

The Purpose of Plagues

Exodus 7:1-10:29

Introduction

Showdown: This is a **famous** but **unfortunately long passage** (at least for the preacher). We're going to cover three full chapters in Exodus.

- Chapters 5-6 saw Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh with the command to release the Israelites from their oppressive slavery. Their initial plea was met with intensified suffering as Pharaoh increased their workload.
- Genealogical break in the action.

The stage is set for a **showdown** between God and Pharaoh. It's a showdown of cosmic proportions.

- I love a good showdown. One of the most famous in history was the "Rumble in the Jungle" in 1974 between the outspoken Muhammed Ali and the unstoppable George Foreman. Ali had battled back from being stripped of his title and suspended because of his refusal to comply with the Vietnam draft. When he returned, he battled back only to lose the heavyweight crown to Joe Frazier. On the other hand, Foreman gained the title with a sound beating of Frazier. Ali was the underdog. He used his speed and cunning and the new "rope-a-dope" strategy to tire Foreman and drop him in the 8th round.

Pharaoh: All of the suffering that will happen to Egypt is largely the result of Pharaoh's recalcitrance. He looked at Moses and Aaron and said: "Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go" (Ex 5:2). #Proveit #DaringGod

- Don't feel bad for Pharaoh, God gives him plenty of chances. He doesn't just **reject** God's call, he **punishes** the Israelites. **He doubles down.**
- Before God sends 10 punishing plagues he gives Pharaoh a chance, he has Aaron perform one of the signs he showed Moses in the wilderness: ^{7:8} Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ⁹ "When Pharaoh says to you, 'Prove yourselves by working a miracle,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.'" ¹⁰ So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. ¹¹ Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. ¹² For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. ¹³ Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.

Context: Pharaoh was not an **atheist** but a **pluralist**. It is not enough simply to believe in **a god** but to believe in **the one true God**.

- Pharaoh hasn't heard of Moses' God (or so he says) and, besides, he has his own gods, why does Moses care?

- It isn't enough to be religious, or spiritual, or have faith, it matters whether or not your faith is in Jesus.

Purpose: ^{7:1} And the LORD said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. ² You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land. ³ 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." ⁶ Moses and Aaron did so; they did just as the LORD commanded them.

- God knows Pharaoh's response and sovereignly ordains the circumstances to **demonstrate his power, judge his enemies, and save his worshippers.**
- He does this by sending 10 plagues (9 of which we'll look at today). The term "plague" has been co-opted by the Bubonic variety in most of the literature. Usually referring to disease, plagues here summarize all of the widespread and often fatal judgments of God.
 - (1) Water to blood, (2) frogs, (3), gnats, (4) flies, (5) livestock disease, (6) boils, (7) hail, (8) locust, (9) darkness (and next week, [10] death of the firstborn).
 - Pharaoh's cycle of bondage, plague, repentance, reversal.
- These plagues tell us so much. They tell us **that** we should obey God, because of his power, but also **why** we should obey God, because of his salvation.
 - ^{7:17} Thus says the LORD, "By this you shall know that I am the LORD:
 - ^{9:14b} so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth.

1. The Undeniable Power of God

Undeniable: Each plague shows the undeniable power of God, a power greater than anything the Egyptians know. There is none like God in the whole earth.

- **Undeniably Powerful:** ^{7:20} Moses and Aaron did as the LORD commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned into blood. ²¹ And the fish in the Nile died, and the Nile stank, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. There was blood throughout all the land of Egypt. No one could ignore the reality of what is happening.
- **Undeniably Supernatural:** ^{7:19} And the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, their canals, and their ponds, and all their pools of water, so that they may become blood, and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.'" No natural explanation could fully accord to what was happening.
- **Persistent Grace:** ²⁴ And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile. The judgment God was earned but he consistently offers grace.

Destroyer of the Gods: Egypt was filled with gods. Sun god, moon god, river god, fertility god, and so on. Religion and everyday life were intertwined.

