

Every day we are faced with choices. A study done by Cornell University states that the average adult makes more than 70 decisions daily; we make about 12 decisions before 9:00 a.m. If we include the amount of times you hit the snooze button, some of you make 3-4 decisions before you even get out of bed.

Entering a grocery store is a decision-making-workout. Basket or buggy? A few items or many? The produce aisle forces us to choose between organic and non-organic, pre-packaged or not, vegetables or fruit, or both. As you walk down Aisle 7, hoping to find some crackers, your eyes take in the myriad of choices: gluten free or fat free, low sodium or high sodium, whole wheat or whole grain. And this doesn't even take into account the price point, nutritional content, quantity, flavour, etc.

So far, I've only mentioned simple choices. The kind of cracker we eat may shape our waistline, but it won't shape who we become; by contrast, other choices we make have a profound effect on who we are and how we experience life.

illus: I was blessed to grow up within a large, extended family—uncles, aunts, and cousins; I was doubly blessed to have both sets of grandparents close by. As an adult, I have grown to understand and appreciate my grandparents' story, but as a young boy all I knew was what I experienced in their presence.

My dad's parents were delightful, kind, and loving; whenever I was with them I felt happy and safe. My mom's parents were less than delightful—it's not that they were unkind or unloving but that they

were always upset about one thing or another. To them, life was always unfair—there was always something to complain about, someone who had snubbed or slighted them, someone who had it better than them but was less deserving. When I was with them I was often on edge—I didn't want to become the focus for their anger; it was safer to be out of sight and ear shot.

What's interesting is that my dad's parents had actually had a much tougher life. Immigrating from Russia, my dad's parents had nothing, living significant portions of their lives on the brink of poverty. But they lived with such joy, such gratitude, you would never guess their back story. My mom's parents had a much easier path through life, but you wouldn't know it from the way they related to others.

What made the difference between the two? Their pathways diverged on the basis of the choices they made. I've shared a simple story from my own family but I have no doubt you could share other examples: choices that led to addictive behaviour, or the loss of a job, or a breakdown in physical, emotional, or relational health.

In a cause and effect universe there is a power in our choices—our choices exercise a kind of power over us. The freedom to choose is both the privilege and price of being human¹—with freedom comes the responsibility to bear the consequences of our choice.

One scholar writes, "Choosing and habit forming are things we all know about... Humans are so created that the choices they make contribute to forming character, and character thus formed promotes the making of similar choices in the future. Sometimes it takes a very

¹ J.A. Motyer, *The Message Of Exodus*, 122.

long series of choices to produce a fixed habit, sometimes one choice is enough... What none of us knows is when the point of 'no return' will be reached."²

This morning we turn our attention back to the Book of Exodus and to God's mighty acts of judgment—all told, 10 plagues were visited upon Egypt. Pharaoh chose freely, repeatedly, to stand against God's plans. In doing so, his heart increasingly became hard to God, and in the end, Pharaoh brought suffering upon himself, his people, and the land of Egypt.

At this time, let me encourage you to turn in your Bibles with me to Exodus 7:1-10:29. In order to address this lengthy section of Scripture in a single sermon, I'm going to be selective about what I address and what I pass over. As I make my way through this text, I will offer a number of observations and along the way I will answer two questions that are inherent in the text. As I begin, please turn your attention to Exodus 7, verses 2-5 and 8-13.

God said to Moses, *"You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites. And the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it."*

"The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'When Pharaoh says to you, 'Perform a miracle,' then say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh,' and it will become a snake.' So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts: Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Yet Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said."

Observation #1: My first observation has to do with the purpose of the plagues. Pharaoh's heart was stone-cold to God's purposes; he refused to grant God's request to release Israel. And so, the plagues function as signs and wonders, revealing God's power. As Pharaoh refused God's request, the plagues functioned as mighty acts of judgement, forcing Pharaoh to acknowledge God. Later on, in Exodus 12:12, God describes the plagues as a judgement against the gods of Egypt—I will come back to this thought in a little while.

Observation #2: The text I've just read takes place before the first plague and yet, it contains the main elements that we see in each successive plague. Take a closer look. When Aaron's staff was transformed into a snake, it was a direct challenge to Pharaoh's power. Remember, the kings of Egypt wore crowns that were adorned with a cobra—a symbol of their power. We're told that Pharaoh's sorcerers were able to replicate the same feat—their staffs became snakes—but Aaron's snake swallowed their snakes whole.

