

## **The Plagues** *Exodus 7:14 – 10:29*

A six-year-old boy told his father he wanted to marry the little girl across the street. The father, being modern and well-schooled in handling children, hid his smile behind his hand.

"That's a serious step," he said. "Have you thought it out completely?"

"Yes," his young son answered. "We can spend one week in my room and the next in hers. It's right across the street, so I can run home if I get scared of the dark."

"How about transportation?" the father asked. "I have my wagon, and we both have our tricycles," the little boy answered. The boy had an answer to every question the father raised.

Finally, in exasperation, his dad asked, "What about babies? When you're married, you're liable to have babies, you know."

"We've thought about that, too," the little boy replied. "We're not going to have babies. Every time she lays an egg, I'm going to step on it!"

It seems like life ought to be so simple. I wonder if Moses was thinking after he received his commission from God – go meet with Egypt's Pharaoh, deliver the message: "God says, Let my people go," and then head out at the front of the pack.

Not! As we saw last week, this isn't turning out to be simple at all! And even though God told Moses from the very beginning that Pharaoh would not let the Hebrews leave until after He had displayed his great power against the king and the nation of Egypt, I have to believe that Moses was somewhat perplexed.

Today in our text we come to the execution of God's judgment against Pharaoh and Egypt. Before we jump into looking at the plagues, let's look again at the prelude to the plagues – a meeting in Pharaoh's palace that immediately precedes the beginning of God's judgment.

### **I. Prelude to the Plagues – Exodus 7:8-13**

This is the prelude to all that will follow in the next few chapters. It sets up the following pattern: Moses and Aaron standing before Pharaoh in obedience to God; the counterfeit miracles by the Egyptian sorcerers; God's power that is mightier than the Egyptians and their gods; and the continued and increasing hardness of Pharaoh's heart.

We see here at the beginning that this is going to be a battle primarily between Yahweh (God) and Pharaoh, between the king of Egypt and the King of the universe. It is a battle with only one possible outcome: God is going to win and have his way.

This miracle, performed on Pharaoh's home turf, signifies that God is taking on the gods of Egypt. The Egyptians were fascinated with snakes. Even though they feared them, they had become objects of worship. Snakes represented Egypt's power. The headdress of the Pharaoh was the image of the cobra. This was a direct challenge to Pharaoh's power.

We don't necessarily understand how the magicians of Pharaoh's court were able to duplicate the miracle. It might have been trickery; it might have been demonic.

But what astounds everyone is the result – God's serpent swallows those manufactured by the sorcerers. It's interesting that the Hebrew word "swallow" used here occurs only one other time in this book. Flip over to chapter 15.

**Exodus 15:12** – The incident back in Pharaoh's court is a hint of what's in store for Pharaoh and his army.

Two thoughts before moving on:

- 1) We see here the reality of counterfeit miracles. We ought not to be surprised that Satan is the master of presenting counterfeits as the real thing. The Apostle Paul, in a warning about false teachers, talks about how they disguise themselves as apostles of Christ, and says:

And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds. – *II Cor. 11:14-15*

- 2) We need to take heart when we see the battle between the real and the counterfeit, between God and Satan, between the workers of God and those of Satan. John writes in his first epistle:

Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. – *I John 4:4*

Pharaoh's heart is hardened and refuses to yield to God's command. And so, God tells Moses that is now to happen.

## **II. Plagues: The Judgment of God**

God brings upon Egypt ten plagues – some pretty disgusting things: water turned to blood, frogs, lice, gnats, boils, hail, locust, darkness, and finally death. These plagues occurred probably over a period of around nine months – beginning in the July-August timeframe, ending the following April – the Passover month.

The purpose of the plagues would appear to be four-fold:

- 1) To persuade Pharaoh to let Israel go;
- 2) To punish Egypt for her oppression of Israel;
- 3) To demonstrate the power of God; and,
- 4) To demonstrate the foolishness and impotency of idolatry and the uniqueness of Yahweh. Many of the plagues are a direct challenge to Egyptian gods and goddesses.

There are different ways you might group the plagues. I'm going to do it this way. First, we are going to set the final one aside and look at it next week in the context of the Passover which will be framework of our celebration of Easter – the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The other nine I've divided into three groups. All are introduced in the text with this instruction: "Go to Pharaoh in the morning."

### **A. Blood, Frogs and Gnats**

#### 1) Blood – Exodus 7:14-25

The Nile meant everything to the Egyptians. The life and the greatness of the nation was tied to the Nile. There were at least three Egyptian gods associated with the River. So this plague is a direct challenge against them.

This is God challenging the worship of the creation over the Creator. It is the same thing Paul addresses in Romans, chapter one, when he writes of the pagan who suppresses the truth about God and exchanges the glory of God for images of the creation, and says:

...they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen – *Romans 1:22-25*

This religion – worshipping the creation rather than the Creator – is popular and in practice today.

In addition, realize that this also retribution against Pharaoh's edict in chapter one of drowning male Hebrew children in the Nile. God is bringing vengeance against Pharaoh and his ungodly actions.

## 2) Frogs – Exodus 8:1-15

Again, this is an assault on Egypt's gods. The Egyptians worshiped a goddess of childbirth, depicted in art with the head of a frog.

Something to note here: though the Pharaoh's magicians were able to duplicate the miracle, they did not have the power to negate or reverse God's miracle. They could create frogs, but couldn't get rid of them.

## 3) Gnats – Exodus 8:16-19

Scholars are uncertain exactly what sort of insect this is: might be gnats, might be lice, or mosquitoes. I hate gnats and mosquitoes. I remember one particular day when I was a teenager and was baling hay. That day there seemed to be a plague of those pesky insects. It was so bad, I had nightmares about them.

