

How Long Will You Doubt?

Sermon by Pastor Jason Paredes, Lead Pastor

Have you ever heard about paralysis by analysis. It's when you need to make a decision, but you can't because you think you need just a bit more information before you decide. This is one of the greatest contributors to inaction on the planet.

Someone wants to buy a car, but they never pull the trigger because they keep studying the market to see if they can get a cheaper car with less miles than what is available to them. Or they want to stop renting and buy a house, but they want to see if interest rates will get better or if the housing market will dip before they do. They just keep waiting. Or they want to start a new business, but after reading 4 books on business start-ups and attending 2 conferences, they think they need to read a 5th book and attend another conference first. They always feel they are almost there but just not quite yet.

If you struggle with this disease, then you know how many opportunities you miss out on just because you keep hoping for something better. If you took half the time you wasted in trying to make something incrementally better, you could have started 3 businesses, paid off two houses, and bought 3 cars. You are always searching but never ready to move. I've heard it said that the road of life is paved with flat squirrels who couldn't make a decision. This is a dangerous condition. But truth be told, it's most dangerous not in matters of buying a car or starting a business but in matters of faith and obedience.

There are some of you who have been considering going all in with your faith. You know you want something more and you believe living for Jesus might be the answer, but you just have a few more questions you want answered before you take that step of faith. I understand the need to search for truth and applaud it, but beware. Some of you are going to miss out on the greatest opportunity of your life because you're just not sure you have enough information to decide. That might be your most dangerous mistake of all.

When it comes to faith, yes, there are things to know. I say it often but let me say it again. You shouldn't have to check your brain at the door to be a person of faith. God gave us big, beautiful brains for us to use. But you will never find concrete answers to every question of faith that you have. Otherwise, it wouldn't be faith. And if you keep holding off going all in with Jesus because you think you need a few more answers first or need to see a few more miracles first, you will never take that step. You will experience spiritual paralysis by analysis, and that's the deadliest kind there is.

There can come a point when your hesitation might seal your unbelief. The longer you wait and the longer you doubt, subtly and almost imperceptibly, your heart will grow colder and colder to faith in Jesus. As doubt persists, so do the spiritual callouses that come with it. If anyone was a prime example of that, it was Pharaoh in the story of the Exodus. This morning I want you to learn from his mistakes so you don't experience the unnecessary pain he did. Turn to Exodus 9 with me.

As a way of reminder, here's a recap of Exodus so far. Moses has gone before Pharaoh, asking him to release God's people from Egypt to go worship Yahweh in the wilderness, but Pharaoh has hardened his

heart multiple times and refused. The plagues of blood, frogs, gnats, and flies haven't done it. So, Yahweh turns up the heat with plagues 5 and 6. Let's read about them, starting in verse 1 of chapter 9.

Exodus 9:1-7

This particular plague must have hit the Egyptians unusually hard. It would have been a double punch in the gut for their way of life. First, this would have been economically disastrous for them. To lose their livestock would have hit them harder than the global pandemic hit our economy. It would have ground everything in Egypt to a halt.

The livestock were the source of milk, food, clothing and transportation. They were chief elements of a bartering economy. Families would have lost a fortune in this plague. Up to this point, the plagues have been grueling and annoying, but nothing created more loss than this. It would have been catastrophic.

But probably even more catastrophic than the economic destruction would have been the religious destruction. As I've been telling you along the way, these plagues weren't just meant to attack Pharaoh but also the very gods he worshipped. And this one would have been especially significant because of how they viewed bulls as representing divinity. A number of their gods were depicted with bull features. Apis was depicted as a bull (**show pic of Apis**). Mnevis had a man's body with a bull's head (**show pic of Mnevis**). Both of those gods could have been in mind here. But most likely, this plague was an attack on Hathor, the goddess of love, beauty and motherhood, who was depicted as a woman with two bull's horns coming from her head (**see picture of Hathor**).

Hathor was charged with protecting Pharaoh and was even depicted in some paintings as nursing him to health and life. She was a security blanket for him. So, when he and all Egypt go outside and see their livestock dead in the fields, they know their gods and goddesses have been attacked. But even more powerful than seeing dead animals would be seeing the land of Goshen where the Hebrew people lived. In the land of Goshen, not a single one of their animals had died.

