

Exodus I – Notes

IX. Plagued by Plagues

30-Jul-06 Exodus 8:1-9:12

Theme: The ten plagues teach: 1) the meaning of salvation; 2) the purpose of life; 3) the folly of idolatry; 4) the superiority of faith; and 5) the consequence of rebellion.

Key Verses: Exodus 8:19; 9:11-12 ¹⁹Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God.” But Pharaoh’s heart grew hard, and he did not heed them, just as the LORD had said... ¹¹And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils were on the magicians and on all the Egyptians. ¹²But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh; and he did not heed them, just as the LORD had spoken to Moses.

Review

Last Sunday we began our three-week study of the ten plagues. The fact that there are ten plagues or wonders indicates that God’s judgment upon Egypt is total and complete. There are many purposes for the ten plagues. For example, they: 1) reveal the knowledge of God; 2) demonstrate God’s power and glory; 3) bring judgment upon the sins of Egypt; 4) give Egypt an opportunity to repent; 5) show God’s victory over the Egyptian gods; and 6) force Israel to leave Egypt. The order and arrangement of the ten plagues demonstrates their heavenly origin. They are arranged in three cycles of three with a tenth and final devastating act of judgment to complete the plagues. The cycles are ordered in increasing severity as God’s window for repentance closes. We discussed other patterns within and between the plague cycles, but there is one constant in every plague – the hard heart of Pharaoh. Ultimately, the plagues condemn Pharaoh because of his unrepentant and rebellious heart.

Before the plagues actually begin, there is a confrontation between Moses and Aaron and the magicians of Egypt that sets the stage for what is to come. Aaron’s rod turns into a serpent, a feat that is duplicated by the Egyptian magicians using the counterfeit power of Satan. However, in this spiritual battle, God is victorious, as Aaron’s rod-serpent swallows the rod-serpents of the Egyptians. This confrontation foreshadows the entire sequence of plagues ending up with the Red Sea swallowing up the Egyptian army.

The first plague is the Nile River turned to blood for seven days. This plague demonstrates God’s justice for the deaths of the Hebrew children eighty years previously who were sacrificed in the river. It is also an attack on one of the main Egyptian gods, their economy, and their entire way of life. Although the magicians can duplicate this wonder in a small way, they are unable to reverse it and change the blood back into water. Despite God’s call to know Him and serve Him, Pharaoh’s heart remains hard and cold. The plagues have just begun.

Introduction

This morning we will dive into plagues 2-6—frogs, gnats, flies, livestock disease, and boils—all very pleasant topics for a Sunday morning! As we plow through the plagues, I want you to notice the common threads in each of God’s wonders. For example, the plagues consistently demonstrate God’s power and glory over all creation. Ryken points out that the plagues we are studying today have three common results: “First, Pharaoh’s gods were humbled; second, Pharaoh’s magicians were humiliated; and third, Pharaoh’s heart was hardened.”

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Keep your eyes on Pharaoh. For in the Egyptian king we have a portrait of the unregenerate man. His entire attitude is one of rebellion against God. He wants to live life on his own terms, refusing to acknowledge power outside himself. The only thing Pharaoh seems to be interested in is relief from trouble. When he is in trouble, he is willing to compromise, but his concessions are revealed as deceit and lies. Ultimately, he will show remorse and regret, but never repentance. Pharaoh's hard heart cuts him off from the LORD God. Although Pharaoh is plagued by plagues, he does not learn from his experience. May we learn from his example the folly of resisting the LORD.

A. Plague 2: Frogs (8:1-15)

1. Plague Announced (8:1-4)

The second plague is announced to Pharaoh after the seven days of the bloody Nile are completed. Moses is given the same message to deliver to Pharaoh: "Let My people go, that they may serve Me" (8:1). This is a major theme of the exodus – God requires His people to serve Him and worship Him. We serve our heavenly master rather than earthly tyrants.

The second plague is a superabundance of frogs. The frogs will come up out of the Nile River and inundate the land. The Hebrew text literally says the frogs will "swarm" or "teem" (8:3). This is the same Hebrew word used in 1:7 to describe the fruitfulness of Israel – they "increased abundantly" or "swarmed" over the land. This is also the language of creation, because the same Hebrew word describes God's command to the animals to "teem" in the waters and the earth (*cp.* Gen. 1:20).

