

Deliverance From Slavery

Message 7

Destruction of Egypt

Exodus 9:1-10:29

The War Continues

We are in the middle of a war. It is the strangest war ever fought. There are no battalions of infantry, no cavalry charges, no chariots racing across the plain. To all appearances it should have been an easy victory for Pharaoh. Pharaoh was king of Egypt, the most glorious and powerful nation on earth. He commanded the most powerful army, and ruled the Nile without serious opposition. What is more, Pharaoh was a god. Or so he and the Egyptians believed. Pharaoh's opposition was an insignificant God, Yahweh. He was the God of the Hebrews, a slave race in Egypt. For a century the Hebrews have been serving the might of Egypt. It was obvious to all that this Yahweh was unable to oppose the power of Pharaoh.

We have seen how Pharaoh provoked this conflict. For hundreds of years the Hebrews had lived peacefully in Egypt. But as they grew very numerous, Pharaoh began to fear them. First he enslaved them, then he attempted genocide by ordering all male Hebrew babies to be killed. The cries of despair of the Hebrews came to God, and God acted to save them from their misery. God called Moses as His servant, and now Moses has been announcing God's attacks on Egypt. Last week we saw an initial skirmish, when God turned Moses' staff into a snake. Pharaoh's magicians also turned their staves into snakes, but Moses' snake ate up the other snakes. God won the first round. Then we saw the first four plagues that God sent upon Egypt. He turned the Nile into blood, He blanketed the land with frogs, He infested Egypt with gnats, and He sent a horde of flies. Twice Pharaoh was so tormented by these plagues, he said the Hebrews could leave Egypt. But as soon as the plague left, he reneged on his promise. This week we resume the story of this great battle for the Israelites in Egypt.

Natural Phenomena or Miracles?

But before we return to the story, we must ask how these plagues came about. What do you think when you read this story? Does it seem plausible to you that Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, could turn all the water in the Nile river and all the streams and lakes into blood? Could God send millions of frogs across Egypt? What about all the other plagues? Does it seem reasonable that Moses could just wave his staff and God would inundate the land with gnats and flies and locusts, and pummel it with boils and hail? Many people do not find this reasonable. They look at this story the same way they read the myths of other ancient peoples. They are willing to accept that there was a great exodus of Hebrews from Egypt, but they do not accept this account of it. Such people believe that Moses or some later author made up these stories to provide a divine history for their race – just as the other ancient peoples did.

Some people are willing to accept that something like these events occurred, but they look for natural causes. Everyone knows that you cannot turn the Nile into blood by waving a stick at it – so that must be a metaphor for something that really did happen. Perhaps there was a sudden release of mineral deposits that colored the river red. Possibly the polluted Nile caused all its frogs to evacuate onto land. Perhaps the livestock all died of a disease they caught from the rotting frogs. And so forth. If you are interested you can find commentaries that will spin all sorts of “natural” explanations for the plagues. And many universities have professors who teach this stuff as real scholarship.

There are two problems with these “natural” explanations of the plagues. First, they are unnatural, and second, they are unnecessary. They are unnatural because you have to greatly contort the evidence to make them seem plausible. Let us take the Nile turning to blood, for example. It strains the imagination to suppose that a seasonal deluge of mineral deposits would cause all the fish to die and cause such panic of the Egyptians. The Egyptians were not stupid. They knew the difference between blood and hard water. In

an effort to make this event seem reasonable, you end up adulterating or denying much of the rest of the story. Furthermore, just for the sake of argument, let us suppose that there was a natural explanation for all these plagues. Then how can you explain that they happened just when Moses commanded them? If the plagues are not miracles in themselves, then they are certainly miraculous in their timing! The more you examine the so-called natural explanations for the plagues, you find that you encounter far more problems than you solve. It turns out that it takes more faith to believe in the natural causes than to believe the plagues were simply miracles. Although I am sure there are sincere people who hold to this view, in the end it appears to be a poor compromise between denying God's power outright, and affirming it without reservation.

The "natural" explanations for the plagues are not only unnatural, they are also unnecessary. The truth is that Yahweh is not merely the God of the Hebrews. He is the Creator and Ruler of all the universe. Therefore it is eminently reasonable that He could cause all these disasters. In fact, it would be unreasonable to think otherwise. How could the Creator of the universe, the One who controls the stars and the seasons, fail to exercise control over conditions in Egypt? How could any reasonable person question His ability to accomplish these plagues? The simplest and most plausible explanation for the plagues of Egypt is that the God who rules the universe miraculously caused them.