Let me stop here and tell you how much of a miracle that is. Natural attrition of the millions of cows and horses and sheep and donkeys would have meant that several hundred of the Israelites' animals would have normally died of natural causes every single day. Yet over the time of this plague, not only did all the livestock in the fields of the Egyptians die but *not a single animal* of the Israelites died. He kept them all alive just to make a point. Yahweh was God and these Egyptian deities are nothing but powerless idols who can do nothing to protect Pharaoh or his people.

At this point in the story, as you start reading verse 7, it looks like Pharaoh is finally at a breaking point where he is willing to obey Yahweh. It starts off by saying, "And Pharaoh sent..." which was the very thing God had been telling him to do. If you remember from last week, I explained that when God said to Pharaoh, "Let my people *go* to worship Me," He used the word *shalah*, which meant "to send." He was literally saying, "*Send* my people off to serve me." And finally, in verse 7, Pharaoh is ready to *shalah*, like he is supposed to. But alas, he doesn't *shalah* the people to serve God. He sends spies out to see if what Moses said had come true. Did all of Egypt's livestock in the field die? And more importantly, did all the Israelites' livestock survive? He thought he needed a bit more information to decide what to do.

Listen, this is the classic problem I was talking about at the beginning. This is Pharaoh's paralysis by analysis. Each time he sees Yahweh's power through the plagues, he knows he can't just ignore this foreign God's power. Yet, he's just not certain that His power is real. He needs a little more information to make that decision. So, he keeps investigating. He keeps searching for answers. He keeps checking to see if this God is the real deal or not. Pharaoh is the consummate skeptic.

Please hear me when I say this. Searching for answers is a beautiful thing. I hope you ask some of the harder questions and don't just believe in Jesus because your momma or your grandmother did. If your faith is going to be genuine and personal, you need to search out its truth for yourself. That part is healthy. But there must come a moment when you move from investigating to believing. You can't just keep searching for a few more answers and a little more evidence. Faith will mean that, at some point, you have enough evidence to believe, so you take the leap of faith and trust in Jesus.

But what I'm afraid of is that some of you use the excuse of searching for answers as a reason for inaction. It's not that you need more evidence. It's that you're too afraid to make the leap of faith. You may think you are open to God's truth, but I think you need to ask yourself if you really are.

Pharaoh acted like he was willing to listen to Yahweh. Over and over again he led on like he was going to believe in Yahweh and let the people go, but he never did. The truth is, he was never really going to. He was always searching, never believing. And this is exactly where some of you are today as well. You are always searching but never believing. And if you look hard enough, you may discover that you are not really even open to Christ in your life. Let me give you a case in point.

There are some people, maybe some of you listening right now, and you are looking for a reason not to believe the Bible. And you'll use little things like what appear to be discrepancies in the Bible to choose not to believe. Take verse 6 for example. There are some who struggle with the fact that in verse 6 it says that "*all* of the livestock of the Egyptians died," but then in verse 19 of the same chapter, Moses warns them to hide their livestock from the hailstorm coming. How could there still be livestock if "*all*" the livestock died here in verse 6?

This is the kind of question people try to use to discredit the accuracy of the Bible, but such steps need not be taken. A closer look brings the likely answer. In verse 3, it explains that the plague will fall on the livestock "*that are in the field.*" Much like today, most Egyptians had stables for their livestock, and depending on the time of year, many of the animals would have been in the stables. If only those in the fields died, then it would make sense that there would still be livestock alive since those in the stables weren't affected by it. It would also make all the more sense to protect them from the hailstorm in the 7th plague since they'd already lost so many animals in this 5th plague. All that to say, this detail doesn't discredit the Bible one bit. There are explanations for the details in this book.

But, if you are predisposed to disbelieve the Bible, you'll use things like this to keep you searching but never believing. And this is exceptionally dangerous. Maybe you don't see the danger in it yet, but I believe the next plague will bring it into focus. Let's read on in verse 8 about the 6th plague.

Exodus 9:8-12

This 6th plague is the first one to attack the Egyptians physically. Up to this point it had been affects on the land or on the living creatures around them. This is the first one that hit their bodies. It is as if Yahweh was trying to get them to see He was upping the game.