We once again see the connection between the plagues and creation. The plagues are presented as a reversal of creation. Man was supposed to have dominion over the "swarming" animal kingdom (Gen. 1:26). In the plagues, we see the reversal of this creation mandate: the "swarming" animal kingdom (in this case, frogs) has dominion over man. The animal kingdom will have dominion over Egypt not only in this second plague, but also in plagues three, four, and eight (gnats, flies, locusts). God is in the process of "de-creating" Egypt.

The frogs will appear everywhere, including inside houses, ovens, and cooking bowls (8:3). They will be hopping all over the place, on everything, and on everyone. Even Pharaoh will not be immune – they will be in his bedroom, on his bed, and even on his royal person. From the greatest to the least, no one in Egypt will escape the frogs (8:4).

To paraphrase Indiana Jones, "Frogs! Why did it have to be frogs?" Frogs were held in high regard in Egypt. "The Egyptians regarded the frog as a symbol of divine power and a representation of fertility" (Currid). One of the main Egyptian gods, Heqet, was portrayed as a woman with a frog's head. Her husband Khnum was believed to form human bodies on a potter's wheel, while Heqet would breathe the breath of life into them. Thus, she was seen as the goddess of life-giving power.

Heqet's other main responsibility in the Egyptian pantheon was as the goddess of fertility. She assisted Egyptian women in childbirth. Thus, we have a connection here with the Hebrew midwives of chapter 1. Pharaoh and all of Egypt had sinned by trying to force the Hebrew midwives to kill the Hebrew boys as they were born. Now God is demonstrating His power over the Egyptian agent of fertility and birth. God humiliates the goddess of Egyptian labor and delivery in judgment for their sins against His people.

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2. *Plague Enacted (8:5-11)*

The second plague is enacted exactly like the first one (*cp.* 7:19). Moses has Aaron stretch his staff over the Nile River and all of other natural waterways: streams, rivers, and ponds (8:5). This time however, instead of turning to blood, the waters give rise to the frogs which cover the land (8:6). And just like the first plague, the magicians of Egypt “hop” to the task of imitating God’s wonder. Of course, they can’t reverse the plague; all they can do is bring forth even more frogs (8:7).

In verse 8, we see the first sign of weakness in Pharaoh. Apparently he doesn’t like to sleep with frogs on his pillow!

⁸Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron, and said, “Entreat the LORD that He may take away the frogs from me and from my people; and I will let the people go, that they may sacrifice to the LORD” (Exodus 8:8).

This is a remarkable statement from Pharaoh. As Ryken points out, it shows three things that Pharaoh has learned about God. 1) First, Pharaoh has learned *God’s name*. He calls God by His covenant name, the LORD or Yahweh. Pharaoh had claimed he did not know the LORD God of the Hebrews (5:2), but he is starting to learn! 2) Second, Pharaoh has learned something about *God’s power*. Although the court magicians could make more frogs appear, they could not make them disappear. Their power was limited, but God’s power is limitless. By calling for Moses and Aaron to ask the LORD to stop the plague, Pharaoh was admitting his helplessness when faced with the power of God. 3) Finally, Pharaoh has learned what *God requires*. God’s consistent message has always been to let His people go so they may worship Him. Pharaoh promises to do exactly that if the plague of frogs is ended. Of course we know Pharaoh will renege on his promise, but it does demonstrate that he understands what God wants.

Moses gives Pharaoh the privilege of deciding when the plague will end (8:9). Moses was demonstrating his faith in God’s power by allowing Pharaoh to set the timing of the plague’s end. If I were Pharaoh, I would have said “Now” instead of “Tomorrow” (8:10). Perhaps Pharaoh was hoping for some natural end to this supernatural disaster and so he delayed his request. Regardless of his reasoning, Moses agreed to his timing. Both Moses and Pharaoh knew that an abrupt ending to the plague of frogs would be just as miraculous as its beginning.

3. *Plague Ended (8:12-15)*

Moses goes out from Pharaoh and prays to God to end the plague at the appointed time. Notice that Moses “cried out” to God in prayer (8:12), just as the Israelites had “cried out” to God because of their bondage (2:23). Moses did not take a casual attitude to prayer. He had promised a cessation of the plague to Pharaoh, but he knew that only God could accomplish that miracle. Thus he comes to God in fervent prayer, not so much for the comfort of Pharaoh as for the preservation of God’s glory through honoring Moses’ word to the king.