² Motyer, 121-122.

God demonstrated His power and Pharaoh resisted the obvious conclusion—he was utterly and completely outmatched. But instead of surrendering to God’s purposes, he clenched his fists and prepared to fight. In each plague, Pharaoh was brought to his knees, but each time God lifted the plague, Pharaoh got up from the mat stubbornly refusing to relent.

Observation #3: Before I offer a third observation, I need to remind you that we are dealing with theological history, that is, we are dealing with God’s relationship to the world within the events of history. And as such, there is more going on than meets the eye.

It would be easy to categorize the two combatants as Moses and Pharaoh. “*Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the main event. Fighting out of the Blue Corner we have the Challenger, a Slave-Prince-turned-Shepherd, and fighting out of the Red Corner we have the The King of Sting, the Master of Disaster, the Undisputed Champion of the world—Pharaoh, King of Egypt.*”

But the real confrontation is not between Moses and Pharaoh, nor even God and Pharaoh, but between Yahweh, the One True God, and the “gods” of Egypt.

In the first plague—Exodus 7:14-24— the life-giving waters of the Nile were transformed into blood. In ancient Egyptian religion, Hapi was the patron god of the Nile—he was credited with providing Egypt with fish, birds, and fertile land. But with a word from Yahweh, the Nile became unable to sustain life—so much for the power of Egypt’s river god.

Ex. 8:1-14 describes the second plague. This time, at Yahweh’s word, the Nile produces too much life—it began to teem with frogs, and soon, Egypt was overrun. One of Egypt’s goddesses, Heqet, the goddess of fertility, was often depicted with the head of a frog. But it was Yahweh, not Heqet, who proved to be the Lord of life.

Question #1: And this leads to the first question I want to address this morning—**What does the Bible teach about the “gods”? Isn’t there only one God?** While the Bible does teach that there is only One God—Eternal and Uncreated—it also recognizes that there are other spiritual beings—created by God—who are worshipped as “gods” in other religions.

As the plague narratives reveal, these spiritual beings have power—albeit limited; if they didn’t have power, Pharaoh’s sorcerers would have been unable to replicate the miracles performed through Moses. God transformed water into blood and so did the sorcerers; God brought forth frogs from the Nile and so did the sorcerers.

But notice the limitation to their power. The sorcerers were able to produce blood and frogs—they could make things worse—but what they couldn’t do was undo what God had done—they could replicate the plagues but they could not remove them. In Exodus 8:8, Pharaoh was reduced to asking for the Lord’s help.

By the time we get to the third plague, the sorcerers had reached the limit of their power. Listen to Exodus 8:17-19, “*when Aaron stretched out his hand with the staff and struck the dust of the ground, gnats came on people and animals. All the dust throughout the land of Egypt became gnats. But when the magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, they could not. Since the gnats*

were on people and animals everywhere, the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God.' But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the Lord had said."

The sorcerers' admission points to an important spiritual truth: there is no dualism in our universe. There are many spirits in this world and they do have a kind of power, but, their power is not equal and opposite to God—it is limited. There is One God, One Sovereign Lord, who is over all. This Lord is Good. He is Love. He is with us and for us. Of whom shall we be afraid?

Observation #4: Let's get back to observations. In each plague, the moment God delivered Pharaoh from trouble, he hardened his heart and once more took a stand against God. I'm going to come back to this in **Question #2**, but for now let me offer a 4th observation. *We tend to turn to God when we need Him and ignore Him when it's convenient.*

In the face of difficulty, uncertainty, or pain, many undergo a miniature "re-conversion"—we find our faith again, we cry out to God for help, rescue, wisdom, or strength. But the moment God responds and our need has passed, we become prayerless, and for all intents and purpose, we become practical atheists—self-reliant, self-directed, self-focussed; *how quickly we forget God.*

Observation #5: As the plagues progressed in severity, God made a distinction between Israel and Egypt. Beginning with the 4th plague—the plague of flies—God afflicts Egypt but spares Israel. In Exodus 8:20-24 God said to Pharaoh, "*Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you do not let my people go, I will send swarms of flies on you and your officials, on your people and into your houses.*

The houses of the Egyptians will be full of flies; even the ground will be covered with them. But on that day I will deal differently with the land of Goshen, where my people live; no swarms of flies will be there, so that you will know that I, the Lord, am in this land. I will make a distinction between my people and your people. This sign will occur tomorrow."