There are a couple of interesting details that add to the gravity of this particular plague. The first is the clear attack on the Egyptian god Sekhmet (**show pic of Sekhmet**). Sekhmet was depicted as the body of a woman and the head of a lion. She was not only the goddess of war, but more importantly, she was the goddess of healing. She was the patron of physicians and healers in Egypt and was believed to be able to avert plagues and heal diseases. To appease her, the priests would offer her food and drink and burn incense to her to get her to help. Those priests were also known as magicians. That leads me to my second interesting detail..., the boils on the magicians.

Here we see for the first time even the magician priests suffering from this plague. But what you may not know is that in Egypt, a skin disease was considered defiling to the point that they could not stand before their gods. So, here you have the goddess who is supposed to heal the plagues and not only is she unable to protect her people, but she can't even spare the magicians charged with trying to appease her, so she will get no food or incense. God has outmaneuvered Sekhmet completely.

At this point, with Pharaoh now feeling this plague on his own body, since all the land of Egypt was feeling it, he should have recanted and sent the Israelites off..., but he doesn't. His heart is hardened. But for the first time in the 10 plagues, the terminology changes. Look back at verse 12.

Exodus 9:12

Did you notice the difference? This is the first time it says that the Lord hardened his heart. For the first five plagues it never says that Yahweh hardens Pharaoh's heart. It either says that he hardened his own heart or that his heart *was* hardened, which can just be a passive way of saying he hardened his own heart. But 4 of the last 5 plagues say directly that Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart.

Now, maybe you're wondering why I feel the need to point this out. I won't keep you in the dark any longer. I believe this is showing us that there is a point when a person can so persistently harden their heart toward God that He will accept their rejection of Him. If that sounds harsh to you, let me have you jump over to Hebrews 3 to read verses 7-14.

Hebrews 3:7-14

There came a moment when God swore they would no longer enter into His rest. God began to fight against the people who had rejected Him. There is a moment, according to this text, when an evil, unbelieving heart can lead a person to fall away from God for good. I wish it weren't so, but this is the picture the Bible portrays for us.

This is what we see going on with Pharaoh. This is the turning point. He has hardened his heart long enough for God to accept his hardening and partner with him on it. It's as if God at this point is saying, "Don't try to get out of the ring with me here. You wanted this fight, and now I'm going to finish it."

Now, I have to be very careful when I tread on this ground. People may start assuming they are too hardened and beyond being saved. Yes, we can't ignore the fact that here God hardened Pharaoh's heart. But I also know this idea can be greatly misconstrued and abused. The most important thing to remember is that no one has any idea when that point is. You don't have to live in fear that you have crossed that line yourself. If you are here and you are genuinely repentant, there is still hope for you.

If we do not harden our hearts, we can still enter into God's salvation and rest. The door is not closed for us if we choose to believe. And I don't mean just believe in some generic idea of God. I mean choosing to believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Listen to how Hebrews 4 finishes up.

Hebrews 4:14-16

We don't have to fear being rejected by God since we have a Great High Priest named Jesus who earned our righteousness and then died on a cross to absorb our sin. We know we can approach God and receive mercy and grace because we choose to believe Jesus is the Son of God who takes away the sins of the world. So, my question is, do you believe that? Have you come to place your faith in that?

Please hear me, you have time today to make that decision, but I cannot promise you'll have time tomorrow. Do not harden your heart toward God like Pharaoh. Don't keep holding off making a decision to follow Christ because you think you need more answers or more information or more evidence. You have all the evidence you need in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the one who makes Christianity different than every other religion. Who else has a God who takes on flesh to die for them? Who else has a God with such power and such love? No one! It is time to stop waiting. Each time you do, your heart gets a little harder and harder. It is time to humble yourself and give your life over to Christ.

If today you are ready to make that decision, we want to talk to you about it. Come down front and let us know so we can help you step into your new faith in Christ. We're ready to meet you.

But before I open up that time, let me talk to you who have already come to that place of decision. Don't think this message doesn't apply to you. You might not refuse to believe in Christ, but you could still refuse to obey him because you keep hesitating to do what he tells you. It is possible for believers to be struck with paralysis by analysis when it comes to obeying. We think we need more certainty, more answers, or more confirmation when what we really need is more faith.

Is there some excuse or some missing information keeping you from obeying? Don't harden your heart toward obedience. The door to obey can close and you'll be the one missing out on what God had in store for you. Tell the Lord this morning that you are ready to trust Him and obey.