God answers the prayer of Moses and ends the plague of frogs. But the frogs do not simply disappear back into the river; they die where they are. Soon, stinking piles of dead, rotting frogs litter the country of Egypt (8:13-14). The cessation of the plague is nearly as bad as the plague itself! The stench of the frogs is reminiscent of an earlier statement by the Hebrew foremen in chapter 5. When Pharaoh had increased their workload, these Hebrews told Moses that he had caused them to “stink” in the nostrils of Pharaoh (5:21). Now in an ironic twist, the stink of Egypt rises up to God in heaven.

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Once Pharaoh has been relieved from the oppression of the frogs hopping upon his royal person, he reverts to true form. He hardens his heart and reneges upon his promise to let Israel go. The unregenerate man is only interested in relief from the consequences of sin. Once Pharaoh gets a little breathing room, he no longer honors his commitments. When the frogs were out of his sight, they were out of his mind. He demonstrates by his actions that he has no use or regard for God.

B. Plague 3: Gnats (8:16-19)

1. *The Dust of the Land (8:16-17)*

The third plague comes unannounced. This is the signature of the third plague in each of the three cycles. This plague is also the last time that we see Aaron's involvement. His rod is used for the last time to call forth the plague. After this, the emphasis switches to Moses.

Aaron is to strike the "dust of the land" with his rod so that it will become some type of insect (8:16). The exact insect is not known, but there have been many suggestions: gnats, fleas, lice, mosquitoes, maggots, midges, and sand flies. Most English translations are evenly divided between "lice" and "gnats." Obviously, some type of small, swarming, biting insect is intended. For the purpose of this class, we will call them "gnats."

The "dust of the land" has two different connotations from the book of Genesis. One connotation is of numerical abundance. God tells both Abraham and Jacob that their descendants will be innumerable, "like the dust of the earth" (Gen. 13:16; 28:14). This meaning is certainly intended in this passage in Exodus. The gnats spread "throughout all the land of Egypt" (8:16, 17) and cover "man and beast" (8:17, 18).

However, "dust" also speaks of the curse on the earth. After the Fall of mankind in the Garden, God tells Adam:

¹⁷"Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life.
¹⁸Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. ¹⁹In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:17b-19).

The ground is cursed by the sin of man. The very dust of the ground that God breathed life into to create mankind (Gen. 2:7) has now been cursed with sin and death (*cp.* Job 17:16). Thus, God takes this cursed dust and uses it to plague men. It is a reminder of their mortality and their sin which leads to death.

It is uncertain which if any gods of the Egyptian pantheon may be under attack in this third plague. Ryken suggests that the transformation of the dust of the earth into gnats is intended to humiliate the earth-god Geb. What is interesting to note is that through the plagues, God is claiming power and dominion over all spheres of creation: the waters of the Nile, the land of Egypt, and even the very air or atmosphere. Each of the first nine plagues attack one or more of these spheres. Thus, in this plague the dust of the earth is used to create a plague of the air.

2. *The Finger of God (8:18-19)*

This is the first plague that the magicians of Egypt are unable to duplicate. The picture is quite funny – the magicians are desperately and vainly trying to bring forth more gnats, all the while covered from head to toe by the gnats of God! In this plague, the magicians are defeated by

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gnats. They will never again be able to duplicate another of God’s wonders. They have been humiliated here, but their final defeat comes in the sixth plague.

In trying to cover up their failure, the magicians tell Pharaoh that “this is the finger of God” (8:19). On the one hand, the magicians are acknowledging a greater power outside of themselves. The “finger” of God is referenced several times in Scripture to indicate God’s power and authority: God writes the Ten Commandments in the stone tablets with His finger (Ex. 31:18; Dt. 9:10); all of creation is the work of God’s fingers (Ps. 8:3); God’s finger writes the words of judgment at Belshazzar’s feast (Dan. 5:5-29); and Jesus casts out demons with the finger of God (Lk. 11:20).

On the other hand, the magicians are not confessing faith in the LORD God of the Hebrews. Notice that they say the “finger of God”, not the “finger of the LORD.” The word used for God is *Elohim*. This is the plural, general reference to God; it is not God’s covenant name – the LORD or Yahweh. In fact, the magicians may actually be saying, “This is the finger of the gods” referring to their pantheon rather than to the true and living god. Regardless of who the magicians were ultimately referring to, it mattered not to Pharaoh. His heart grew hard and he didn’t listen to the advice of his counselors. Pharaoh was determined to continue the spiritual battle against God.

