

Plagues for a Purpose

Exodus 7-11

We are continuing to work our way through Exodus this morning and as we've read through this story, we've been introduced to the people of Israel who were slaves in Egypt, to Moses who was sent to deliver them, to Yahweh the unknown God of Israel, and to Pharaoh the prideful and powerful king of Egypt. We've reached the point where Pharaoh has refused to let the people go and Yahweh is about to pour out powerful plagues on Egypt to bring them to ruin so that Pharaoh would let the people go.

This is a popular part of the story that many of us know, but there are several details that most of us probably aren't aware of that are very significant because they show us the underlying reason for why God decided to deliver his people using these plagues. God used them for a purpose beyond just delivering his people and I want us to see what that is because God has called us to join in that same purpose today.

To understand the significance of the plagues, we need to understand what was going on in Egypt at that time. Like all people, they had refused to worship God and they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and came up with all kinds of bizarre ideas to explain life, death, and the world they lived in. This included beliefs about all kinds of different gods in order to explain things. (Picture) They had gods for the sun, the river, wind and storms, rain, drought, fertility, health, disease, the underworld, the heavens – some kind of god for everything. And these were the gods they worshipped. The same thing was happening all over in the world at that time. Every people group had their own gods and ideas.

Meanwhile, the one true God who actually created all things and had power over all things was UNKNOWN. Even the people of Israel didn't know him. Their forefathers did, but after generations of slavery he was forgotten. So when God sent Moses to lead them out of Egypt, no one knew who he was. And the Exodus is really a story of God revealing himself to the world at that time. That will help us understand why God used plagues to deliver his people.

We saw last week that Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh the first time to tell him to let the people of Israel go. But he refused and even punished the people because of it. And now they're going back with the same command and that's

where we pick things up today in chapter 7. We are going to cover 5 chapters today, which means we're not going to read them all, so I'm going to summarize what happens and pick out key verses to look at.

In chapter 7, Moses and Aaron are told to go to Pharaoh and repeat God's command to let his people go, and as God sent them, he told them this in Exodus 7:3-5: *"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."*

This reveals God's underlying purpose for the plagues. It wasn't just to deliver his people from Egypt, but to reveal who he was to the world. He wasn't going to just kill Pharaoh and get him out of the way, he was going to harden his heart and pour out a series of judgments against him so that the Egyptians and the people of Israel would know that he is Yahweh. This is a massive and intentional demonstration of the glory of God. We will see this purpose repeated throughout the plagues. The unknown God was about to reveal his glory to the world in a spectacular way.

So God told Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the people go, but they were also to do something else – to cast Aaron's staff on the ground in front of him. I learned this week that was the beginning of God revealing himself as supreme over all the gods of Egypt. The things I learned and will be sharing about God's defiance of the Egyptian gods come from the preacher J. Vernon McGee.

When Aaron threw down his staff, something very strange happened. The staff turned into a serpent. The chief god of the Egyptians was the sun god, Ra, and his perpetual enemy was Apep, the god of storms, clouds, fog and darkness. Apep had the form of a serpent. (Picture) So for Aaron's staff to turn into a serpent was a challenge against Ra. It also says that Pharaoh's magicians were able to do the same thing – whether by demonic power or illusion – their staffs became serpents as well, but Aaron's actually ate theirs right in front of them. So not only was God challenging Ra, but he was also revealing himself as supreme over the powers of Egypt. This was a direct warning before the plagues began, but Pharaoh wasn't swayed at all and would not let the people go.

So, the next morning, God poured out the first plague. When Pharaoh went out to the Nile River, Moses was to say to him: *“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.”* (7:17) So Moses took his staff, struck the river, and all the water in the Nile turned to blood. This was a huge problem for the people of Egypt. All the water was contaminated, and they had to dig for ground water that would be clean to use. But there was more than that.

The Egyptians actually worshipped the gods of the Nile River that they believed to have the powers of fertility and nourishment. (Picture) So when Moses struck the river and it turned to blood, the life-giving water from the Nile was turned to death in a demonstration of Yahweh’s power over their gods. But Pharaoh’s magicians were able to do a similar thing with their secret arts, so as problematic as this plague was, Pharaoh didn’t pay any attention.