Did you notice in the text that the magicians have no answer – no duplication for this one, nor as we will see, none of those that will follow. They have depleted their arsenal; there's nothing left in their magic bag.

God is showing himself as Lord over all creation. The sorcerers of Egypt, on the other hand, have limited power and are incapable of matching the power of Yahweh.

## **B. Flies, Livestock & Boils**

### 1) Flies – Exodus 8:20-32

Flies – God uses such a small creature to exert his power over Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. The 19<sup>th</sup> century English preacher of preachers, Charles Spurgeon, writes:

When it pleases God by his judgments to humble men, he is never at a loss for means' he can use lions or lice, famines or flies. In the armory of God there are weapons of every kind, from the stars in their courses down to caterpillars in their hosts.

Go back and look at **Verse 23**. Literally: "I will set redemption between my people and your people." The story of Exodus is the story of redemption. This is the language of salvation – the payment of ransom for the liberation of a slave. What a picture of New Testament salvation – redemption: the payment of a ransom to free those enslaved to sin.

Why is this so in Israel's case? It is the mystery of God's sovereign grace: choosing a people to be the recipients of his mercy and through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed. This is the promise within the covenant God made with Abraham.

There was nothing inherent in the Israelites that deserved God's grace and mercy. Turn over to **Deuteronomy 7:6-9**.

The impact of this miracle on Pharaoh? He hardens his heart against God and refuses to bow his will to the Almighty.

2) Livestock – Exodus 9:1-7

This is the first plague to destroy Pharaoh's personal property. Again, many of Egypt's gods and goddesses were portrayed as livestock, for example – the bull. We will see Israel even fashioning a golden idol as a bull during their days at Sinai; and they suffer God's judgment because of it.

3) Boils – Exodus 9:8-12

Notice the origin of this plague – from the soot of the kiln. Peter Enns calls this God's:

...poetic justice for the kiln-baked bricks the Israelites had to make as Pharaoh's slaves.

When Moses writes the book of Deuteronomy shortly before Israel crosses the Jordan into the Promised Land, he warns the people of the consequences of disobeying God:

The LORD (he writes) will strike you with the boils of Egypt, and with tumors and scabs and itch, of which you cannot be healed. (And then later) The LORD will strike you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head. – *Deuteronomy 28:27, 35*

### **C. Hail, Locusts & Darkness**

These last three plagues signify an intensifying judgment.

1) Hail – Exodus 9:13-35

And Pharaoh's heart is hardened. If this wasn't enough damage to the economy and will of the people, here come the locusts.

2) Locusts – Exodus 10:1-20

A very powerful and significant statement at the conclusion of this plague: God hardens Pharaoh's heart. For him, there is no going back, no reversal of his steadfast, stubborn resistant of God's power.

### 3) Darkness – Exodus 10:21-29

There is something terrifying about utter darkness. A few years ago, Nancy and I, along with friends, watched an IMAX movie presentation at the National Air & Space Smithsonian Udvar-Hazy Center at Dulles. It was of the Shackleton Expedition begun on August 1, 1914. Sir Ernest Shackleton and his crew set sail from London aboard the ship *Endurance*, hoping to cross Antarctica on foot.

They never accomplished their mission because in January 1915 the ship became locked in the ice. It now became a matter of survival. In the months ahead they faced starvation and the threat of freezing to death. The light began to fade and in early May the sun vanished altogether, until its reappearance in late July.

Shackleton's biographer wrote:

In all the world there is no desolation more complete than the polar night. It is a return to the Ice Age – no warmth, no life, no movement. Only those who have experienced it can fully appreciate what it means to be without the sun day after day and week after week. Few men unaccustomed to it can fight off its effects altogether, and it has driven some men mad.

The darkness of just three days drove Pharaoh mad. This darkness produced a special terror in the Egyptians because they worshiped the sun. Philip Ryken writes:

Like most Egyptians, Pharaoh was a sun worshiper. More than that, he was regarded as the Son of Re, the personal embodiment of the solar deity. Egypt's king was Egypt's god, and as the reincarnation of Amon-Re, he maintained the cosmic order.

You can appreciate the terror and the affront this was to the Egyptians and the Pharaoh. Look again at the consequence of this plague – **Exodus 10:27-29**.

The final and ultimate plague we will consider next week. Let me draw some implications and applications as we close this morning.

### **III. Implications & Applications**

A. God works everything by his sovereign hand to accomplish his divine purposes for his ultimate glory. This is the lesson and the message for Pharaoh, the Egyptians, and, yes,

even the Israelites. Don't miss the impact this was to have on God's people as the scene gets set for their departure from Egypt. The message is for them as well.

We see in God's actions the mystery, or if you will, the tension inherent in understanding God and his ways. No more true is this than seeing human responsibility and divine sovereignty at work in Pharaoh: Pharaoh hardened his heart; God hardened Pharaoh's heart. This was all for God's glory and his purpose. Paul writes in Romans, chapter nine, dealing with the issue of God's faithfulness to Israel:

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. – *Romans 9:14-17*

B. Secondly, in relation to human responsibility, we must be careful not to harden our hearts to God and his work. We see in Pharaoh such a great example of this. Who has ever seen God's power displayed like Pharaoh, and yet he hardened his heart against God. The writer of Hebrews cautions against such hardening of the heart. In chapter three he writes:

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years." – *Hebrews 3:7-9*

C) Lastly, the plagues of Egypt are a foreshadowing of the judgments to come in the end time as God completes the deliverance, the redemption, of his chosen people – those who have believed the Gospel and trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation. It will be a terrifying day for those who must face this judgment – a judgment as the world has never seen, even in the days of Moses.