C. Plague 4: Flies (8:20-32)

1. *God’s Differentiation (8:20-24)*

The fourth plague of flies begins the second cycle of plagues. It is introduced in the same way as the first plague: Moses meets Pharaoh early in the morning near the Nile River and proclaims the same demand as always: “Let My people go, that they may serve Me” (8:20).

The fourth plague was to be “swarms of flies” (8:21). In Hebrew, the word translated here as “swarms” is different than the swarming or teeming gnats of the third plague. Literally, God says He is sending a “mixture of flies.” A very similar Hebrew word is used to describe the “mixed multitude” of non-Israelites that leave with the Hebrews in the exodus (12:38). This usage suggests that there were several types of flying insects in this plague. Psalm 78:45 says that these swarms of flies “devoured” the Egyptians, probably indicating that they were biting, stinging insects.

Like the gnats, they were ubiquitous (everywhere). They were in the air and on the ground. They were in the houses and on the people. From the greatest to the least, all of Egypt were covered with the flies. The impact of the flies is significant. The “thick swarms of flies” are literally a “heavy mixture of flies” (8:24). The flies are *kabed* – heavy – just like Pharaoh’s heart is heavy and hard. Furthermore, the flies corrupt the land. In some fashion, they begin to wreak havoc and destroy the land of Egypt. The Hebrew word for “corrupt” in verse 24 is significant: it is the same word used in Genesis 6:12 to describe the moral corruption of the earth before the Flood; it is also the same word to describe the physical destruction of the earth by the Flood (Gen. 9:11). These flies bring corruption and destruction to the land of Egypt.

The exact god of Egypt that this plague is directed against is unknown. Currid suggests that it is against the self-generating god of resurrection, Kheprer, who is symbolized by the flying beetle. Ryken suggests that it was directed against Beelzebub, “the lord of the flies” (*cp.* Lk. 11:15). Regardless, we can be assured that the gods of Egypt are no match for the God of Israel.

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The fourth plague introduces a major new concept: the differentiation of the children of Israel. Before this plague, presumably God's people suffered along with the Egyptians through the bloody river, the frogs, and the gnats. But from now on, God will treat His people differently; they will no longer be impacted by the plagues. Now that the plagues have moved from merely uncomfortable to destructive, God's people are protected. The absence of flies in Goshen where Israel lived was just as miraculous as the presence of flies where the Egyptians lived.

This protection and differentiation of Israel has theological significance. It demonstrates the doctrine of election – God chooses some for salvation and others for damnation. The plagues are being used to destroy Egypt on the one hand and save Israel on the other. This emphasis on salvation of Israel is brought out in the original Hebrew. In 8:23, the phrase translated “I will make a difference between My people and your people,” is literally, “I will set a redemption between My people and your people.” The difference between Israel and Egypt is *redemption*. God intends to redeem a people for Himself, to save them from slavery to bondage, sin, and death, and to make them a new creation so that they will worship and serve Him. That is the difference between Israel and Egypt, and that is the difference today between the Christian and the non-Christian: Jesus Christ has redeemed us with the price of His own blood (Titus 2:14; 1 Pe. 1:18-19).

2. *Pharaoh's Concession (8:25-27)*

Now we come to the second sign of weakness in Pharaoh. Once again he calls for Moses and Aaron and gives them leave to “sacrifice in the land” (8:25). What is the problem with Pharaoh's concession? The restriction of “in the land.” God had clearly demanded a three-day journey from Egypt. The worship of God would take place at God's location, not in territory controlled by Pharaoh. Pharaoh was giving in a little by conceding the right of Israel to worship their God, but he still wanted to dictate terms and conditions, especially location. As Mackay puts it, they would be “under Pharaoh's jurisdiction and supervision.” Pharaoh has not submitted to God's authority; he is still trying to control Israel.

Moses rightly refuses. He will not accept the compromise. His reference to the “abomination of the Egyptians” (8:26) may imply that the sacrificial animals of Israel were considered sacred by the Egyptians. However, Moses is not interested in a debate on the proper methods of sacrifice; he is intent upon obeying completely the command of God. And that means going a three-day journey into the wilderness, outside of Egyptian territory, to worship God (8:27).