The second plague is found in the beginning of chapter 8 and had to do with frogs. God caused frogs to come up and cover the land of Egypt. Frogs were everywhere, but the Egyptians couldn’t kill them because frogs were sacred. This plague was a defiance against Heket, the frog-headed goddess of Egypt. Frogs swarmed the people and were very upsetting to everyone, including Pharaoh. And again, by some sort of demonic power, the magicians were able to do the same thing, but they were only able to add to the problem, not do anything to stop it. It was so bad that Pharaoh begged for relief and promised to let the people go. So God showed mercy and all the frogs died, but then Pharaoh reneged on his promise.

So God poured out the third plague. It says in Exodus 8:16-19 that the dust of Egypt (which was a lot of dust!) turned into gnats/lice and tormented the people. McGee didn’t mention anything about how this tied in with an Egyptian god, but this time the magicians couldn’t imitate it and even told Pharaoh *“This is the finger of God.”* So they were beginning to see a power at work beyond the gods of Egypt. Up to this point the plagues were very problematic, but they didn’t cause actual destruction or pain. So Pharaoh refused to listen or let the people go, and the plagues continued. The next three bring more destruction, hardship, and direct pain.

Before the fourth plague God gave Pharaoh another warning. It says in Exodus 8:20-23: *“Thus says the Lord, “Let my people go, that they may serve me. ²¹ Or else, if you will not let my people go, behold, I will send swarms of flies on you and your servants and your people, and into your houses. And the houses of the Egyptians shall be filled with swarms of flies, and also the ground on which they stand. ²² But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth. ²³ Thus I will put a division between my people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall happen.””*

With this plague and those that followed God would make it clear that he was separating his people and protecting them. He was revealing his power over the universe and his faithfulness to the people of Israel. Furthermore, by sending a plague of flies, God was again defying the gods of Egypt. McGee says these flies were likely a kind of beetle that was sacred in Egypt and found in their tombs. (Picture) They were sacred to Ra and spoke of eternal life. So by causing them to swarm everywhere in Egypt and drive the people crazy, God was continuing to reveal his dominance over the Egyptian gods.

Pharaoh begged for relief. Not only were the flies a terrible nuisance, but they were ruining the land. He promised to let the people go, but when relief came, he hardened his heart again. His actions revealed how deceptive, stubborn, and prideful he was even as God was revealing his patience, mercy, and justice.

The fifth plague was poured out on the livestock. Many of them were struck and killed, but only in Egypt – not in Goshen where the Israelites lived. Livestock were vital for many things so this was a major hardship for the Egyptians. Even beyond that, the Egyptians also worshipped some of them – the god Apis was a black bull that they worshipped and even mummified. So God was not only increasing economic hardship, he was also continuing to triumph over the gods of Egypt. Pharaoh’s heart was still hardened.

The next plague was very painful – boils all over their bodies and on the livestock too. It was also a particular blow to the worship of the Egyptian gods. According to McGee, the priests who served in the Egyptian temples had to be clean, without any kind of sickness. Boils would have made them unfit to serve in the temples which would have brought all worship of false gods to a halt. In one city, Memphis, there were over 1,000 temples – all shut down because of boils. So the

priests were out of commission and this is the point at which the magicians gave up as well because of their misery.

Six plagues had happened by this point and all segments of society were feeling the impact: the land and livestock had extensive damage, the people were suffering from terrible sores, worship was completely shut down, and Pharaoh's magicians gave up. Up to this point the text says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, but after this plague and after others to come it says that God hardened his heart. In recalling these events, I think Moses wanted to show the readers that even the hardening of Pharaoh's heart was under the mighty hand of God in order to accomplish his purpose of revealing his glory through Pharaoh.

