

WEEK
6

Oct. 19-25,
2026

Daily Bible readings

Exodus 5:22 - 15:27

Hardness of heart

Monday, Oct. 19

Exodus 5:22 – 7:13

God promises Moses that God will free his people. “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.”

Like many of God’s promises, though, the route between making the promise and fulfilling the promise will have challenges along the way. Pharaoh will have a hard heart against freeing the Israelites; that hardness of heart will raise its own questions that we still wrestle with today.

One of the great debates over how we understand scripture is visible throughout the interactions between Moses and Pharaoh. In several cases, such as 7:3, we read that God will “harden Pharaoh’s heart.”

This raises a lot of questions and can become a stumbling block for some readers. If we take these words literally, Pharaoh had no free will in the matter; it was God who caused him to reject Moses’s plea to free the Israelites. But if that’s the case, it seems to us unfair that Pharaoh and the Egyptian people would suffer for a decision they had no say in.

The same question comes up elsewhere

in scripture; it is often asked about Judas: did he really have a choice in betraying Jesus, or what he simply doing what had to be done in order for God’s plan to be realized?

From this we ask about guilt and responsibility. If the decision was really God’s decision, how can the humans involved be considered guilty of sin?

It can even lead us to question our understanding of good and evil. Is an action that leads to a good result ever really evil? Is an evil action ever justified by its good result?

And behind all this we get into questions about free will vs. predestination. Do we really make choices?

There are also questions of what we believe about the divine inspiration of scripture: Did God choose the words that are on the page, or was God simply behind the events that are relayed to us (or, in a more extreme understanding, was God even involved in making scripture happen?).

I’m bringing these questions up not to encourage philosophical detours, but because they are likely to arise, and they shape our understanding of what the text means.

For myself, I do not think that a rigid understanding of predestination is consistent with scripture. Yes, there are passages that suggest it, but strict belief in predestination requires setting aside a lot of the biblical story.

Daily reflections by Rev. Mark Fleming

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But even without a strict understanding of predestination, we can question if God prompted Pharaoh to resist in order that God's power might be shown more decisively.

That's not really a question I have a satisfying answer for, and I've simply accepted that for now.

But fortunately, there is much we can learn from the story without coming to a conclusion on that point. Regardless of why the things that happened the way they did, we know what occurred: Pharaoh did resist, and God used that resistance to build up faith in Moses and Aaron, and to let his people see signs of his immense power.

Leaving questions unanswered is always frustrating, but sometimes we need to learn what lessons we can for today and trust that we'll gain more understanding and wisdom as we go along.

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Throughout the Bible, and especially later in the Old Testament, we meet people who are described as prophets. Verse 7:1 provides insight as to exactly what the word means. "Then the Lord said to Moses, "See I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet." A prophet, then, is one who speaks about and testifies to the godliness of another—often of God himself.

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The "six things...seven things" phrasing that was used in the Proverbs passage emphasizes the comprehensiveness of the list. Six represents incompleteness, and seven represents completion.

Monday meditation

Proverbs 6:16-19

There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

Prayer focus

Lord, give me grace to find wisdom even

when I can't fully find understanding, and protect me from the vices that cause conflict in the world.

God vs. gods

Tuesday, Oct. 20

Exodus 7:14 – 8:32

To demonstrate his power, God brings a series of plagues on Egypt.

The way readers understand the plagues also depends on some of their presuppositions about how God works and how the Bible is written.

For some, the miraculous nature of the events is critically important and is a proof of God's supernatural intervention in human affairs.

Others go to great lengths to explain the plagues as natural phenomena, imagining a major upstream flood which washed red dirt and toxins into the river, killing the fish and sending the frogs fleeing from their usual habitat. Then all the dead fish and frogs cause a plague of gnats and flies. Ultimately the "natural" explanations offered become so complex that they are as supernatural as the miracle explanation.

Here again I like to focus on what happens rather than wandering into unproductive speculation about how it came to be.

Repeatedly Pharaoh defies God, and things happen to wear him down. God has determined that his people will be freed; when one course fails, he's ready to use another approach. Through it all, though, Pharaoh is determined to not give in. "Pharaoh's heart is unyielding; he refuses to let the people go."