Ultimately the issue here is God Himself. The problem is not the plagues. It is a God who is sovereign over all things. Men who will not worship God, live in fear of Him – and they must find some way to try to deny His presence and power. Like Pharaoh, they have hardened their hearts. In the face of clear and simple evidence of God's activity, they deny God and seek alternate explanations – explanations which they think will protect them from the presence of God. And like Pharaoh, their time is limited. Soon they will face this God they deny and be required to give account of the lies they told about Him.

Attack on Beasts

The first four plagues caused real hardship on Egypt, but they did not substantially damage the country. Blood, frogs, gnats, and flies are pesky – and their vast numbers made life miserable. But now things start to get real ugly. The fifth plague was an attack on the livestock of Egypt. Livestock are vital to the economy of any nation. Think what would happen if all the livestock in this country died. We would be plunged into a deep recession. But livestock were even more important in the ancient world. Not only did they provide food and clothing, but also transportation and the power to perform many tasks. Verse three says that the plague was against all the livestock in the field. Perhaps the livestock in the barns were not affected by this plague, and it would explain how livestock were affected by the next two plagues. We cannot tell how many livestock were in the fields, but it would strain credibility to think that it was a small percentage. The death of millions of cows, sheep, pigs, camels, and donkeys would have wreaked havoc on Egypt.

Again we notice that the livestock of the Hebrews was untouched. If the outbreak of disease was not a miracle, its limited scope certainly was! It is rather pathetic to see Pharaoh sending servants to see if the Hebrews' livestock was still healthy – and yet still refusing to submit to God. What more will it take to convince Pharaoh that he cannot win against God?

Since livestock were so important, it is not surprising that there were many gods associated with them. Dr. Philip Ryken reports:

Some Egyptians worshiped the bull, which they viewed as "a fertility figure, the great inseminator imbued with the potency and vitality of life." Cults dedicated to the bull were common throughout Egypt. There was Buchis, the sacred bull of Hermonthis, and Mnevis, who was worshiped at Heliopolis. Sometimes bulls were considered to embody the gods Ptah and Ra. But the chief bull

was Apis. At the temple in Memphis, priests maintained a sacred enclosure where they kept a live bull considered to be the incarnation of Apis.

Then there were the goddesses. Isis, the queen of the gods, was generally depicted with cow horns on her head. Similarly, the goddess Hathor was represented with the head of a cow... One of her sacred functions was to protect Pharaoh, and on occasion she was depicted as a cow suckling the king for nourishment.¹

Once again God struck at the heart of Egyptian religion, and demonstrated the ridiculous impotence of the gods they relied upon to protect them. Imagine the spectacle of the sacred bull, the embodiment of life, suffering under Yahweh's plagues, and finally keeling over dead. How much can a dead cow-god protect Pharaoh? This should definitely have warned him to mess with God no more.

Last week I had the flu. It was pretty unpleasant, but not as much as my memory of childhood diseases. When I was a child, all children got chickenpox, mumps, and measles at some point. Now you get vaccines for these diseases. They were not life-threatening, but they were exceedingly unpleasant. I have dim memories of lying on the living room couch, too sick to play, too sick to read, too sick to watch TV. It was horrible. But I believe that cancer is even worse. The pain becomes so great you wish to die. This is a good picture of the sixth plague. I cannot imagine how Pharaoh could suffer the painful boils and yet still refuse to let the Israelites go. It is beginning to seem that he was demonically blinded to reality.

This plague is also an attack on the gods of Egypt. Let us hear again from Dr. Ryken.

Many [Egyptians] worshiped Amon Re, the creator-god, whom one ancient text describes as "he who dissolves evils and dispels ailments; a physician who heals." Others worshiped Thoth, who was the god of the healing arts. Still others worshiped Imhotep as the god of medicine... But the most common deity for dealing with disease was Sekhmet... "a lion-headed goddess, [who] was supposed to have had the power of both creating epidemics and bringing them to an end. A special priesthood was devoted to her called *Sunu*."²

The ancient Egyptians were foolish to suppose that their useless gods could give them health and protect them from disease. They were appalled that a primitive god such as Yahweh could obliterate the power of all their gods. But such is the effect of sin. It lulls you into trusting things which cannot save you.

