

Sermon 31, Dealing with Temporary Repentance, Exodus 9:27-35

Proposition: Pharaoh's temporary repentance, and Moses' wise handling of it, show us both what genuine repentance looks like and how to shrewdly respond to those who fake it.

- I. Pharaoh's Temporary Repentance, vv. 27-35
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 - B. It Only Pays Lip Service to the Righteousness of God, v. 27b
 - C. It Refuses to Pray, v. 28
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, Pharaoh saw the seventh plague, the plague of hail, and he got scared. He didn't get scared enough to permanently turn to Yahweh, of course. But he did get scared enough to temporarily turn. What he did — temporarily backing down, paying lip service to the majesty and correctness of God — is what I call temporary repentance. It was not the real thing, but it did bear some resemblance to it. What's fascinating about this temporary repentance is how common it is. We have all dealt with temporary repenters. We have all been temporary repenters. Moses shows us how to deal with temporary repentance in a wise, prudent, and godly fashion.

I. Pharaoh's Temporary Repentance, vv. 27-35

We start with the bad news — with Pharaoh's temporary repentance, and what it looked like. I'm afraid that this is going to look and feel uncomfortably familiar.

A. It Refuses to Reckon With All Sin, v. 27a

So here's the first characteristic of temporary repentance: It will say "I have sinned this time." It will not say "I've been in the habit of sinning for a long time." It will not say, "My sin is congenital and disgusting." It gets focused on one *really bad* sin, and ignores all the rest of its sins. They don't count. The first six plagues, and the heart-hardening in their wake, are not important to Pharaoh. When the pressure is bad enough, he admits that he has done *something* wrong. But he will never plead guilty to doing *everything* wrong. Far from it. And so, refusing to reckon with all sin, Pharaoh signals that his repentance is totally temporary.

B. It Only Pays Lip Service to the Righteousness of God, v. 27b

Second, he pays lip service to the righteousness of God. A temporary repenter will admit that he is wrong and God is right — in this particular instance, relating to this particular thing. “Well, yes, I should not have cheated on my wife. That was wrong. God says adultery is wrong and He is telling the truth.”

You say, “OK. What about the bad attitude you had toward your wife all of last year, all the ways you resented her for having a hard time with your previous affair?”

The temporary repenter says “That’s different. She was totally out of line.”

Brothers and sisters, Pharaoh here is not saying “God is righteous” with the meaning “God is always right, always does everything in accordance with right, and my people and I are sinners from birth and totally dependent on His bleeding charity.” Commentator after commentator pointed out that what Pharaoh is actually saying is “OK, you won.” The term “righteous” is a term referring to the one who wins a lawsuit, and “wicked ones” refers to the losers. In other words, Pharaoh uses these terms that can mean “righteous” and “wicked” in their full biblical significance, but that is totally not what he means. Rather, he means “Fine, you won. We lost.” I can just picture Yul Brynner saying it, too.

That’s temporary repentance for you. It knows when it’s beaten. But it is pretty sure that it can get up and win later on.

Do you do this? “God has stopped me from sinning now. But I’ll go back to my sin as soon as it’s safe, as soon as it’s convenient, as soon as it’s pleasant. It will be waiting for me, cool and delicious.” Do you have this attitude? I know you do sometimes. I do too. Beware of it!

C. It Refuses to Pray, v. 28

Furthermore, temporary repentance won’t pray. Notice how in his temporary repentance Pharaoh asks Moses to pray for him — not to pray for him to repent, of course, nor to pray for him to depart from iniquity, but only to pray for him to stop experiencing the consequences of his sin. Does that sound familiar? In your distress, you will even ask others to turn to God on your behalf, but only so that you can be relieved of the pain and trial that God’s judgment has brought on you.

Maybe you would not think of yourself as actively refusing to pray; maybe you would only think of yourself as praying later. “I’ll get to it as soon as I’m not so busy. I’ll do it after I just finish this article, this show, this task.” Do you ever think or feel that way? Sure you do. I do too. And watch out, brothers and sisters. It’s a sign of temporary repentance. “I have to keep my distance from God, because if I really got close to Him I would have to throw away my sin and stop living for pleasure or power or whatever my temptation is.”

D. It Distinguishes Yahweh from God, v. 28

This one is really tricky. Notice, though, how Pharaoh says “Supplicate Yahweh, because I’ve had enough of the voices of God.”

Now, it doesn’t seem that odd; the Bible switches out Yahweh and God all the time as a way of varying the style. But there is reason to believe that Pharaoh was deliberately denigrating Yahweh as not on a par with Elohim. The true ruling power in the universe, if you will, the

generic essence of Deity (yes, one of the commentators on this book actually “translates” “Elohim” as “Deity” throughout his entire commentary), is not the same thing as Yahweh of the Hebrews. Yahweh and Elohim are different things; the gods of Egypt are more god-like than the God of the Hebrews. So Pharaoh seems to imply. Anyway, the other reason to think that Pharaoh has distinguished Yahweh from God, through his tone, body language, or something else, is how Moses responds in v. 30. There, Moses uses the phrase “Yahweh God.” That phrase appears so often in the creation account that we forget that it hardly appears elsewhere in the Bible. This, in fact, is its only appearance in the Pentateuch outside of Gen. 1-3. Why? Because Moses is emphasizing back to Pharaoh that Yahweh and God are the same being. There is no difference or distinction between them, for they are one and the same.