The seventh plague is significant in many ways. In Exodus 9:14-16 God tells Moses to say to Pharaoh: *"For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. ¹⁵ For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. ¹⁶ But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth."*

It is very clear again that God is using the plagues to reveal his glory throughout the earth. He could have ended Pharaoh and Egypt in one powerful plague and delivered his people right away, but he didn't. He was using multiple plagues with increasing intensity to reveal his glory in many ways: Yahweh has supremacy over all other gods, he has power over the heavens and earth, he has power over Pharaoh and all his people, he is patient and merciful, slow to anger. He is righteous and just. He is faithful to his people... This is Yahweh.

In the seventh plague God was going to send heavy hail upon the land in a mighty demonstration of his power. This time people and animals would die. But God also revealed his mercy by giving a warning to everyone in advance: anyone who listened and took shelter would be safe – even in Egypt – while those who didn't pay attention would die. The next day the hail came along with terrifying thunder and lightning. It struck down man, beast, plant, and tree and was a direct assault against the Egyptian god, Shu, (Picture) who was considered the god of the air. He was nothing before Yahweh. As the hail pounded the land, Pharaoh pleaded for relief once again, promising to let the people go, and God showed mercy once again. But when the hail stopped, he hardened his heart.

Exodus 10:1-2 says: “Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, ²and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the LORD.” The revelation of Yahweh’s glory.

Moses went and warned Pharaoh of the next plague, which was locusts. Pharaoh’s servants begged him to let the people go, so he said the men could go, but that was it. So God sent swarms of locusts that devoured everything that survived the hail. The crops and vegetation were completely gone and now the survival of the people of Egypt was in danger. Pharaoh begged again, God relented, and Pharaoh’s heart was hardened again.

The ninth plague was a direct judgement on their chief god Ra – the sun god. God caused a heavy darkness to cover the land for three days. It was so dark that people couldn’t go anywhere or do anything, except in the land of Goshen where they still had light. So Pharaoh said all the people could go, but he refused to let them take their livestock, which was a direct disobedience because God had hardened his heart again.

That brings us to Exodus 11 and the warning of the final plague. Moses told Pharaoh that at about midnight God would go out throughout the land of Egypt and the firstborn among man and livestock would die. According to McGee, the Egyptians believed the firstborn of both man and beast belonged to their gods. So now Yahweh would defy the gods of Egypt once again and claim the firstborn from them. Even after all that Pharaoh had seen, it says in Exodus 11:9: “*Then the Lord said to Moses, “Pharaoh will not listen to you, that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt.”*

The plagues are full of significance and purpose. God was revealing his glory on earth, showing that Yahweh has power over every king and kingdom, over every god, over every priest and magician, over everything in the universe, even the heart of man. Yahweh is faithful to his people – he will carry out his promises, he will protect, he will deliver and nothing can stand in his way. Yahweh is righteous and just, punishing wickedness, injustice, and rebellion. But he is also merciful and patient, showing compassion on all who turn to him. The unknown God who

created the universe and is sovereign and supreme over all things was making himself known through the plagues and beginning to carry out his plan to bring restoration and redemption to the human race that had turned away and rejected him.

That was then, this is now, and things are a lot different now because about 1500 years after the plagues, God revealed himself through the person of Jesus Christ who would deliver his people from slavery and the bondage of sin and the world has never been the same. Col. 2:13-15 says, *“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”*

Through Jesus and the power of his life, death, and resurrection, God has revealed himself to the world in a powerful way, triumphing over Satan, and delivering his people from sin. We know who God is because of the revelation of Jesus Christ and the spread of the church. And for those of us who believe and have become part of his people, Christ has called us to join in the work of revealing God to the world to bring restoration and redemption to mankind. Jesus is the light of the world and now we too are that light. Christ is in us and will make himself known through us.

So the purpose for the plagues is in many ways the same purpose we’ve been given today – to reveal the Lord to those who don’t yet know him so that they might turn to him and be saved. It’s an awesome responsibility that I honestly don’t feel capable of doing. But what we’ve just seen is that God is capable. He has all power to do whatever he determines to do and nothing can stop him, not even our incapability. We don’t need to be capable, we just need to be willing – to put our trust in him and let him use us to shine his light to the people around us. May the Lord encourage you and empower you to reveal his glory this week.