It is easy to scoff at the ancient Egyptians, but we are no better today. It is election season, and one of the most strident voices is the demand for better health care. Everywhere you turn, people are demanding that the government do more to keep them healthy. No one can get elected to office today unless he promises to do something about the health care crisis. One of the most commonly voiced complaints is the number of Americans without health insurance. Now I think health insurance is a good thing, and I think it is wise to have some. But is it not crystal clear that health has become our god, the government has become our temple, and politicians have become our priests? To hear the howls of outrage, you would think that vicious villains have sneaked into America and stolen the health insurance of those who do not have it. Well, the reality is that the human race have been multiplying quite well even though most people on this planet are uninsured.

¹ Philip Ryken, *Exodus; Saved for God's Glory* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2005) pp. 262-263.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 271-272.

Our root problem is not the lack of health insurance, or the health care crisis. It our refusal to trust God. Now of course God can and does use the medical profession. Doctors and nurses are called by God to serve us when we are ill. But we must not get the priority reversed. God is the healer. The doctors are his agents. And God can heal without doctors. Health insurance is good if you can get it, but what is essential for all people is to trust in God, not in medicine.

Attack on Crops

God has destroyed most of the animals in Egypt. Next He attacked the vegetation. I have conflicting opinions about hail. On the one hand it is rather fun. It is exciting to hear the tapping of the ice balls on the roof and see them bounce down the street. But hail can be destructive. The few hail storms we have experienced here in Bethlehem have not caused real damage, but hail can dent your car and strip the leaves off of plants. Farmers especially dread hail, because it can wipe out a whole season's crop. That can be difficult or impossible to recover from today, but we would be able to truck in food from the next state and no one would starve.

The hail we know is only a faint glimpse of the disaster that overcame Egypt. The hailstones must have been the size of grapefruits, because they killed any of the remaining animals which were out in the open, and people as well. The text tells us that the hail destroyed all the plants and broke down the trees. It came as a storm, complete with terrible thunder, lightning, and wind. When it was all over, Egypt was destroyed. In the ancient world there were no trucking firms to transport food from far away. Everyone ate what they or their neighbors grew. At this point most of the livestock are dead, and half of the year's crops are pulverized. The only hope for survival is the wheat crop which had not come up yet. People are going to starve. The only question is how many.

It is interesting to note how the Egyptians responded to this plague. Moses warned them in advance to prepare by bringing their animals inside for protection. Pharaoh refused, but others heeded the warning. Some Egyptians are beginning to believe in this Yahweh God! But when the storm commenced, Pharaoh was stunned by its ferocity. He called Moses and Aaron in and said,

“This time I have sinned; the LORD is in the right and I and my people are in the wrong. Plead with the LORD, for there has been enough of God's thunder and hail. I will let you go, and you shall stay no longer.” (Exodus 9:27b-28)

What a change of heart! Not only is Pharaoh willing to release the Israelites, he even confessed his sin. But it was a mirage. As soon as the storm ceased, Pharaoh again reneged on his promise. His heart was not changed after all. It was a false confession.

Egypt was a wasteland. Only a few animals were left, and the barley and flax crop were destroyed by hail. But it got worse. Moses announced a swarm of locusts – so many locusts that you would look out your window and not see a patch of earth because the whole land would be blanketed with the creatures. The hail had beaten the crops and trees to the ground. Now the locusts came through and ate up whatever green remained.

Did you see those pictures of the Ninth Ward in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina? What was once a poor, but thriving neighborhood was wiped clean. Except for the random house standing here or there, much of the neighborhood is empty. That gives you some idea of the impact of the locust plague. In that case they did not destroy the houses, of course, but the devastation was of similar magnitude. The trees and crops that the hail had destroyed now were devoured entirely. The countryside was barren. Instead of green crops there is now naked black earth. Egypt is totally destroyed. It will take decades before this country will be able to get back on its feet.

Egypt's gods failed her again. Min was the patron god of the crops, Isis prepared flax for clothing, Nepri was the god of grain, Anubis was the guardian of the fields, and Senehem protected against pests.³ All these were powerless before Yahweh, the only true God, Creator and Ruler of the universe.

Again Pharaoh confessed his sin, but again it was a false confession. He did not care what Yahweh thought of his actions. He, Pharaoh was god of Egypt – and he would bow to no one. As soon as the locusts left, Pharaoh again refused to release the Israelites.

Egypt was destroyed. What more could God do? The ninth plague brought terror on the land and was a sign that the end was near.

Have you ever experienced total darkness? I doubt that many of you have. Everywhere you go there is a glimmer of light, even in the small hours. You have to go far out into the country on a cloudy night to experience total blackness. Complete darkness is scary. When you literally cannot see your hand in front of you, it is frightening. The ninth plague might seem fairly harmless compared to those preceding it, but it terrified the Egyptians and signified that their last hope was dashed.