3. *Moses' Intercession (8:28-32)*

Surprisingly, Pharaoh relents, only he asks that they not go too far into the wilderness (8:28). Moses does not bargain any further, apparently accepting Pharaoh's response as sufficiently meeting the original demand. However, he does have some strong parting words for Pharaoh: “But let Pharaoh not deal deceitfully anymore in not letting the people go to sacrifice to the LORD” (8:29). Moses wasn't born yesterday; he knew the kind of snake he was dealing with.

Pharaoh's request for prayer is not a sincere one. He is not seeking a right relationship from God. As always, he is merely seeking relief from trouble and difficulty. Nonetheless, Moses does intercede to the LORD, and God heard and honored Moses' prayer. All of the flies were removed from Egypt; “not one remained” (8:31). Pharaoh remains true to form: once the flies are gone, his promise to let Israel worship God is gone as well. He hardened his already “heavy” heart and refused to let Israel go.

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D. Plague 5: Livestock (9:1-7)

1. *God's Hand* (9:1-6)

The fifth plague of livestock disease is the second plague of the second cycle. Consistent with its position, the fifth plague is announced to Pharaoh by Moses at an unspecified time and location. The command God gives to Pharaoh is the same one in all the other announced plagues (first, second, fourth): “Let My people go that they may serve Me” (9:1). By this time Pharaoh probably has the message memorized!

In the third plague, the magicians of Egypt recognized the finger of Elohim was against them (8:19). However, here in the fifth plague, God announces that the “hand of Yahweh” (9:3) will be raised against Egypt. God had promised to strike Egypt with His strong hand (3:20); here He announces that fact to Pharaoh.

“The hand of the LORD” is used frequently in Scripture to indicate God’s power. God sometimes raises His hand in judgment, as He does here against Egypt (*e.g.*, Dt. 2:15; Jos. 4:24; Jdg. 2:15; 1 Sam. 5:6, 7:13; Ps. 75:8). But the hand of the LORD can also be used to assist His people (*e.g.*, 2 Sam. 24:14; 1 Kgs. 18:46; 2 Kgs. 3:15; Ezra 7:6; Ps. 118:15-16; Ez. 3:14; Lk. 1:66; Acts 11:21). However God chooses to use “His hand,” you can be assured that His purposes will come to pass.

That is the case with this fifth plague, a disease or pestilence on livestock. Various types of animals are named – cattle, horses, donkeys, camels, oxen, and sheep. In other words, every type of domesticated livestock is affected. Enns points out that this “is the first plague directed *against* created things (plagues 2, 3, and 4 used created things). As such, it serves as a harbinger of worse things to come.”

Most commentators agree that the plague on livestock was not only directed towards Egypt’s economy, but also towards their religion. Many Egyptian gods and goddesses were portrayed as livestock. For example the god Apis was depicted as a bull, the symbol of fertility. Isis, the queen of the gods, was shown with cow horns on her head. Hathor, pictured with the head of a cow, was a goddess of love and beauty (although how a cow-headed goddess could be in charge of beauty I don’t know!). As Ryken puts it, “the Egyptians loved their sacred cows.” Thus, God demonstrates the cow cults as just another false religion, unable to stand up to the power of the hand of the LORD.

The type of animal disease God inflicts in the fifth plague is not known. Some commentators speculate that it might have been anthrax (*e.g.*, Cole). Whatever it was, it was not an ordinary epidemic. It specifically struck livestock and not people. In 9:3 it is called a “very severe pestilence” or literally a “very heavy plague.” Once again, our friendly Hebrew word *kabed* (heavy) is used to describe not only the condition of Pharaoh’s heart, but also the severity of the hand of God in striking the livestock of Egypt.

Not only was the epidemic very severe, it was also a deadly disease. Exodus 9:6 tells us that “all of the livestock of Egypt died.” However, we know from later accounts (*e.g.*, 9:19) that there were still livestock alive in Egypt. Thus, the “all” of 9:6 does not mean every *single* animal; rather, it likely means every *kind* of animal. Alternatively, it could indicate that all the cattle “in the field” were destroyed, but the livestock in barns were spared. In any event, it was a huge economic disaster: animals used for food (cattle – beef/milk), transportation (camels, donkeys), the military (horses), farming (oxen), and economic goods (sheep – wool) were lost.