It's interesting that the first plague is turning the Nile River into blood. While other water is also affected, it is impossible to overstate how important the Nile is to Egypt. It is the source of Egypt's very life and existence. To stand up to a threat to the Nile shows how committed Pharaoh was to resisting freedom for the slaves.

The main point here is Pharaoh's hardness of heart, but we also have a contrast

developing between the power of the gods the Egyptians worship and the true God who is guiding Moses. Even in that day the appeal of worship a god representing something familiar (like a river or the sun), was tempting to people, as it seems more approachable than the God who can't even be pinned down with a name or image.

Tuesday meditation

Proverbs 6:20-35

My son, keep your father's command and do not forsake your mother's teaching. Bind them always on your heart; fasten them around your neck. When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you.

For this command is a lamp, this teaching is a light, and correction and instruction are the way to life, keeping you from your neighbor's wife, from the smooth talk of a wayward woman. Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes. For a prostitute can be had for a loaf of bread, but another man's wife preys on your very life. Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched? So is he who sleeps with another man's wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished.

People do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving. Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold, though it costs him all the wealth of his house. But a man who commits adultery has no sense; whoever does so destroys himself. Blows and disgrace are his lot, and his shame will never be wiped away. For jealousy arouses a husband's fury, and he will show no mercy when he takes revenge. He will not accept any compensation; he will refuse a bribe, however great it is.

Prayer focus

Protect us from the temptation of desiring people or things that are not meant for us.

God 911

Wednesday, Oct. 21

Exodus 9:1 – 10:29

As the plagues continue, God distinguishes between the Egyptians and the Hebrews, sparing the Hebrews from the effects of some plagues. This is an act of mercy toward his own people, and also emphasizes to the Egyptians that the people they enslave have God's particular favor.

Despite this, Pharaoh continues to refuse to let the people go.

At times, though, he seems to recognize his sin.

In 9:27-28, he says, "This time I have sinned. The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Pray to the Lord, for we have had enough thunder and hail. I will let you go; you don't have to stay any longer."

But once the threat passes, he quickly turns his back on his promise.

I have often heard the phrase, "There are no atheists in foxholes." Usually it is presented in a positive light, to point out that people turn to God in times of crisis. But the negative side of it is that those same people are often quick to turn away from God once the shelling stops.

For too many people, God is a last resort, as in the phrase, "There's nothing left to do but pray."

Prayer, though, is meant to be part of an ongoing relationship, not just a desperate cry when there's nothing else to do. Repentance that is cast aside the moment things settle down isn't repentance at all.

While we usually just look at Pharaoh as the bad guy in this encounter, it's notable that in his prayer of contrition he said, "I and my people are in the wrong."

This raises an interesting question: To what extent to the people—of any nation—bear the guilt of evil choices made by those who govern them? The U.S. Declaration of Independence contains a famous line that says, "governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

We usually think of that phrase as applying to elected governments where people explicitly grant the right of leadership to those they elect, but that wasn't the case with Pharaoh; he was an absolute, hereditary monarch. And yet even he seemed to understand that his will and his actions weren't entirely separated from the will of his people; his actions were their actions.

Wednesday meditation

Proverbs 7:1-5

My son, keep my words and store up my commands within you. Keep my commands and you will live; guard my teachings as the apple of your eye. Bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart.

Say to wisdom, "You are my sister," and to insight, "You are my relative." They will keep you from the adulterous woman, from the wayward woman with her seductive words.

Prayer focus

God, write your wisdom upon my heart, that it may serve me both in times of crisis and in good times.

Passover

Thursday, Oct. 22

Exodus 11:1 – 12:13

This passage is worth reading more than once. It is the source of the most important annual rite of the Jewish people, and the model for the Christian sacrament of Communion. It is also a rich source of our understanding of the meaning of the crucifixion.

For a slightly different take on it, though, try reading it from a pre-Jesus perspective. Imagine what it meant to people as a salvation story unconnected to the Messiah.