The Egyptians served Horus (the god of the sunrise), Aten (the god of the round, midday sun), and Atum (the god of the sunset). But the supreme deity in their national pantheon was Amon-Re, who said, "I am the great god who came into being of himself, He who created his names...he who has no opponent among the gods." The Egyptians believed that this solar deity was their creator. "Unique god," they would sing in their great hymn to the Sun-disk, "there is none besides him. / You mould the earth to your wish, you and you alone — / All people, herds and flocks, / All on earth that walk on legs, / All on high that fly with their wings." Every morning the rising of the sun in the east reaffirmed the life-giving power of Amon-Re. Sunset represented death and the underworld, but the rise of Amon-Re offered the hope of resurrection. For the Egyptians, it was a matter of faith that the eternally rising sun could never be destroyed.⁴

Furthermore, Pharaoh was considered the son of Amon-Re. "Egypt's king was Egypt's god, and as the incarnation of Amon-Re, he maintained the cosmic order... When the Pharaoh Merneptah ascended the throne of Egypt, his loyal subjects sang:

Be joyful the entire land!
Good times have come.
The lord has ascended in all lands,
and orderliness has gone down to its throne.
...
the Son of Re who is more excellent than any king,
Merneptah."⁵

"The Egyptians worshiped Pharaoh as their god...Sometimes they even prayed to him, saying, 'Attend to me, O rising sun that illuminates the Two Lands with his comeliness; O solar disk of mankind

³ Ibid., p. 299.

⁴ Ibid., p. 304.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 304-305

that dispels darkness from Egypt. Thy nature is like unto thy father Re who arises in heaven.”⁶ You can see from these prayers that Pharaoh was claiming divinity. He was claiming to be the Son of God, and thus was an anti-Christ.

When God brought darkness over all Egypt for three whole days, He proved once and for all His supremacy over Amon-Re as well as his son, Pharaoh. Until now God had made a laughingstock of a host of lesser deities. Some Egyptians might have thought that however powerful Yahweh was, at least he was no match for the supreme power of Amon-Re. Now any such hopes were dashed. Yahweh extinguished the Egyptian hope of resurrection and brought death and darkness upon the land.

Remedy for a Hard Heart

How did the mighty, prosperous land of Egypt come to such ruin? The text tells us repeatedly. Pharaoh had many chances to spare his land such sorrow and destruction. Before He lifted a finger against Egypt, God gave Pharaoh a chance to escape judgment. Think of it! God was willing to pass over a century of enslavement and genocide against His own covenant people – if only Pharaoh had allowed them to worship Yahweh. It is at moments like this that the myth of the severity of the Old Testament God is exposed for the rubbish that it is. God’s offer was unspeakably generous. I think that most of us would be tempted to say it was too generous. But it is God’s nature to be overwhelmingly merciful – even to those who hate Him.

But Pharaoh would not listen to God, so God struck his kingdom. One by one God defeated all of Pharaoh’s gods. The first few plagues were sufficient to prove that Pharaoh was no match for Yahweh. By the seventh plague, the hailstorm, other Egyptians began to believe in God. When locusts were threatened, his subjects begged Pharaoh to surrender. But he refused. Why? He hardened his heart.

This passage reveals what hardness of heart is. It is the progressive refusal to believe in God, even when He proves Himself to you, even when He shows you great mercy. This passage reveals the consequences of a hard heart – absolute destruction. But this passage does not show us the remedy for a hard heart. It is only hinted at in the Old Testament. Ezekiel stated it most clearly as the promise for a new covenant.

I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

This is what Jesus came to do. Jesus came to die for us and send the Holy Spirit to give us soft hearts. Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” (John 3:5-6) A few verses later Jesus said that all who believe in Him would not perish, but have eternal life. Then when Jesus ascended to the Father, He sent the Holy Spirit, as He promised, to soften our hearts so that we might believe in Him.

Is your heart hard? Have you been resisting God? Do you know what it means to serve Him, but you refuse to do so? If so, you are headed for destruction as surely as Pharaoh is dead. But Jesus came to save you from that fate. Do not be stubborn like Pharaoh. Face the truth. God is Lord and Judge, but He is also merciful and loving. Make a true confession of your sins. Ask Jesus to take away your hard heart and give you a soft, obedient heart so that you might be saved from destruction.

⁶ Ibid., p. 305.

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