



Week 2: Plagues

Day 1 - Exodus 7:1-2, 7:8-13

¹ 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 Israelites go out of his land.

⁸ The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ⁹ "When Pharaoh says to you, 'Perform a wonder,' then you shall say to Aaron, "Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, and it will become a snake.'" ¹⁰ So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did as the Lord had commanded; Aaron threw down his staff before Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. ¹¹ Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same by their secret arts. ¹² Each one threw down his staff, and they became snakes, but Aaron's staff swallowed up theirs. ¹³ However, Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

Understanding the passage:

Like the Greeks and the Romans, the Egyptians worshipped a pantheon of gods. The gods were individually responsible for battles and wars as well as various aspects of nature. The Egyptians, and especially Pharaoh, believed it was their gods who controlled all of the things that God commanded in the plagues. The plagues are a showdown between Israel's God, the one true God, and all of Egypt's gods.

What's more is that God begins by telling Moses that he will be placed in the role of God to Pharaoh. This is significant because Pharaoh sees himself as a god. This means that not only are the gods of the pantheon at war with Israel's God, but Pharaoh-the-god is at war with Moses-the-God.

Before the plagues even begin, Aaron threatens Egypt's gods by throwing down his staff. Cobras were symbols of Egypt's power (think of Pharaoh's headpieces that look like cobras). The staff turns into a serpent. Pharaoh's magicians do the same, but Aaron's serpent swallows the Egyptian's serpents. The message is clear: God will swallow up whatever lies in the way of freeing the Hebrew people.

The first time Aaron cast down his staff and it became a serpent (Exodus 4:1-5, 30-31), it was a sign intended to help the Hebrews believe God had given power to Moses and Aaron. The Israelites did believe, but Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not believe.

Questions for reflection:

1. How does this confrontation set the tone for the plagues that will follow?
2. What do the varying responses of the Hebrews and Pharaoh to Aaron's staff turning into a serpent tell you?
3. Why do you think Pharaoh's heart was hard?

Day 2 - Exodus 7:14, 7:19-23, 8:1-4, 8:7-8, 8:13-15

14 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. 19 The Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over its rivers, its canals, and its ponds, and all its pools of water—so that they may become blood, and there shall be blood throughout the whole land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone."

20 Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and of his officials he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile; all the water in the river was turned into blood, 21 and the fish in the river died. The river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink its water, and there was blood throughout the whole land of Egypt. 22 But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts; 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.

1 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord: Let my people go, so that they may serve me. 2 If you refuse to let them go, I will plague your whole country with frogs. 3 The Nile shall swarm with frogs; they shall come up into your palace, into your bedchamber and your bed, into the houses of your officials and of your people, and into your ovens and your kneading bowls. 4 The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your officials.'"

7 But the magicians did the same by their secret arts and brought frogs up on the land of Egypt. 8 Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, "Pray to the Lord to take away the frogs from me and my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the Lord."

13 And the Lord did as Moses requested: the frogs died in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. 14 And they gathered them together in heaps, and the land stank. 15 But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said.

Understanding the passage:

Because the plagues were God's deliberate demonstrations of control over the world that God created, there was nothing random about them. They were specifically targeted at certain nature gods.

In the first plague, God turns the water of the Nile to blood. Because the Nile was a source of drinking water and crop irrigation, the Egyptians were dependent on it. The health of the river meant the difference between a year of plenty at harvest or a potential famine. An unhealthy river was a preview of the threat to Egypt's survival.

It is fitting that the first plague occurs where so much death took place as a result of Pharaoh's decree to kill all of the baby boys. The bloody water caused the fish to die, the Nile to become undrinkable, and made the river useless for irrigation of agricultural lands.

The Nile was considered a source of life; consequently, it was worshipped and deified in the god Hapi. A river of death symbolized defeat of the deity that protected it. God's message is clear: I am the one who gives life, not the false god Hapi.

Pharaoh's magicians responded by turning other water to blood. They were so eager to outdo God that they were willing to intensify the deathly curse. Their short-sightedness not only hurt the Egyptian people, but it didn't make an impact on Pharaoh's hard heart.

