this day as one of the greatest stories of an infamous villain’s catastrophic end. Why did God do it in the first place, and preserve such a historic and dramatic rehearsal of it in the Scriptures? Because He has always resolved to save His elect from among the sinners of this world! When Israel saw that great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians, they feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and His servant Moses (v. 31). Such terrible judgments recorded in the Scriptures and now preached to us are intended as a means of grace to those whom God would save (1 Cor 10.6, 11).

THE WARRANT FOR UNIVERSAL HOPE

Still, some hearing the doctrine of Pharaoh’s predestination to damnation and God’s hardening his heart will be tempted to despair. “What if I am predestined to hell? What if God is hardening my heart so that I cannot believe the gospel and be saved?” Indeed, I cannot conceive of a more terrifying reality for anyone, and we do not deny that some of you here may be in this case for all you know.

However, I strongly urge upon you these thoughts as well. No one can know for sure in this life that he is reprobate in this sense, and absolutely anyone who will believe the gospel will be saved! We have a warrant to hope for the salvation of everyone living, especially if you have been so highly privileged by God to hear the gospel preached to you. Your responsibility is not to pry into the secret counsels of God about your eternal destiny, but to turn from your sins, abandoning all hope of self-justification, and casting yourself without reserve upon the mercy of God through Jesus Christ, who died for sinners like you! Let Jesus’ promise in John 5.24 be a word of hope and life to you, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.”

May the Lord give each one of you grace to believe the gospel, and the sweet evidences of new life in Christ that shall flood your soul with strong assurance that you are saved for time and eternity. Amen.

¹³ All from *The Complete Gathered Gold*, ed. John Blanchard, under “abandonment,” “consecration,” and “submission.”