It wasn't that God loved Israelites and hated Egyptians—this was a power struggle between Yahweh and the gods of Egypt. God had the power to protect Israel, but neither Egypt's gods nor her king could offer similar protection to Egyptians. But instead of surrendering to God's purposes, Pharaoh refused to bend his will to Yahweh's and all of Egypt paid the price for his stubborn pride.

Question #2: At this time I want to address a second question. As the plague narratives unfold, we are given window into what is happening in and to Pharaoh's heart. Over the course of Exodus 7-11, we read that when confronted by God's mighty acts, Pharaoh's heart became hard, or, that Pharaoh hardened his heart, or, that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. The first two we understand, but the third descriptor casts a shadow on God—it smells of foul play.

If God is all-powerful, and if He hardened Pharaoh's heart—making it impossible for him to repent—would God be just in punishing Pharaoh? Did Pharaoh have a real choice or did God program him to rebel? Did Pharaoh have freedom to choose for or against God—do any of us? This begs the larger question about the nature of sovereignty and free will. *What does the Bible have to say?* When we talk about sovereignty vs. free will, what we're really talking about is God's freedom and human freedom. *What God is free to do and what we are free to do?*

Let's begin with God. Is God's freedom greater than our freedom? Most certainly—He is God and we are not! As Creator, God's freedom includes the power to direct everything towards His ultimate purpose. By comparison, we are created beings, living in His world, and as such, our comprehension of His purposes, and our freedom is appropriately limited.

Now, our freedom may be limited, but is God's freedom unlimited? Put another way, *is God completely free to do what He wants?* The answer is "yes," God is free to do what He wants, but of course, there are all kinds of things that God doesn't want to do. God doesn't want to be kind one day and then cruel and manipulative the next; God doesn't want to make a promise and then go back on His word. While God is completely free to do what He wants, His freedom functions in alignment with His character—if you like, His freedom to choose is limited to what is holy, righteous, and good.

Some Christians are convinced that God's sovereignty requires that He predetermine everything, meaning, God has rendered certain every detail, every choice that will ever be made by everyone, everywhere. In this scenario, God has predetermined each choice and ultimately preprogrammed humanity—we have been preprogrammed to make the decisions that God has determined in advance for us to make.

Unfortunately, this kind of theology leaves us wanting for real freedom to choose, and much worse, it makes God the author of evil in the world. If God has preprogrammed you to drink too much on

Friday night, and then get into a car and drive too fast, who is ultimately responsible for the ensuing fatality? Is it not God? The only way we can be held responsible is if we have the freedom to choose.

Consider the implications if such a reality existed. It would mean that from eternity past, God looked forward, across the centuries, and predetermined every choice—that you will cheat on your spouse, you will become addicted to drugs, and that you, sorry to say, will live a bitter, angry, lonely existence. Is this what God does? Does this speaking square with who He is?

All Christians have always believed that nothing can happen in the world apart from God's permission, but if everything that happens has been planned and rendered certain by God, then God and God alone must be held responsible. I believe the Bible teaches limited, human, free will, if for no other reason than it preserves human responsibility for pain, sin, evil, and death.³

Make no mistake, God is sovereign, and nothing happens in this world apart from His permission, but not everything happens according to His good pleasure and purpose—many of our choices grieve His heart; God is not the author of evil.

Pharaoh's example reminds us that in a cause and effect universe, there is a power in our choices—our choices exercise a kind of power over us. The freedom to choose is both the privilege and price of being human—with freedom comes the responsibility to bear the consequences of our choice.

³ Roger E. Olsen, *Against Calvinism*, 23.

So why does God allow for human freedom, knowing that humanity will use this freedom to reject Him, and cause pain to others? Love requires a choice—apart from the freedom to choose, there is no possibility for love. God loves us, and He invites us into relationship but we are free to refuse Him.⁴ Wasn't this was the case for Pharaoh? God repeatedly demonstrated His power before Pharaoh, but instead of surrendering to God's purposes, Pharaoh chose freely, repeatedly, to stand against God's plans.

