

Shorter Catechism

Q57 What is the fourth commandment?

The fourth commandment is: Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Memory Verse Exodus 7:3-4

But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment.

Daily Readings

Monday

Exodus 7:1-15

Tuesday

Exodus 8:1-15

Wednesday

Exodus 8:16-32

Thursday

Exodus 9:1-12

Friday

Exodus 9:13-35

Saturday

Exodus 10:1-20

Sunday

Exodus 10:21-29

Exodus 6:28-8:15

Exodus 6

²⁸ On the day when the Lord spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt, ²⁹ the Lord said to Moses, "I am the Lord; tell Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I say to you." ³⁰ But Moses said to the Lord, "Behold, I am of uncircumcised lips. How will Pharaoh listen to me?"

Exodus 7

Moses and Aaron Before Pharaoh

¹ And the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. ² You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land. ³ But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, ⁴ Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. ⁵ The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and

bring out the people of Israel from among them."⁶ Moses and Aaron did so; they did just as the Lord commanded them. ⁷ Now Moses was eighty years old, and Aaron eighty-three years old, when they spoke to Pharaoh.

⁸ Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ⁹ "When Pharaoh says to you, 'Prove yourselves by working a miracle,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.'" ¹⁰ So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. ¹¹ Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. ¹² For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. ¹³ Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

The First Plague: Water Turned to Blood

¹⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. ¹⁵ Go

to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water. Stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that turned into a serpent. ¹⁶ And you shall say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, ‘Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness.’ But so far, you have not obeyed. ¹⁷ Thus says the Lord, ‘By this you shall know that I am the Lord: behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood. ¹⁸ The fish in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile.’” ¹⁹ And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, their canals, and their ponds, and all their pools of water, so that they may become blood, and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.’”

²⁰ Moses and Aaron did as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned into blood. ²¹ And the fish in the Nile died, and the Nile stank, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. There was blood throughout all the land of Egypt. ²² But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts. So Pharaoh’s heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. ²³ Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart. ²⁴ And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile.

²⁵ Seven full days passed after the Lord had struck the Nile.

Exodus 8

The Second Plague: Frogs

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.

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.’”

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.

Introduction

Many Christians are aware that Moses called down plagues on Pharaoh and the Egyptians (possibly from watching one of the various movie versions of the story); indeed, he did – no fewer than ten plagues in all, culminating in the death of the firstborn throughout Egypt. But these were not random acts of power on the Lord’s part, as if after each plague, he scratched his head and wondered in what ways he should demonstrate his awesome majesty next. Rather, these plagues were deliberately crafted to demonstrate that the Lord is the God who has sovereign control over all the elements of nature over which Pharaoh, as a divine king, claimed authority for himself. In the conflict between “Thus says Pharaoh” (Exod. 5:10) and “Thus says the Lord” (5:1), there would be one clear winner – the Lord. However, the battle would take some time to play itself out, in order to demonstrate in fullness the Lord’s power over all creation, marshalled in defense of his people.

Lesson

1. Moses and Aaron Confront Pharaoh Again (6:28-7:13)

Moses and Aaron’s first encounter with Pharaoh ended in bitter disappointment. Not only had Pharaoh not been willing to let Israel go – not even for a three day journey into the Wilderness to celebrate a religious festival (see Exod. 5:3) – but he had imposed harsh new conditions on the Israelite workers, forcing them to make the same number of bricks as before but now without the benefit of having straw provided for them (5:4-9). The result had been a rift between Moses and Aaron and the people of Israel as they blamed Moses for their worsened situation (5:20). Not surprisingly, Moses was deeply discouraged. Even when the Lord repeated his promise to deliver his people out of Egypt and bring them into the Promised Land, the people were unwilling to listen (6:9). So when the Lord told Moses to go back to Pharaoh and present his request again, Moses pushed back: why should Pharaoh listen to him if even Israel wouldn’t listen to his faltering speech? (6:12, reiterated in 6:30).

The answer was that the Lord would transform the relationship between Moses and Pharaoh, so that Pharaoh came to acknowledge Moses’ god-like authority over him; insofar as Moses’ speech was faltering, the Lord would resolve that problem by causing Aaron to function as Moses’ prophet (Exod. 7:1). This gives

us a window into the work of Biblical prophets: their task was to function as divine messengers, delivering messages from the Lord to the recipients – a role that requires the full verbal inspiration of their oracles, as they were commissioned to speak nothing less than the words of God. Yet even with this divinely-given, authoritative message, delivered with the effective public speaking skills of Aaron, the Lord declared that Pharaoh still would not listen to Moses. Instead, the Lord would harden Pharaoh’s heart and use him as an object lesson of the Lord’s powerful hand in delivering his people (7:4-5).