God responds to Pharaoh by sending another plague: frogs emerge from the Nile to infest the land. Heqet, the Egyptian god of fertility, was depicted with the head of a frog so this is immediately a battle between God and another nature god. The question at hand is, who controls fertility? Controlling fertility means controlling power. Is it God who creates and gives life? Or does life come from an Egyptian god?

Though Pharaoh's magicians are able to produce hordes of frogs as well, Pharaoh doesn't ask them to get rid of all of the frogs; he asks Moses and Aaron. This offers a glimpse of Pharaoh's sense of inner conflict. He clearly has a lack of trust in his own magicians, and by asking Moses to "pray to the Lord" to remove the frogs, he indicates an awareness of the power of Israel's God.

Questions for reflection:

1. What are the "little g" gods in our world that people worship?
2. Have you ever found yourself eager to outdo someone, even to your own detriment, in order to make a point? What was the result?
3. If Pharaoh believes God can remove the frogs, why doesn't Pharaoh assent to God?

Day 3 - Exodus 8:17-23, 8:28-32

17 Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and gnats came on humans and animals alike; all the dust of the earth turned into gnats throughout the whole land of Egypt. 18 The magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, but they could not. There were gnats on both humans and animals. 19 And the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God!" But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said.

20 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Rise early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh, as he goes out to the water, and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord: Let my people go, so that they may serve me, 21 because if you will not let my people go, I will send swarms of flies on you, your officials, and your people, and into your houses. The houses of the Egyptians shall be filled with swarms of flies, as will the land where they live. 22 But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people live, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I the Lord am in this land. 23 Thus I will make a distinction between my people and your people. This sign shall appear tomorrow.'"

28 So Pharaoh said, "I will let you go to sacrifice to the Lord your God in the wilderness, provided you do not go very far away. Pray for me." 29 Then Moses said, "As soon as I leave you, I will pray to the Lord that the swarms of flies may depart tomorrow from Pharaoh, from his officials, and from his people; only do not let Pharaoh again deal falsely by not letting the people go to sacrifice to the Lord."

30 So Moses went out from Pharaoh and prayed to the Lord. 31 And the Lord did as Moses asked: he removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh, from his officials, and from his people; not one remained. 32 But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also and would not let the people go.

Understanding the passage:

God loves and cares for the Israelites and wants to free them **from** slavery and oppression. God also wants to free them **for** something: worship. In verse 20, God tells Moses to demand freedom for the people so they might go out and worship God. Even after suffering through those horrible plagues, Pharaoh's heart is hardened, and he will not let the people go. Everett Fox, a Jewish studies scholar, translates verse 32 as: "Pharaoh *made his heart heavy-with-stubbornness* this time as well." Pharaoh did the same thing that many of us do today: stubbornly cling to a cause that is both wrong and failing. As the past two days have made clear, Pharaoh had a pantheon of gods he worshipped, and he viewed himself as a god as well. The idea that he would let go of free labor so they might go worship another god was appalling to him. It makes sense that he would rebel against that petition.

Pause for a moment and think about how you feel when there are a couple of gnats around you. You likely swat at them and feel uncomfortable with them landing on you. Now, imagine all of the dust from the ground becoming gnats and them flying around your face or your food. It would have been unbearable.

It is unclear whether God has increased the complexity of the plagues or if God has limited the abilities of the magicians, but for the first time they are unable to replicate the plague. Their response shows humility. They recognize that the plague of gnats must have come from a truly powerful God.

The plague of flies was a direct mocking of the insect god, Khepri. Khepri, who was depicted with the face of a beetle, was connected with the sunrise, rebirth, and creation. God's dominance over Khepri is intended to remind everyone that God alone is responsible for creation, for the sun rising every morning, and for resurrection. This plague has an added layer of the miraculous: the Israelites escape it. God sets apart the land of Goshen, where the Hebrews lived, so that it was not affected.

