

The Judgment of Plagues
Exodus 7:14 – 11:10
by Dellen Ludwig

Memory Verse: Exodus 9:16 “But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”

Although these chapters may have been a longer read for our study this week, they were so packed with action and drama that they formed a fascinating story with which we're all somewhat familiar. Today, I would like to approach this story from a more holistic point of view in this lecture so that a special emphasis might be given to elements that you may not have noticed as you studied them.

Therefore, we will examine the Judgment of Plagues that fell on Egypt first, as ten attacks against the Egyptian gods. Secondly, but simultaneously with the first, ten steps these plagues formed to turn Israel toward the worship of the One True God. And Finally, as ten chances to turn Pharaoh's heart toward the One True God.

The Egyptians held a polytheistic view of god. Each element of their lives was represented by a deity. The sun was a god. The earth, rivers and hills were gods. The starry sky and moon represented a goddess, as did the desert, forests, and dwarfs. Many of their gods and goddesses favored and were thought to appear as animals, such as crocodiles, hippos, jackals, scorpions, falcons, bulls, vultures and even frogs. Their gods interacted with each other, much as the Greek and Roman gods. They would marry, and then reject each other. They had offspring who later played favorites, played tricks and were put in charge of another part of life, such as the underworld.

So, it was from this polytheistic culture that Moses was chosen and charged to lead the people of Israel to the exclusive worship of the one God, named I AM. As stated in our memory verse, God's purposes were twofold: “... that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” [Exodus 9:16] Therefore, at the same time God was unleashing his power through these plagues to persuade Pharaoh, he was revealing to both Israel and Egypt, He was almighty and ought to be praised among the people of all the earth above all other gods.

It is not surprising that God's first two plagues involved the Nile river and its tributaries. The Nile was revered as life giving because as it flooded and subsided, it watered and fertilized the land so that crops could grow and provided a bounty of fish for food. By attacking the water Israel had relied on for their 400 year stay in Egypt, their hearts were challenged to recognize that life and sustenance came from the Lord God, not from a river that He created. He alone could give or take away water. It should not be taken for granted, because look what happened when it was spoiled with blood for seven days!

Furthermore, when the bounty of the Nile was unleashed by God in the form of frogs, all of the people realized that even good things they counted on from the Nile could be destructive when there was too many of them! The Egyptian creator-god was pictured with a frog's head. So, when at Pharaoh's request, all of the frogs died in the houses, courtyards and fields, the people again had a chance to turn their hearts away from this Egyptian god who was certainly no match for the One True God who actually did create all things.

Now, a certain pattern appeared as we read through the ten plagues. The first two came after a warning from Moses and Aaron. But the third was summoned without warning. The sixth and ninth were also given without warning. Step by step the great I AM showed His power and strength to both Egypt and Israel; step three: stinging gnats, step four flies.

The stinging gnats confounded the court magicians because this was the first plague they were unable to duplicate with their trickery. Their reactions were recorded in Exodus 8:19. "The magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God.'" These sorcerers had sought to diminish the miracles God revealed through Moses and Aaron. But they soon realized that this experience was not like the deception they trafficked in. This was a true miracle and showed that they were dealing with a big "g" God, not a mythological construct of their own making.

By plaguing Egypt with the gnats and flies God also revealed that His power was discriminating. The gnats were the last plague that harmed Israel as well as Egypt. But when the flies tormented only the Egyptians, and the land of Goshen was left free of the pests, God showed that not only was He the true Creator of all, but He also could control where the flies would go! "How great is our God," the people of Israel must have begun to think.

Up until this point, the people of Egypt could have dismissed those plagues as misfortune; the result of a bad season of bugs, bugging them. But in the next

two attacks, God began to bring harm on the people and animals, not just discomfort. The fifth plague came on the livestock. Exodus 8:6 recorded: “And the next day the Lord did it: All the livestock of the Egyptians died, but not even one of the animals of the Israelites had died...” So, every horse, donkey, camel, cattle, sheep and goat that was in Egypt died. But not a single pastured animal among the Israelites died.