Reading it in that way doesn't take away any of its power. It does, though, emphasize God's protective care for us in this earthly life. As Christians we can easily forget that God was active in the world long before the birth of Jesus, already doing the same things he does in the Christian era.

Read through these verses and look at the

earthiness and immediacy of the story. Try to look beyond the ritualized reenactments we are so familiar with and consider that night of both terror and hope.

The first time I remember preaching on this passage happened to be the day that Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. That helped bring that night home to me. In our part of the world, we've all spent days and nights waiting to see how bad it was going to be—eating hurriedly, ready to flee—our most valued and most portable possessions prioritized and packed.

Also notice that none of the Hebrews were alone that night. If a household was too small to eat a whole lamb, it was to combine with a neighboring household. Most people were with family, but for some that family was extended so no one was in isolation.

It's easy to think of the people as cowering in their houses behind locked doors, counting on the blood on the doorposts to protect them. But in truth they were waiting eagerly for what was on the other side of Passover. Like sprinters waiting for the starting pistol, they were primed and ready to move once God cleared the way.

The Lord told Moses, "This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover."

We are called to always be ready—not for tragedy, but for the opportunity that lies beyond it.

Thursday meditation

Proverbs 7:6-27

At the window of my house I looked down through the lattice. I saw among the simple, I noticed among the young men, a youth who had no sense. He was going down the street near her corner, walking along in the direction of her house at twilight, as the day was fading, as the dark of night set in.

Then out came a woman to meet him, dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent. (She is unruly and defiant, her feet never stay at home; now in the street, now in the squares, at every corner she lurks.)

She took hold of him and kissed him and with a brazen face she said:

“Today I fulfilled my vows, and I have food from my fellowship offering at home. So I came out to meet you; I looked for you and have found you! I have covered my bed with colored linens from Egypt. I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon. Come, let’s drink deeply of love till morning; let’s enjoy ourselves with love! My husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey. He took his purse filled with money and will not be home till full moon.”

With persuasive words she led him astray; she seduced him with her smooth talk. All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter, like a deer stepping into a noose till an arrow pierces his liver, like a bird darting into a snare, little knowing it will cost him his life.

Now then, my sons, listen to me; pay attention to what I say. Do not let your heart turn to her ways or stray into her paths. Many are the victims she has brought down; her slain are a mighty throng. Her house is a highway to the grave, leading down to the chambers of death.

Prayer focus

Keep me attentive and ready to follow in your pathways, not on the wide highway to destruction.

In remembrance

Friday, Oct. 23

Exodus 12:14-51

It’s always seemed odd to me that the story of the first Passover would also contain instructions for how it is to be commemorated. It seems like the people would have enough on their minds without planning future family dinners.

But there are times when things happen that we know will be landmarks in life. We may not plan the commemorations on the spot, but we know they will come. With the Passover, though, God made it clear right away. “This is a day you are to commemo-

rate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord—a lasting ordinance.”

I am of the generation that I remember where I was when I heard President Nixon resign, when I saw the Challenger explosion on live TV, and of course, when I heard of the 9/11 attacks.

President Kennedy’s assassination was within my lifetime, but before my awareness, but I heard my siblings recount their memories of it often enough that I almost feel I was there.

There are even things that happened long before I was born that still feel like they shaped the world I live in: The bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Texas City explosion, the Galveston Hurricane, the Civil War.

It is historical events that define a culture (which is why disagreements over school history curriculum get so emotional.) They re-shape not only how we live, but also how we perceive ourselves and the people around us.

All historical events, though, eventually fade from memory. Many are lost completely in the mists of time and others remain only as historical references with little capacity to evoke the meaning or emotion that made them memorable.

The escape of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, though, still shapes the thought and self-awareness of much of the world’s population (Jewish, Christian and Muslim), about 3,300 years after it happened. Jacob may have been the father of Israel, but it was Moses that God used to shape its identity.

Friday meditation

Proverbs 8:1-11

Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice?

At the highest point along the way, where the paths meet, she takes her stand; beside the gate leading into the city, at the entrance, she cries aloud: “To you, O people, I call out; I raise my voice to all mankind.