- They worshipped the Nile River as a god because it was as close to divine as anything they knew. The apparent mood swings of the Nile determined much of their life. Would there be enough water for the crops, for their livelihood?
 - **“Destroyer of the Gods” hypothesis.** In some ways it falls short as there are more than 10 gods in Egypt and some of the plagues don’t correspond to a particular God (maybe one god has a frog as its hieroglyph, or the Nile is worshipped, or there is a sun god, etc.).
 - In some ways, it tracks because he is showing his superiority to the world and worldview of the Egyptians. The pharaoh himself was, as in many cultures, viewed as a god or the emissary of a god on earth. **Pharaoh was a god, but had no power against the real God.**

No Imitation: It’s interesting to the “magicians” of Egypt mimicking YHWH’s plagues. Whether a clever illusion or a demonic imitation, it clearly falls short.

- **Snakes:** Swallowed the snakes.
- **Water:** ^{7:22} But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts.
- **Frogs:** ^{8:7} But the magicians did the same by their secret arts and made frogs come up on the land of Egypt.

They fall short. They had a water/blood trick in their bag. And apparently, they knew how to summon frogs. Notice that even in the water/frog situations, they could imitate the plague but not eliminate it. They could turn water to blood but not make the blood go away. They could call the frogs but not make them go away. ^{8:8} Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, “Plead with the LORD to take away the frogs from me and from my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the LORD.” And for some reason, the gnats are a bridge to far.

- **Gnats:** ^{8:16} Then the LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, so that it may become gnats in all the land of Egypt.’” ¹⁷ And they did so. Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and there were gnats on man and beast. All the dust of the earth became gnats in all the land of Egypt. ¹⁸ The magicians tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, but they could not. So there were gnats on man and beast. ¹⁹ Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God.”

And they, themselves, are not exempt from these afflictions.

- **Boils:** ^{9:10} So they took soot from the kiln and stood before Pharaoh. And Moses threw it in the air, and it became boils breaking out in sores on man and beast. ¹¹ And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils came upon the magicians and upon all the Egyptians.

Threat to Our Lives: YHWH is the powerful creator, God of the universe. He is not a therapeutic, feel-good self-help deity. He is not a tame god who does our bidding, but the only true God who destroys anything that opposes him.

- A weak god might seem more approachable but he I wouldn’t be powerful enough to save.

- The famous C. S. Lewis *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* that describes Aslan, the Christ figure. Asked if Aslan is safe, the response is telling: “Safe? Of course he isn’t safe. But he’s good!”
- A god who is weak enough to domesticate is too weak to save. A god who is powerful enough to save is not subject to our whims or wishes. We either worship him or face his righteous judgment. Either God is strong enough to destroy evil and bring justice or he is too weak to do much more than encourage us with empty platitudes.
 - Too often we want a God who smites others but doesn’t judge our sin.

Modern Idols: Our idols may be different, our false gods more modern, but they are no less worshipped. We might not worship the Nile but we worship the economy. It might not be the pharaoh who has our allegiance, but politicians and celebrities often do. We might not be enamored by the same graven images but our hearts are captured by technology, entertainment, and much more.

- And just as the LORD set a time of judgment for the Egyptians all of us have a time of judgment coming. He told the Egyptians, “Tomorrow the LORD will do this thing in the land.” We are reminded that judgment comes for us all. Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness (Ps 96:11-13).

Running from opposing God always leads us to a life of **destruction**. God is powerful and should be trusted and obeyed.

2. The Unavoidable Consequences of Sin

A Hard Heart: Sometimes the situation is described as Pharaoh hardening his heart, other times, it’s God that hardens Pharaoh’s heart.

- **Water:** ^{22b} So Pharaoh’s heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said. ²³ Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart.
- **Gnats:** But Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.
- **Flies:** ³¹ And the LORD did as Moses asked, and removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people; not one remained. ³² But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go.
- **Livestock:** ⁷ And Pharaoh sent, and behold, not one of the livestock of Israel was dead. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go.
- **Boils:** ¹² But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had spoken to Moses.
- **Locust:** ^{10:1} 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, ² and 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.”... ¹⁶ Then Pharaoh hastily called Moses and Aaron and said, “I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you. ¹⁷ Now therefore, forgive my sin, please, only this once, and plead with the LORD your God only to remove this death from me.” ¹⁸ So he went out from Pharaoh and pleaded with the LORD. ¹⁹ And the LORD turned the wind into a very strong west wind, which lifted the locusts and drove them into the Red Sea. Not a single locust was left in all the country of Egypt. ²⁰ But the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go.