Most people worship false gods so that they can get something in return. But when their gods cannot protect their fortune and profit, they begin to doubt their worship. And so, when their livestock was killed, they recognized that these plagues were not representative of a bad season, but that a severe battle was going on in their midst. And the gods who treasured cattle and the strength of horses were losing. But the God of their slaves, the Hebrews, was protecting His people in Goshen from these terrible plagues. The people of Israel would now begin to identify with Jehovah, rather than the feeble gods of Egypt.

However, the next plague attacked their health without warning. Festering boils appeared, born on the air like soot from the very furnaces the Hebrews were forced to use to bake the bricks of their slave labor. The boils were so painful and so many, that “the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and on all the Egyptians.” [Exodus 9:11] Even the surviving animals had these painful boils. All of Egypt’s “good luck” charms such as idols, cats and favored hippos could not help them. Instead of relying on luck, they too had the duration of these plagues to turn their hearts away from idols to worship the Living God.

And so, their opportunity for choice came when Moses announced the next plague. He warned them that even while some still suffered from the boils, a tremendous thunder and lightning storm would bring a plague of hail that would kill any animal or person left outside. It is believed that the few livestock that survived the fifth plague would probably have been out in the pastures at this time, watched by slaves. But if they were not brought back into their homes and barns, they and their keepers would be killed by the hail. God warned, “For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” [Exodus 9:15,16]

Pharaoh along with all of Egypt was seeing God's mercy! Prior to this plague, only animals had died. God showed them that He could very easily have

eliminated every person of Egypt so there would not be a single one left to hinder His people from leaving. He wanted His people to leave Egypt without any doubt that it was the One True God they followed. He began to send one plague after another beginning with the hail storm, with only days between, them to prove to Pharaoh, the Egyptians and the Israelites that there is no other god equal to Jehovah in all the earth.

His mercy had gotten their attention, but He was not going to hold back any longer. The hail storm would happen on the next day. All of the people had one day's warning to bring in their family, servants and animals. And some people of Egypt finally believed. "Those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the Lord hurried to bring their slaves and their livestock inside. But those who ignored the word of the Lord left their slaves and livestock in the field." [Exodus 9:20,21]

The storm that came is described as the worst storm ever experienced since Egypt had been a nation. The lightening is described as having flashed down to the ground, and flashed back and forth. The same Hebrew word for this phenomenon is used in Ezekiel 1 to describe the Lord's glory. It is translated: "flashing lightening" "surrounded by brilliant light," "fire infolding itself" by different scholars. So, this was no ordinary thunder storm that passed across the land. This was more like a country wide Tornado that dropped hail, broke crops & trees and killed livestock and people caught out in it.

But again, God protected His people because, "the only place it did not hail was the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were." [Exodus 9:26] When God stopped the storm, Pharaoh again hardened his heart and refused to let the people go. So, God sent Moses to warn Pharaoh about the coming locusts.

Now, Exodus 9:31 states that the hail destroyed the flax and barley crops, which had already begun to grow and bloom. But verse 32 explained that although the wheat and spelt, which is a crop closely related to wheat, were not yet sprouted they too would not be safe as they would begin to blossom after the hail storm had passed. The people who may have worried about making this crop last the year, now would be horrified to learn that God was sending a plague of locusts which would take out these final crops too.

Now, even in our day, there are years when a crop may fail. Droughts can bring minimal crops so that year after year the availability of certain grains or fruits would be difficult to find. But we can easily substitute other crops to meet the demand until the drought would finally break. But this plague of locusts wiped

out the last hope for the agrarian land of Egypt to have an agricultural income that year. Exodus 10:15 described the locust's attack: "They covered all the ground until it was black. They devoured all that was left after the hail – everything growing in the fields and the fruit on the trees. Nothing green remained on tree or plant in all the land of Egypt."

Many of us know of friends and family members who have felt a similar loss this year. So many companies have taken a terrible financial hit this year because of the covid shut-downs. Many of our children and grandchildren have lost their jobs because their employment has had to close down permanently. Our retirement accounts may have taken a big loss as the market has followed the roller-coaster pattern of uncertainty.