You who are simple, gain prudence; you who are foolish, set your hearts on it. Lis-

ten, for I have trustworthy things to say; I open my lips to speak what is right. My mouth speaks what is true, for my lips detest wickedness.

All the words of my mouth are just; none of them is crooked or perverse. To the discerning all of them are right; they are up-right to those who have found knowledge.

Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her.

Prayer focus

Lord, bless me with wisdom. May the recollection of your words and your works guide my path.

The Lord will fight for you **Saturday, Oct. 24** **Exodus 13:1 – 14:31**

Today's passage contains a lot that looks great on the movie screen. The pillar of fire. The parting of the sea. The drowning of the Egyptian army.

It also wraps up a loose end from Genesis, as we see Moses taking with him the bones of Joseph, finally returning that faithful servant of God back to his homeland.

And it has some foreshadowing of what the journey through the wilderness is going to be like. The people have barely started on the journey and are already complaining against Moses about the risks and hardship they are facing.

"Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"

Just as Pharaoh had gone back on the promises he made once the immediate crises passed, now the Hebrew people are losing confidence in God almost as soon as they have left their bondage, even looking back and thinking maybe it wasn't so bad after all.

Nostalgia for the good old days is always a tempting trap. After all, we know that we

survived all of our yesterdays since we're still around. We forget that those days looked a lot less certain when we were living them.

We'll see the same temptation facing Christians after their own emancipation through the sacrifice of Jesus. In Galatians 5:1, Paul writes, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

Freedom always brings uncertainty and risk, while slavery can provide at least the appearance of certainty and security. The descent into slavery always begins with the promise of protection.

With the Egyptian army on one side of them and the sea on the other, even forced labor looks comfortingly predictable. The people feel, with justification, that there's no way out.

That is, there's no way out under their own power.

Moses tells them, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."

Saturday meditation **Proverbs 8:12-21**

"I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence; I possess knowledge and discretion.

To fear the Lord is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.

Counsel and sound judgment are mine; I have insight, I have power. By me kings reign and rulers issue decrees that are just; by me princes govern, and nobles—all who rule on earth.

I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me. With me are riches and honor, enduring wealth and prosperity.

My fruit is better than fine gold; what I yield surpasses choice silver. I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, bestowing a rich inheritance on those who love me and making their treasures full.

Prayer focus

Let me be still, Lord, and know that my salvation comes from you.

Song of celebration

Sunday, Oct. 25

Exodus 15:1-27

This is a chapter of celebration.

While the memory of the flight from Egypt is entrusted to the rather solemn observance of Passover, this “song to the Lord” seems to be a spontaneous outpouring of joy at God’s great work.

It adds some detail to the account we read before and seems to relish the suffering of the Egyptians, which is to be expected, especially now that the people are safely on the other side of the sea.

This chapter also has one of the intriguing appearances of Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. Her song of praise speaks the joy of all of the people: “The Lord is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him.”

Unlike Moses and Aaron, Miriam wasn’t mentioned in the original call story of Moses, but here and in several other places seems to be in a position of leadership alongside her brothers.

Tradition has it that Miriam, the only sister mentioned for Moses and Aaron, is the same sister who saved Moses’s life by placing him in a floating basket in the Nile as an infant, even though her name is never mentioned in the earlier story. If so, she would have been older than Moses by several years (and older than Aaron, who is three years older than Moses).

We again see the people grumbling about the hardships they are facing and God responding with a solution. We also see God telling the people to follow his commands. It will be later in the lifetime of Moses that

we start seeing these commands put into written form as Moses gains his identity as the great lawgiver of Israel.

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In today’s reading from Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a woman. Some offshoots of Judaism and Christianity, considered heretical, have gone as far as to consider Wisdom to be a goddess who is worshiped alongside or even in place of God.

Sunday meditation

Proverbs 8:22-31

“The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be. When there were no watery depths, I was given birth, when there were no springs overflowing with water; before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth, before he made the world or its fields or any of the dust of the earth.

I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.

Then I was constantly at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind.

Prayer focus

Instead of suggesting a specific prayer today, let me encourage you to make your own song of thanksgiving and praise to God for what he has done in you life.

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