But the plague did affect every Egyptian, which raises the question – did they all deserve it? In the midst of all of these plagues, the Egyptians thought the Israelite's God was their enemy, but their real enemy was Pharaoh. Was it just to punish the Egyptian people because Pharaoh wouldn't let the Israelites go? How do we wrestle with that? The Torah makes it clear that the Egyptians are not just collateral damage in God's crusade against Pharaoh, but that the Egyptians shared in collective guilt of enslavement and oppression. This approach to justice is not one-size-fits-all, for we also see in the Torah that individual crimes are to be punished individually.

Questions for reflection:

1. What do you think is more compelling: to be freed **from** something or **for** something?
2. Is there a cause that you're stubbornly clinging to right now that is wrong or failing? Why can't you let go?
3. What is your reaction to the concept of punishment for collective guilt?

Day 4 - Exodus 9:5-12, 9:23-28, 9:34-35

⁵ The Lord set a time, saying, "Tomorrow the Lord will do this thing (strike livestock with a deadly pestilence) in the land." ⁶ And on the next day the Lord did so; all of the Egyptians' livestock died, but none of the Israelites' livestock died. ⁷ Pharaoh inquired and found that not even one of the Israelites' livestock had died. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he would not let the people go.

⁸ Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Take handfuls of soot from the kiln, and let Moses throw it in the air in the sight of Pharaoh. ⁹ It shall become dust all over the land of Egypt and shall cause festering boils on humans and animals throughout the whole land of Egypt." ¹⁰ So they took soot from the kiln and stood before Pharaoh, and Moses threw it in the air, and it caused festering boils on humans and animals. ¹¹ The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils afflicted the magicians as well as all the Egyptians. ¹² But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had spoken to Moses.

²³ Then Moses stretched out his staff toward heaven, and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and fire came down on the earth. And the Lord rained hail on the land of Egypt; ²⁴ there was hail with fire flashing continually in the midst of it, such heavy hail as had never fallen in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. ²⁵ The hail struck down everything that was in the open field throughout all the land of Egypt, both human and animal; the hail also struck down all the plants of the field and shattered every tree in the field. ²⁶ Only in the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were, was there no hail.

²⁷ Then Pharaoh summoned 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. ²⁸ Pray to the Lord! Enough of God's thunder and hail! I will let you go; you need stay no longer."

³⁴ But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned once more and hardened his heart, he and his officials. ³⁵ So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he would not let the Israelites go, just as the Lord had spoken through Moses.

Understanding the passage:

Repeatedly in these passages we see that Pharaoh's heart is hardened, preventing him from letting the people go. The cycle repeats itself: when his country is in the throes of a plague, he begs his magicians to solve it, he begs Moses and Aaron to solve it, he pledges to let the Israelites go. But when the plague is resolved (v. 34 "when Pharaoh saw that the rain... had ceased, he sinned once more and hardened his heart."), he immediately goes back to his old ways.

This is typical behavior for abusers, evildoers, and... most of us. We confess our sins, plead for forgiveness, and promise to change our ways. But as soon as we're back on track, our sinful nature rears its head and we're tempted back to our previous patterns or stances.

Pharaoh's problem is not self-awareness, for he admits to Moses and Aaron in verse 27 that he was guilty of sin. His problem is that he is practicing false repentance. The Hebrew word for repentance is *shuv*, which literally means "to turn." It connotes not just an internal turn away from sin, but a physical turning as well. When someone truly repents, they turn away from their bad habits or decisions. They turn toward something new. Pharaoh doesn't make that turn. His repentance is worthless.

Questions for reflection:

1. Have you ever been caught in a cycle like Pharaoh?
2. Is there anything from which you need to *shuv*?
3. Are you guilty of false repentance? What might you do so that it is more authentic?

Day 5 - Exodus 10:3, 10:7-23

³ So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said to him, "Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews: How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, so that they may serve me.

⁷ Pharaoh's officials said to him, "How long shall this fellow be a snare to us? Send the people away, so that they may serve the Lord their God. Do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?" ⁸ So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh, and he said to them, "Go, serve the Lord your God! But which ones are to go?" ⁹ Moses said, "We will go with our young and our old; we will go with our sons and daughters and with our flocks and herds, because we have the Lord's festival to celebrate." ¹⁰ He said to them, "The Lord indeed will be with you, if ever I let your little ones go with you! Plainly, you have some evil purpose in mind. ¹¹ No, never! Your men may go and serve the Lord, for that is what you are asking." And they were driven out from Pharaoh's presence.