Sovereign and Free: How does God’s sovereignty and our free will interact? God is sovereign and we are free. God’s sovereignty does not violate our free will and our free will does not impinge on his sovereignty (a lot more can be said, but that much is obvious from this passage). (GCA HS Q&A: “How can God be sovereign and we have free will?” *smart alec* Takes one to know one).

- Judas was punished for betraying and it was foreordained. We are responsible for our actions and God is in perfect control of us and all things.

God is Sovereign: God will get his glory! Everything is going exactly to God’s plan. From one vantage point, we see God’s intimate care, concern, and control of the situation involving his people.

We are Responsible: From another vantage point, we see the judgment and punishment of Pharaoh because of his sin. Pharaoh has no excuse. Plenty of times we see his rejection of God.

Responsibility: When he repents it is **superficial** (hastily calls Moses/Aaron) or **temporary**.

- He wants to relieve the consequences of judgment without changing his behavior. **Hail:** ^{9:27} Then Pharaoh sent and called Moses and Aaron and said to them, “This time I have sinned; the LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong... ³⁴ But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again and hardened his heart, he and his servants. ³⁵ So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people of Israel go, just as the LORD had spoken through Moses.
 - He wants to be delivered from the consequences of his sin while still worshipping himself instead of God.
 - **Superficial sorrow** and **true repentance** are different. Not embarrassment of being caught or fear of the consequences. “True repentance is having a broken heart over what breaks God’s heart” (Hopper) and a change in allegiance that genuinely loves God more than sin and self.
- He’s negotiating with God. **Darkness:** ^{10:24} Then Pharaoh called Moses and said, “Go, serve the LORD; your little ones also may go with you; only let your flocks and your herds remain behind.” ²⁵ But Moses said, “You must also let us have sacrifices and burnt offerings, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God. ²⁶ Our livestock also must go with us; not a hoof shall be left behind, for we must take of them to serve the LORD our God, and we do not know with what we must serve the LORD until we arrive there.”
 - Following God is not a negotiation, it’s a surrender (kids negotiating bed time; fighting sleep).

What should have humbled him, only hardened him. It was his own fault. There is always the option between humbling and hardening. The judgment of God is meant to humble us so we can be saved but, if we're not careful, it will harden us to our own destruction.

- How do you respond to God's judgment? Do you humbly surrender? Or do you blame others, justify your behavior, or try to appease God until he lets up? **You can't fool God.**

Devolution: The punishment of God starts unraveling everything that Egyptian society is built on. The great center of commerce and life, the Nile, is ruined. The health and livelihood of the people is threatened.

- By plague 9, everyone is cast into darkness. The only thing left after that is death. Tim Keller points out how this is an unraveling of creation. In Genesis 1, the world is formless and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. God took that darkness and spoke light, he took that chaos and created order. He gave rhythm to the anarchy.
- Their sin has led them back toward chaos and confusion. The mighty Egyptian empire is now hurtling toward anarchy. Everything is breaking down until they are left in the dark. Whether natural or supernatural, disobedience leads to our destruction.
- **Consequences are often natural to disobedience.** E.g., Nile turns to blood, frogs evacuate and take over the land, the frogs die and gnats and flies proliferate, diseases on cattle and people are born, etc.
- Often it is the natural consequences that get us. Following God isn't just a spiritual exercise that occurs in our hearts and minds but the practical choices we make every day (e.g., doctor looks at bloodwork, tells you to eat differently, won't arrest you and lock you up. But if you don't change your health will deteriorate, your body will break down, your heart will attack you).

When God says to not be unequally yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor 6:14) and you ignore his warning, you bring all sorts of difficulty and danger into your life. And when things go badly (and they will), don't blame God, blame your sin.

When Jesus says seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matt 6:33) and you seek your own kingdom first, putting your work, hobbies, and personal comfort ahead of God, and it leads to spiritual and relational problems, don't blame God.

- He could smite you, and sometimes he might, but he can also give you over to your sin and your world can fall into despair and disintegration.
- **Sin Stinks:** ^{8:13b} The frogs died out in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. ¹⁴ And they gathered them together in heaps, and the land stank.
- Only Jesus can heal you. Only the creator can bring order from the chaos. His Lordship leads to an abundant life. But if you stubbornly stick to your sin and stubbornly try to rule your own life, **you will destroy yourself (he won't have to).** God is it against us, he is against our sin. He loves us so much that he does not want us to destroy ourselves.