How do you and I distinguish Yahweh from God? When we think of Him as generic. When we project what God must be like, according to our private intuitions, onto Him, rather than believing what He has revealed about Himself. When we think of God and Christ as two separate individuals. Or when we believe that our sins don’t matter because the god we really serve (whom we call “Jesus”) doesn’t disapprove of them.

E. It’s Self-Centered: “I’ve Had Enough Judgment,” v. 28

Well, Pharaoh’s temporary repentance is also marked by a basic self-centeredness. Pharaoh literally says “There’s been enough of the voices of God and hail.” I’m tired of it; I’ve had enough! Not “I am really sorry that my sin deserved this judgment,” and definitely not “I’m sorry that I am such a rotten sinner who deserves way worse than what I’ve gotten.” No. The temporary repenter will tell you at the drop of a hat how tired of the consequences of sin he is! And then he will have the gall to suggest that God should stop punishing him because he’s sick and tired of those punishments. Wow.

F. It Doesn’t Follow Through, v. 35

Finally, then, temporary repentance does not follow through. Obviously! That’s what makes it temporary. Pharaoh’s heart was hardened; he had not the slightest desire to keep on living for the Lord, despite all the promises he made under duress. And so it ever is with the temporary repenter. As soon as the immediate duress is gone, he’s right back to his old tricks.

II. Moses’ Wise Dealing, vv. 27-35

But Pharaoh’s temporary repentance doesn’t fool Moses. Moses shows us five things to do to handle temporary repentance — in others, but also in ourselves.

A. Don’t Trust Pain to Make Temporary Repenters Fear God, v. 30

The first of them should be obvious to us: No matter how much the temporary repenter is hurting, pain alone is not going to change any hearts. Otherwise the Gulag and the Holocaust would have made a whole bunch of Christians. No. Pain by itself is not particularly salutary. Moses knew from Pharaoh’s behavior to this point that the man did not fear God. His self-centered speech about how “this time” he had sinned and so on did not inspire any confidence in the fellow. Far from it. And brothers and sisters, if you know yourself to be a temporary repenter, ask: Do I fear God? I’m going through pain right now; do I think it will somehow, magically, make me a better person?

And if you're dealing with a temporary repenter, ignore the whining and complaining. If you have good reason to believe that the person does not yet fear God, treat them accordingly. That doesn't mean you should be cruel; it just means that you shouldn't trust them. Don't expect their decisions to be driven by the fear of Yahweh. Instead, keep working to teach the temporary repenter the fear of God.

B. Demonstrate through Prayer that the Earth Is the LORD's, v. 29

One major way you should do that is by showing the power of prayer. Do you believe that God hears your prayer? Are you motivated to pray because you trust Him implicitly? I've seen many answers to prayers — to prayers for a spouse, for healing, for furniture, for a job, for a house. I have not seen every prayer answered in an unmistakable way. Far from it. But I have seen a bunch of them answered. Moses was going to pray that the thunder and hail would stop. When he did that, God would answer the prayer — thus proving that the earth belongs to Yahweh.

Do you pray in such a way that people you pray for are keenly aware that the earth belongs to Yahweh, and that He will do anything necessary for His people's good and His own glory?

C. Be Aware of What Temporary Repenters Are Trusting In, vv. 31-32

Pharaoh's behavior gets more explicable once you know that he is putting his hope in the other two crops, the ones that hadn't been damaged by the hail. He wasn't thrown entirely onto the mercy of God. Oh no. He had another source of strength, something that allowed him to think he was bamboozling the Almighty yet again. "Though you sent hail, Yahweh, I still have wheat and spelt. My main crops are far from ruined."

What do you trust in? God's patience with those who continue in sin? The fact that what you're doing is not illegal? That you've gotten away with it thus far? Or what? The temporary repenter always has some refuge, some bolthole, that allows them to think they are getting away with their sin and don't need to turn from it in order to live.

D. Insist that Yahweh Is God, v. 30

Moses insisted that Yahweh was God. He would not allow Pharaoh to make a distinction between God and Yahweh. Oh no you don't, Pharaoh! Yahweh God is the one you must fear. If you're confronting your own temporary repentance, or someone else's, you must emphasize the character of the one to whom we must give an account. Yahweh God is the only one who reigns — so submit to Him, and permanently repent of your sins!

E. Don't Insist on Continually Pressuring the Temporary Repenter, v. 33

But finally, Moses actually lets the plague stop. I'm not suggesting that if you're the temporary repenter you should give yourself a pass and say "Oh, my pastor says I can keep my sin." Not at all. But if your husband keeps cheating on you, if your child keeps rebelling against you, if your pastor keeps spiritually abusing you or your boss keeps telling you to lie, don't try to set up situations that will pressure those people to change. You can ask them to change, but at the end of the day, it was not Moses' responsibility to plague Egypt until Pharaoh changed his spots. Nor is it your responsibility to get your spouse straightened out, your responsibility to change everyone around you for the better. Moses knew that Pharaoh did not yet fear God, but he lifted

the plague anyway. Why? Because pain won't bring repentance. Repentance is God's gift. If you are struggling with temporary repentance in yourself, pray as hard as you can for God to give you the gift of genuine repentance. If you are struggling with it in someone else, pray as hard as you can for that person. But don't make it your mission to change him.

Moses knew that Pharaoh wasn't going to change; God knows that certain people aren't going to change. But we are not prophets; we don't know that. And so we hope, pray, and press on. Above all, as you know the plague of your own heart and how temporary so much of your repentance really is, turn to Jesus. He can grant repentance and save you even from yourself. Fly to Him today. Amen.