But in all of this, God is merciful. He has shown himself stern as He has allowed this terrible plague. We have lost finances, health and in a few cases, we have lost loved ones. So, has the Lord gotten our attention from the plague we know as covid-19? Are we mourning our terrible loss, or are we looking to the God of grace and mercy because He alone holds our future? Are we disillusioned that all of the wealth we had relied upon is gone, or are we turning our hearts toward the One True God? Can God use us to spread God's praise as the only One who can turn this all around? He alone can use this to bring uncounted multitudes to recognize for the first time the great I AM as God, rather than their possessions and other small "g" gods.

Like the Israelites, we also have gone through a season of fear during this out of control plague. Just as the Israelites needed to use that time to turn their hearts to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, we also need to evaluate our faith. We know that our God is stronger than the gods that clamor for our allegiance; the gods of wealth, pleasure, power, addiction, and worry. We need to trust that our true God is faithful to "repay you for the years that the locusts have eaten." [Joel 2:25] Let us face the future with our eyes on the Lord our God, the God of our Fathers, not the lower "g" god of our fears.

The Lord God would now send the final two plagues to persuade Egypt and Pharaoh to let His people go. Without warning, a darkness would descend on all of Egypt for three days. This would be no ordinary darkness. It would not be the twilight of an eclipse nor the shadows of a heavy storm. It is described in Exodus 10:21 as a "darkness that can be felt." This darkness prevented people in Egypt from seeing even their family members and they couldn't move about at all.

The description given in our text reminded me of Matthew's description of hell, given at the ending to the story of the wicked servant in Matthew 25:30: "And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." The Lord used this darkness to illustrate that isolation from God means torment in total darkness. When men reject the Light of the World, no artificial light can penetrate that inky deprivation. All goodness and light will be gone and it will cause weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In his Gospel, John described the lives of those who reject the Lord Jesus Christ as being in darkness. "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but the people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed." [John 1:19,20] So by this plague the great I AM compared for Egypt the darkness in which they desired to hide their evil deeds, to the Light God offered to his people.

Can you imagine the panic and terror this plague caused? For three days, no one could see anything. This kind of darkness meant every labor and daily task came to a halt. Even the regulation of time, of day and night, was obscured. Exodus 10:23 stated: "No one could see anyone else or move about for three days. Yet all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived."

Now notice that Pharaoh summoned Moses to negotiate a return of the light. How did he do that? How could he send a messenger from the palace over to Goshen in this darkness? Did the messenger that found his way there step into the light of day and then have to lead Moses back through the darkness to stand before Pharaoh? Did God keep a beam of light on Moses during this journey? I don't know the answers to these questions because Scripture doesn't reveal such details.

But this darkness was also revealing the blindness of idol worship. Isaiah brought before the future nation of Israel the futility of worshiping idols. In chapter 44 he described how ridiculous it was to take a piece of wood, carve an idol to worship, and then use the scraps left over to heat their homes and cook their food! He described the idol in verse 18 as having "their eyes... plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand." [Isaiah 44:18,19]

As Israel and Egypt worshiped the false idols of their religion they too were in the darkness of unbelief. How many of Jehovah's own chosen people had these wood or metal carvings stashed away in the folds of their household furnishings? It was so easy to join the worship of idols rather than the worship of the God whose

very Word was a light for them. We will find that Israel did not easily eliminate all of these idols from their homes. How easy is it for us to substitute our pleasure or selfish desires instead of authentic worship of God in our lives today – especially when we're home, online anyway?

The darkness we feel when we have wandered away from our love of God, is just a hint of this plague of darkness. Although God ended the darkness after only three days, it left a profound effect on the people of Egypt. Exodus 11:3 states that, “The Lord made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people and Moses himself was highly regarded in Egypt by Pharaoh's officials and by the people.” So, the Egyptians gave the Israelites their payment for their years of slavery.