Feel the Darkness: Darkness. ^{10:21} Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt." ²² So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of

Egypt three days. ²³ They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the people of Israel had light where they lived.

- Darkness is terrifying because any danger can be lurking their. There's a type of darkness (**cave dark**) that is so intense that the **absence feels heavy**. That is what life without God is like. It is an emptiness heavier than any weight. Without God we all live in a land of darkness. Is your life in darkness? Do you feel the darkness?
- **Jesus is the light that overcomes the darkness.** "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1:5).

3. The Unbelievable Hope of Salvation

Hope of Salvation: If we look close enough in these chapters we will see the hope of salvation embedded in these terrible judgments.

- **Grace to the Israelites:**
 - **Flies:** ^{8:22} 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.
 - **Livestock:** ^{9:6} And the next day the LORD did this thing. All the livestock of the Egyptians died, but not one of the livestock of the people of Israel died.
- **Grace to the Egyptians:** God demonstrates his power **not** to destroy the Egyptians (he has always desired to save the nations) **but** to destroy those that oppose him and reject his mercy (foreshadowing of Passover).
 - **Hail:** ^{9:18} Behold, about this time tomorrow I will cause very heavy hail to fall, such as never has been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. ¹⁹ Now therefore send, get your livestock and all that you have in the field into safe shelter, for every man and beast that is in the field and is not brought home will die when the hail falls on them. ²⁰ Then whoever feared the word of the LORD among the servants of Pharaoh hurried his slaves and his livestock into the houses, ²¹ but whoever did not pay attention to the word of the LORD left his slaves and his livestock in the field.

Opportunity: God is giving them a warning, a chance. **God is pulling his punches.** He could have wiped everyone out with something more severe than frogs, gnats, and flies (and it is coming). Why are there 10 plagues? Not plan A or B but J? God knows it's going to take the death of the firstborn son. **This is God's grace, not incompetence.**

- ⁴ Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? ⁵ But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed (Rom 2:4-5).
- O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy (Hab 3:2).
- **The point of the plagues is not ultimately to judge but to save.**

- The Hebrews are being saved by God judging Pharaoh, and the Egyptians are also given the opportunity to repent and worship YHWH.
- Even his judgment of Pharaoh is full of grace. He could have killed him at any point.
- The choice is not between salvation or judgment but the plan is salvation through judgment.

The Cross: Salvation comes (not instead) but through judgment on the cross. God does not ignore or bypass our sin, but Jesus takes the judgment for our sin on himself so that we can be saved.

- All the plagues of God's justice came upon Jesus. Jesus endured the darkness of God's wrath so that we could experience the light of his grace. He substituted himself and took our judgment. Jesus is the judge who came to bear our judgment in our place. This distinguishes the gospel.
- **Religious Pluralism:** David Platt tells a story of sitting outside a Buddhist temple in Indonesia, talking to a Buddhist and a Muslim leader in the shadow of the colorful temple grounds. These leaders were discussing how all religions are **fundamentally** the same and only superficially different. "We may have different views about small issues," one of them said, "but when it comes down to essential issues, each of our religions is the same." Platt eventually said, "It sounds as though you both picture God (or whatever you call God) at the top of a mountain and you believe we are all at the base of the mountain, and I may take one route up the mountain, you may take another, and in the end we will all end up in the same place." The leaders smiled and happily replied, "Exactly! You understand!" Platt leaned in and said, "What would you think if I told you that the God at the top of the mountain actually came down to where we are? What would you think if I told you that God doesn't wait for people to find their way to him, but instead he comes to us." That is the gospel. Jesus saves us and leads us to the Father.

Conclusion:

- At the end of the 9th plague, Moses tells Pharaoh, ^{10:29}"As you say! I will not see your face again." It's over, there are no more chances. He has persisted in his resistance and will receive the just judgment of God.
- But for those who have eyes to see, who hear the warnings, they humbly repent and believe.
 - Jesus was judged so that you could be saved. **Would you believe completely in him?** I'm not talking about temporary relief from your problem, or superficial sorrow that you got caught, but deep thankfulness for his grace and a desire to follow him everywhere he goes until he brings you home to glory.
 - Disobeying Jesus will bring nothing but destruction and darkness, but trusting in him is the path to abundant life, now and forever. **Will you follow him?**