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There are two more miraculous features about this pestilence. First, it struck at God's appointed time. God set the time – tomorrow – and He delivered. Why did God wait one day? Perhaps to give the Egyptians time to repent. If so, it was time spent in vain, because they did not repent. The second miraculous feature of the pestilence is that it only struck Egyptian livestock. Once again, God specifically excludes His people from the plague. God sets apart Israel and makes a distinction between His people and the Egyptians. While “all the livestock of Egypt” was destroyed, “not one died” of all the livestock of Israel (9:6).

2. *Pharaoh's Heart (9:7)*

You can almost see Pharaoh in the royal stables watching his prized chariot stallions dying when he receives the news that there is no livestock illness in the land of Goshen. Pharaoh couldn't believe his ears, so he sent agents out to investigate the report. Soon enough the confirmation came back: “not even one of the livestock of the Israelites was dead” (9:7). Now that the plagues have taken a deadly turn, now that the economic losses are mounting up, now that the distinction between Egypt and Israel could not be clearer, you would think that this would be the moment for Pharaoh's heart to soften and for him to repent. If you thought so, you would be wrong. Pharaoh's *kabed* heart became even harder, and he refused to let Israel go.

E. Plague 6: Boils (9:8-12)

1. *Furnace Ashes (9:8-10)*

The sixth plague, like the third plague, comes unannounced. Pharaoh gets no warning this time, no opportunity to let God's people go to serve Him. For the first time, we have a plague directly attacking people. The previous plague attacked only the livestock, but the boils and sores of the sixth plague are directed specifically towards the Egyptians themselves. For the first time, all of Egypt can directly feel the pain and wrath of God upon their skin and realize that their lives are truly in danger. This second cycle of plagues has definitely increased in the severity of God's judgment. The fourth plague (flies) devastated the land (8:24). The fifth plague (livestock disease) decimated the domestic animals (9:6). And now the sixth plague afflicts the Egyptians as well as their remaining animals.

Moses is instructed to throw furnace ashes into the air “in the sight of Pharaoh” (9:8). So, although this plague is unannounced, Pharaoh is fully aware of how and when the plague began. God transformed the ashes into a fine dust which blew all over Egypt and settled down on man and beast as “boils” and “sores” (9:9). Although not specifically stated, the context makes it clear that like the fourth and fifth and subsequent plagues, this plague struck only Egypt. As the plagues became more severe, God continued to protect His people.

The source of this sixth plague is significant. The ashes likely came from the furnaces or kilns where the Hebrews were forced to make bricks for the Egyptians. Thus, the furnaces were symbols of the affliction of Israel. The residue of soot from their labors was the very means by which God inflicted physical pain upon the oppressors of His people. Egypt is about to pay a steep price for their building projects!

The exact nature of the skin disease which afflicted man and beast is unknown. Moses lists “the boils of Egypt” in Deuteronomy 28:27 along with other skin afflictions such as tumors, scabs, and itching. Mackay suggests it was skin anthrax, which would have caused black, burning abscesses. If so, this would be a connection with the black soot that was used to spread the

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disease. Other commentators suggest other ailments such as small pox or leprosy, but most agree that the affliction was dangerous, painful, and potentially life-threatening.

Several Egyptian deities may be under attack in this plague. First, there is “Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess of plagues, who was viewed as responsible for epidemics and also as capable of healing those who were afflicted by them” (Mackay). Next, we have Thoth, the god of healing. And then there was also Imhotep, the god of medicine. Ryken points out:

It is important to recognize that we are tempted to worship the same deities. This is an age of remarkable progress in medicine — the age of lasers and CAT scans, of antibiotics and anesthesia. As a result of our advanced knowledge of the body and its various ailments, it is tempting to make medicine an object of faith. Despite all our skill at healing, we are not sovereign over the human body. This means that medical expertise must never become our source of ultimate confidence for physical well-being. *Medicine makes a wonderful tool but a poor deity.* Whenever we get a prescription filled or go in for surgery or start chemotherapy, we should remember that all healing comes from God and that Christ alone is Lord of the body.