Then, Pharaoh may have ordered Moses to leave his sight, but God gave him one more plague to think about before Moses left. The final plague would be the death of the first-born son of all of Egypt; from that of the slave household to that the palace of Pharaoh himself. We will examine this final plague in detail next week. But even after all he had seen, and the promise of this most severe plague to come, the Lord said, “Pharaoh will refuse to listen to you – so that my wonders may be multiplied in Egypt.”

Finally, let's examine the ten chances to turn Pharaoh's heart toward the One True God. The first description of Pharaoh's heart is found back in Exodus 4:21. When God called Moses to face Pharaoh, He explained that even though God Himself would order that the people of Israel be allowed to leave Egypt in order to worship Him, Pharaoh would refuse. “But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.”

Now at first glance, it may seem that Pharaoh had no chance to believe God, because God had already hardened his heart. Let's examine that idea. First of all, we must acknowledge what Scripture says about our hearts.

Psalm 44, verses 20 and 21 say, “If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god, would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart?” Then Psalm 14: verse 1 recognized, “The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.”

God examined Pharaoh's heart and deeds before calling Moses. He saw that, rejecting the evidence seen in creation, Pharaoh did not believe in the One True

God. That was evidenced by his rejection of God's order to let His people go to worship Him. In each warning Moses gave about all ten plagues, it is stated that Pharaoh hardened his heart. However, at the warning about the water to blood, the frogs, gnats, flies, and plague on livestock, it was written that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Only when the boils appeared on all the Egyptians was it said, "the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart." [Exodus 9:12]

Why did it take so many terrible events to convince Pharaoh to listen to God and let the people go? God's plan included this process to not only demonstrate His power to Israel and Egypt with their Pharaoh, but also to establish clearly in all their minds exactly who He was:

"This is what the Lord says: By this you will know that I am the Lord." – water to blood --Exodus 7:17a

"...so that you may know there is no one like the Lord our God." – frogs -- Exodus 8:10

"But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the Lord had said." - gnats --Exodus 8:19

"...so that you will know that I the Lord, am in this land." – flies – Exodus 8:22b

"Pharaoh investigated and found that not even one of the animals of the Israelites had died. Yet his heart was unyielding..." – death to livestock -- Exodus 9:7

"This time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth." – hail – Exodus 9:13

"But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." – hail – Exodus 9:16 (our memory verse)

"The thunder will stop and there will be no more hail, so you may know that the earth is the Lord's." – hail-- Exodus 9:29

Because of all these mighty demonstrations of God's power, Pharaoh did concede that he had sinned when he hadn't kept his word to let the people go. But his confession was only that he was sorry for the punishment of the plagues, and so he sinned again. Rather than repentance, Pharaoh merely bargained first to permit the people to worship God in the land of Egypt only. Then he offered to let only the men go to worship, and at the destruction of the locusts, he offered that Moses could take only the people, but not their livestock and animals with them.

Pharaoh was right. He did sin against God. Not only did he break his word to let the people go, but he did not soften his heart to the Word of the Lord when he had the opportunity. Jesus described this phenomenon as he described the Pharisees of his day. In Mark 7:20 & 21 "He went on: 'What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come...'"

The last two verses in Exodus 11 reveal that the Lord saw the evil in Pharaoh's heart. He saw his hard heart, that was unyielding to God's commands and unrepentant of his sin. But God used even this hardness to His own glory. "The Lord had said to Moses, 'Pharaoh will refuse to listen to you – so that my wonders may be multiplied in Egypt.' Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh, but the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let the Israelites go out of his country." [Exodus 11:9 & 10]

We may, like Pharaoh become stubborn at times, and fall into sin that we struggle to confess before the Lord. But through that struggle, we must never allow ourselves to hardened our hearts. The Lord is always faithful, to those who are His children through faith in Christ, to offer forgiveness for our sin. In I John 1:9, we have this promise: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." His Holy Spirit within us will never leave us, but will convict us of sin so that we may confess it, and renew our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, let us end this lesson by praying with the Psalmist: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me; Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me." [Psalm 51:10-12] Amen