So did the Lord harden Pharaoh’s heart (4:21; 7:3; 9:12) or did Pharaoh harden his own heart (8:15, 32; 9:34)? The answer is that both statements are true. It is not as if Pharaoh started in a neutral state toward God, and God then forced him into unbelief against his will. Like all of us, Pharaoh started out with an unbelieving, hard heart toward God. When the Lord sovereignly hardened Pharaoh’s heart, he simply confirmed him in his unbelieving rebellion against God, an attitude that led to Pharaoh hardening his own heart still further. In order for Pharaoh to repent and change, God would have needed to intervene and first soften his hard heart. Without that sovereign act of deliverance, Pharaoh had no power to soften his own heart; it was inevitable that his hard heart would grow still harder and more confirmed in its rebellion against God, a progression that Pharaoh clearly

demonstrates in this narrative. What is remarkable is not that Pharaoh's heart remained hard; it is that the Lord could soften Israel's hard heart, giving them a heart of flesh in place of their naturally stony heart (see Ezek. 36:26).

Pharaoh's unbelieving heart was on clear display when, in response to his request for a miraculous sign, Aaron threw down his staff before him and it became a snake (Exod. 7:10). Instead of repenting, Pharaoh summoned his own magicians, who emulated Aaron's display. This didn't necessarily involve magic on their part, since a number of ancient texts describe Egyptian snake charming by which skilled practitioners could make their snakes go into a trance and remain stiff for a time. However, in Egypt religion and magic were closely connected, so priests and temples often possessed a variety of magical texts, and we cannot rule out some kind of occult practice here. In a sense, Aaron took on the Egyptian magicians at their own game by turning his staff into a serpent – but Aaron's staff scored a clear victory when it swallowed up their staffs (7:12). This was a particularly potent sign since at this period Pharaoh's crown was topped by two serpents, symbolic of the protection of his gods. After the defeat of the serpents, Pharaoh was left defenseless. Yet Pharaoh's heart remained hard and he would not pay attention to the ominous signs which confronted him, just as the Lord had declared (7:13).

2. The Plague of Blood (7:14-24)

Because of that hardening, the Lord poured out a succession of ten plagues upon Egypt, beginning with a plague in which the Nile water was transformed into blood (Exod. 7:14-24). Each of the ten plagues represents an imbalance in nature and demonstrates that Pharaoh was unable to maintain that proper balance as the Egyptians had believed. Rather, it was the Lord who was in control of nature. Some scholars have argued that these ten plagues are all explainable as natural phenomena, but that is to miss the whole point. Only the Lord can cause the arrival of these unexpected natural phe-

nomena on demand, because only he controls nature. It is similar to Jesus speaking a word and stilling the storm (Mark 4:37-41); storms may come and go all the time, but ordinary people don't have the power to say to them "Stop now!"

The first nine plagues are arranged in three groups of three, with the first of each group of plagues being introduced by a warning to Pharaoh in the morning as he went down to the Nile (Exod. 7:14; 8:20; 9:13). The Nile was the center of Egypt's economy and transportation system: its inundation every year irrigated their crops, and boats traveled up and down it, carrying passengers and cargo. Turning it to blood therefore not only removed the source of drinking water for many people, but also impacted farming and trade. However, it seems the loss of drinking water that had the most severe impact on the Egyptians, who were forced to use primitive filtration systems, digging alongside the Nile to get the water that seeped through the soil (7:24). The Israelites were apparently unaffected by this plague.

3. The Plague of Frogs (8:1-15)

You might imagine that this would be enough to bring Pharaoh to repentance, but that was not the case. After seven days, Moses and Aaron returned to Pharaoh and presented once again the Lord's demand that Pharaoh should let Israel go. When Pharaoh refused, the Lord sent a plague of frogs – perhaps fleeing the polluted Nile. The Egyptians viewed frogs as sacred animals, who should not be killed, but in this case they had far too much of a good thing. Ironically, during both of the first two plagues the Egyptian magicians were able to replicate Aaron's miracle, thus doubling up the suffering of the Egyptians! Beyond that they were not able to go, however. As early as the third plague, the plague of gnats, they were forced to admit that "This is the finger of God" (Exod. 8:19). But still Pharaoh was hard-hearted, calling down upon himself and his people the full judgments of God.

At first, Pharaoh seemed ready to relent, but then he changed his mind. He asked Moses to pray that the Lord would remove the frogs, af-

ter which he would send Israel out to worship the Lord (8:8). But when Moses cried out to the Lord and the frogs all died at exactly the moment specified by Pharaoh so that it could be abundantly clear who sent them, Pharaoh once again hardened his heart (Exod. 8:15). After the fourth plague, Pharaoh declared that Israel could go and offer sacrifices – but only inside Egypt (8:25), though he then conceded they could go into the desert but “not very far” (8:28). After the seventh plague, Pharaoh said he would let

Israel go (9:27-28); after the eighth plague, he said they might go – but without their women and children (10:11). After the ninth plagues, Pharaoh conceded that Israel might take their women and children but must leave their flocks behind (10:24). Each time, Pharaoh changed his mind after the plague had been removed. It is not until after the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn, that Pharaoh finally relented and allowed the Israelites to leave.

Application Questions

1. Why is it important to know that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart rather than Pharaoh simply hardening his own heart?
2. Why did God authorize Moses to do miraculous signs? Why don’t we see similar miracles today?
3. What do we learn from the diversity of plagues God brings on Egypt? Does that mean that contemporary natural disasters are signs of God’s judgment on modern nations?
4. What do we learn from the fact that Pharaoh repeatedly says he will let Israel go but then turns around and refuses to release them?