2. *Weak-Kneed Magicians (9:11-12)*

There is a significant impact of the sixth plague upon the court of Egypt. Cleanliness was paramount in Egyptian society. The magicians are covered in boils and sores. Not only are they suffering the affliction of the skin disease, but they are now also ceremonially unclean and unable to perform their rituals. God has “cut them off” from their deities. As a result, they “could not stand before Moses” (9:11); they have been thoroughly and completely defeated. Although the magicians cannot stand, Moses and Aaron are left standing in front of Pharaoh (9:10). The contrast could not be greater. The gods of Egypt have been defeated; the LORD God of Israel has vanquished them. Thus the magicians depart the pages of Scripture, never to return.

Still, Pharaoh does not seem to get the message. His heart remains hard. However, for the first time in the exodus narrative, the text now tells us that God made Pharaoh’s heart hard. Ryken explains:

Pharaoh’s hard heart confronts us with the mystery of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Both of the following statements are true: Pharaoh hardened his heart; God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. While it is true that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, the deeper truth is that even this was part of God’s sovereign plan. The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was not God’s response to Pharaoh, but His *purpose* for Pharaoh. God did this to demonstrate His justice, power, and mercy.

Conclusion

1. *Theological*

In closing, Philip Ryken gives a wonderful summary of 5 theological lessons from the plagues:

1) First, we learn *the meaning of salvation*. In its most basic sense, salvation means deliverance. God’s commands to Pharaoh to let His people go is a further reminder that God had come to set his people free. What was true for Israel under Moses is true for the believer in Jesus Christ. 2) Second, we learn *the purpose of life*, which is to glorify God. When God

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said, “Let my people go,” He went on to say, “so that they may worship me.” The Israelites were saved for God’s glory. Since the Hebrew word for “worship” is also the word for “service,” God was claiming His right to both their work and their worship. Like the Israelites, we are saved for God’s glory. 3) Third, we learn *the folly of idolatry*. Pharaoh was such a proud man that in order to humble him, God had to humiliate his gods one by one. With the plague on livestock, God humiliated Apis, Hathor, and the rest of Egypt’s sacred cows. Although we do not bow down before golden cows, we sometimes worship the very same gods and goddesses. 4) Fourth, we learn *the superiority of faith*. Beginning with the fourth plague, God differentiated between the Israelites and the Egyptians. This is the distinction He always makes — the distinction between the people of His choice, who receive all the blessings of His salvation, and the rest of fallen humanity, who remain under His curse. 5) The superiority of faith is proved by a fifth lesson, which is *the consequence of rebellion*. It is true that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. This is one of the mysteries of sovereign predestination: God wills the choice of some for salvation, while He hardens others in their sins. But it is also true that Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

2. Christological

The plagues demonstrate both the justice of God towards the Egyptians, and the mercy of God towards Israel. Throughout the Bible, we are presented with these two sides of salvation: judgment and mercy. Nowhere is that more evident than in the cross, where Jesus Christ endured the punishment of God’s justice so that we would receive the blessings of God’s mercy. God did not draw a distinction on the day of the crucifixion. The great Son of God, the greater Israel, did not enjoy the shade of God’s protecting hand. Instead, Jesus endured the full extent of the plagues of Egypt on the cross for us. While Pharaoh deserved everything he suffered, Jesus suffered everything we deserved. As we ponder this wonder, let us sing with the saints of heaven the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying:

³Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints! (Revelation 15:3).

3. Practical

We are often tempted to worship at the altar of the Egyptian gods. Whether it is medicine or money, pleasure or power, people or property, we are surrounded by the “gods of this age.” Whenever we place our faith and trust in a created thing instead of the Creator, we are imitating the Egyptians. How many of your idols must God destroy before you turn your full attention back to Him? Will it take one or two “plagues,” or will God unleash the full fury of His justice upon an unrepentant and unbelieving heart? These theological lessons are really practical lessons. If we grasp the meaning of the plagues, we will know the *meaning of salvation* and the *purpose of life*. We will learn the *folly of idolatry*, the *superiority of faith*, and the *consequences of rebellion*. These are practical, life-changing lessons. God made a distinction between Israel and Egypt. On which side of the line do you stand? Are you protected by God’s hand in the land of Goshen, or are you struck by the judgment of the hand of the LORD in Egypt? There is no middle ground.

Close in Prayer.

Next week: Lesson 10 – Plagued to Death – Ex. 9:13-11:10