Four times Pharaoh hardened his heart, four times he refused God, and with each choice, his heart became less willing, less able, to respond to God. As I said earlier, “Choosing and habit forming are things we all know about... Sometimes it takes a very long series of choices to produce a fixed habit, sometimes one choice is enough... What none of us knows is when the point of ‘no return’ will be reached.” In the end, God simply affirmed Pharaoh's choice—*have it your way Pharaoh, you have refused Me again and again, and I will no longer make it possible for you to turn and repent.*

While God does not force us to follow Him, our freedom to reject God cannot and will not hinder God's plans from coming to pass. In Exodus 9:16 God said to Pharaoh, “*I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.*” Pharaoh's refusal did not hinder God from rescuing His people. God has written contingencies into His plans that allow for our inadequacies, failures, and in the case of

Pharaoh, even stubborn rebellion—but our limited freedom cannot derail His purposes.

Conclusion/Application: As I draw my sermon to a close, I am well aware that there is so much more to say than what 30 minutes has allowed. In these final moments, I want to invite you to evaluate the posture of your own heart before God.

illus: the story is told of a young child, wild with energy—running around the house, she chased the cat, jumped off the furniture, and tormented her sibling; the mother was driven to the limits of patience. The mother repeatedly told the child to stop, but the child refused to listen. Finally the mother took her daughter by the arm, sat her on the floor and told her to sit still. Crossing her arms, she looked up at her mother in defiance and said, “*I may be sitting down on the outside, but I'm standing up on the inside!*”

David Benner writes, “In each of us there lives a two-year-old with clenched fists, gritted teeth and defiance blazing in his or her eyes. We only differ in terms of how much life this two-year-old still has and how she or he expresses that vigour.”⁵ Most of the time we hide our inner two-year-old—the older we are, the better we are at disguising our defiance. But our willfulness frequently expresses itself in an attitude that can only be described as “*my way or no way.*”

The willful, stubborn, pursuit of our plans is a major barrier between

⁴ Olsen, 67.

⁵ David G. Benner, *Desiring God's Will*, 19.

us and God. We want God to bless us, but we tend to want His blessing on our terms. And herein lies a principle of the Christian life: *we must release in order to receive.*

We have believed the lie that freedom=independence; the Bible offers a very different perspective. As we surrender ourselves to God, we find that He and He alone is the source of freedom, peace, and joy. There is no greater joy than knowing and living in the love of God—a love that endures in the face of all our faults and failure.

Pharaoh found out firsthand that refusing God brings painful consequences—are you really prepared to continue resisting Him? Return to Him while you can—while your heart is still soft and willing; tomorrow your schedule too full or your heart too hard.

The Lord's Supper: Against the backdrop of Pharaoh's stubborn heart, we see the heart of Jesus. The Scriptures teach that God the Son became a man, born of Mary. In His humanity, Jesus was like us in every way, except in one very important regard—Jesus never refused God the Father. In his freedom to choose, Jesus chose to listen, to follow, and to obey whatever the Father asked of Him. Jesus did what Adam and Eve—the first human beings—failed to do: He lived a life of perfect obedience. And because of His perfect obedience, His self-offering was acceptable in God's sight.

Jesus chose the path that led to the cross—dying for our sake was His choice, no one forced it upon Him. In John 10:17-18 Jesus said, *“The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.”*

Christ's perfect obedience culminated in His perfect sacrifice on the cross. When we look at Jesus, we see the love of God—a love that freely chose the path of suffering and death in order to reconcile us to God. Christ is present in our midst this morning by the Holy Spirit—as we eat this bread and drink this cup we participate in the love of the Father, demonstrated through Christ the Son, and made real to us by the Holy Spirit. As you eat and drink, may His great love be yours in abundance.

Worship

Prayer Ministry: I want share a quick story with you—a few weeks ago, someone came forward for prayer and experienced God's healing. She had been taking strong painkillers along with trigger point injections because of severe back pain. She came forward for prayer, a few members of our team prayed for her and she began to sense the nearness of God's presence, and almost immediately the pain in her back and side left her.

This woman sent me an email last week, and now, almost 5 weeks later, her pain is completely gone. It may be that you are experiencing physical pain today and you would like someone to pray for you; I want to remind you that our prayer ministry team would love to join you in praying for God's healing touch upon your body.

Benediction