¹² Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt, so that the locusts may come upon it and eat every plant in the land, all that the hail has left." ¹³ So Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and the Lord brought an east wind upon the land all that day and all that night. When morning came, the east wind had brought the locusts. ¹⁴ The locusts came upon all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country of Egypt, such a dense swarm of locusts as had never been before nor ever shall be again. ¹⁵ They covered the surface of the whole land, so that the land was black, and they ate all the plants in the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left. Nothing green was left on the trees or on the plants in the fields, in all the land of Egypt. ¹⁶ Pharaoh hurriedly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "I have sinned against the Lord your God and against you. ¹⁷ Do forgive my sin this once, and pray to the Lord your God that at the least he remove this deadly thing from me." ¹⁸ So he went out from Pharaoh and prayed to the Lord. ¹⁹ The Lord changed 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 would not let the Israelites go.

²¹ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven so that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be felt." ²² So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was dense darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. ²³ People could not see one another, and for three days they could not move from where they were, but all the Israelites had light where they lived.

Understanding the passage:

Through Moses and Aaron, God asks Pharaoh, "how long will you refuse to humble yourself before me?" God didn't say, "how long will you refuse to obey me?" though that was ultimately God's concern. God knew there was something standing in the way of Pharaoh's obedience, and that was his pride and lack of humility.

Witnessing the continuous domination by God, Pharaoh's officials began to demand that the Israelites be freed so that they might go and worship. Pharaoh seemed to be blind to the destruction that he was causing by standing against God. Sometimes, like Pharaoh, we are blind to the ramifications and consequences of our actions. We need friends to stand by our sides and point out the places where we don't live up to what we hope to.

Pharaoh seems to back down, but his acquiescence comes with an attempt at compromise. Rather than obeying the commands of God, Pharaoh seeks to wrest control from God. John 14:15 says, "if you love me, you will keep my commandments." God longs for our obedience but it doesn't come from sheer determination; it can only come from a changed heart. The desire of our heart has to include obedience or it will never work.

Pharaoh is able to admit that he a sinner and to ask Moses for forgiveness. But he is unable to truly surrender himself before God. His inclination is much like ours – we keep a string attached to our confession so that we can pull it back when we need to wrest back control.

The locust plague is truly awful because it destroys whatever remains of useful agricultural land. Between the Nile filled with blood, livestock with pestilence, hail and fire, there wasn't much left. The few and far-between patches of green ended up being eaten by the locusts.

God uses a wind to bring in the locusts, reminding Pharaoh and the Egyptians that it is not their gods who send the winds. Like Jesus in the boat rebuking the wind, God is the one with the power to control nature. The Egyptians faced a choice – they could witness what happened and choose to believe it was a coincidence or a natural fluke. Or they could witness the plague of locusts and believe that God was trying to get their attention. We have a similar choice each day: we can regard everything that happens as a coincidence, or we can give credit to God.

Questions for reflection:

1. Who has God placed in your life that can reflect hard truths to you? Are you willing to listen to them?
2. Are you inclined to regard everything that happens as a coincidence or give credit to God?

Video Discussion Questions:

1. What did Colin say were the two purposes of the plagues?
2. Does one of those purposes make more sense to you than the other?
3. What do you think it means that Pharaoh's heart was hardened? How do you reconcile that with God's character?
4. Do you think the plagues, which affected not just Pharaoh but all of Egypt, were just?
5. Does justice require punishing those who did wrong?
6. How would you rate your obedience to God?
7. How would you answer the question posed to Pharaoh: How long do you refuse to humble yourself before me? What are the roadblocks that can get in the way of humbling yourself before God?
8. What role does your pride play in preventing you from doing what God wants you to do?
9. What was your biggest takeaway this week?

Prayer requests and other notes: