The Plagues of Egypt, Exodus 7:8-11:10

JBS 2009 Sermon 3

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Introduction: For the purposes of our study this morning, we will be looking at the plague narrative as a whole with a view toward seeing what they tell us about God and His working with men.

The term plague is, by definition, something which is always compared to the plagues of Egypt. We hear people speaking of disasters of “biblical proportion,” because for thousands of years now, the ten plagues of Egypt have been benchmarks or standards against which all other disasters have been measured.

Turn in your Bibles this morning to Exodus 7:8-13. This first sign was a precursor to the ten plagues which God sent against Egypt. It sets the stage for us, informing us of the principle players, God, Pharaoh, Moses and Aaron, and to a lesser degree, the wise men or magicians of Egypt. It tells us how God is going to operate. It would be through the agency of human servants, Moses and Aaron that God would speak to Pharaoh. God continues to work through human agency. It was God’s who was at work here, not merely or even principally Moses and Aaron. God is the principle character of this text, it is He who would demean the false gods of Egypt. It was God who would use the plagues to make His name known in all the earth and it was God who, through the plagues, would execute judgment on Pharaoh and all of Egypt, for his failure to be obedient to the commands of God.

There are three specific things I want us to observe about the plagues this morning. First they were miraculous, secondly they were meaningful, that is, God had a specific purpose in each plague, and finally, they were merciful, even in His judgment against Pharaoh, we’ll see God’s mercy displayed.
First of all,

I. The Plagues were Miraculous –

One of the enduring questions people have asked is, “What exactly were the plagues? Were they supernatural miracles or were they simply natural disasters which God somehow informed Moses would happen before they did?” A recent documentary on the History Channel I watched, tried to explain them away as the aftermath of a sub-Mediterranean earthquake. Others, like Ronald E. Clements, writing in the Cambridge Bible Commentary, say that the plagues were, “Unusually severe occurrences of what were natural features of life in Egypt.”¹ These supposedly intellectual critics have come up with explanations which rob the plagues of their miraculous nature and explain them away by offering what are often far fetched explanations for the plagues. They say that the Nile turned red because of unusually heavy rainfall which brought red dirt from the Abyssinian and Ethiopian plateau into the river, turning it unusually red. This, they say, polluted the Nile, causing the fish to die and the frogs to all leave the river, which caused the unusual amount of mosquitoes or gnats. And they go on to explain how one after another was the result of mere natural occurrences. Numerous volumes have been written by those who desperately search for some natural way to explain these supernatural events.

The same people who have problems believing that the plagues were miraculous have problems with God creating the earth from nothing, and doing it in 7 days. They have problems with Jesus walking on the water and Jesus rising from the dead. It has been my observation that those who are looking for a way not believe the Bible always manage to find a way to explain away what their lack of faith will not permit them to take at face value.

I, for one, believe that the plagues were all miracles. I believe God acted in time and space, taking charge over nature and worked supernaturally to do that which could otherwise never have been done. They were displays of His sovereign power over all of creation.

Allow me to give you 4 reasons we can be certain that the plagues were actually miracles and not merely extraordinarily severe occurrences of otherwise natural features of Egyptian life.

1. The first and most glaring reason is the text itself. Chapter 7:3-5 specifically tells us that God was going to stretch out His mighty hand and perform signs and wonders. The language is clear: God was going to work miracles. God was going to do the miraculous. One of the clearest proofs that the plagues were not just severe versions of ordinary occurrences is that in the text, God Himself explicitly declares that He was going to do the miraculous.

2. Secondly, the biblical account clearly tells us that the plagues started and stopped at the command of Moses and Aaron. If these had merely been severe versions of otherwise natural occurrences, they would have come on slowly and left just as slowly, like a thunderstorm or clouds that pass over, bringing their rain or hail. According to the biblical account, Moses and Aaron, God’s agents on the scene, were able to begin the plagues and to stop them, often by going directly to God, the One who controlled them.

3. A third rational proof we can give for understanding the plagues as miraculous rather than simply being natural occurrences, is that the extremity of the plagues goes far beyond anything ever recorded anywhere in the history of man. Everyone who has ever read the biblical account of the plagues can clearly understand that these were in no way normal. The critics go to great lengths to explain them away precisely because they are presented as being supernatural. In fact, Pharaoh’s magicians, who were in no way unfamiliar with that which was normal, in so far as natural occurrences were concerned, in 8:19 saw the third plague as the “finger of God.” As one commentator notes, “If native Egyptian magicians could tell that the plagues were not natural phenomena, why should moderns, several millennia later, try and overrule the opinion of observers on site at the time?”

4. And a forth reason we can have confidence these were not merely severe versions of natural phenomena is that several of the plagues, like darkness, boils, gnats, the death of the livestock, and of course the death of the firstborn, only affected the Egyptians, and did not adversely affect the land of Goshen where the Hebrews lived. The cattle of the Egyptians died, but scripture says that not one of the cattle of the Israelites died. It would take more faith to believe that natural phenomena or disease could be geographically and ethnically discriminating then it does to believe that God simply worked a series of miracles.

The Plagues were miracles, they were not natural events. They were miracles preformed by God at a specific time, in a specific place and for a specific purpose. Which brings me to my next point: The Plagues were meaningful.

II. The Plagues were Meaningful – they had purpose.

God’s purposes in the plagues were multifaceted. Let’s examine a couple of them.

A. The plagues demonstrated the futility of worshiping false gods.

In Exodus 12:12, when speaking about the final plague, the death of the first born, God said, “And against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments, I am the Lord.”

Each of the plagues, in their own way, was designed to demonstrate the futility of worshiping false gods, or gods that were in fact, not gods, and the necessity of worshiping the One true God. They were designed to show the Egyptians that they could
have no confidence in their false Gods, but should instead, trust the God of the Hebrews. God was going to use the plagues to humiliate their pagan deities.

Take the turning of the river Nile into blood. To the ancient Egyptians, the Nile was itself a god. They worshiped the Nile as a giver of life. But when God turned the water to blood, and all the fish died and the water was not drinkable, instead of being a giver of life, the Nile became a stagnant flow of death. God was demonstrating that the Nile and everything in it was under His control.

Then there was the plague of the frogs. In the Egyptian religion, frogs were the symbol of fertility. Their god Hekhet, was supposed to breath life into the bodies formed by her husband, the creator god Khnum. But with the plague of frogs, the Lord took their symbol of life and turned it into a picture of death. Again, a direct attack on the pagan gods of Egypt. Remember, God is a jealous God and will not share His glory with anyone or anything else.

Take the plague of the Locusts, found in 10:1-20. The Egyptians worshiped Senehem, who was supposed to protect Egypt from such pests. But by sending the locusts to devour all the crops, God showed them that Senehem had no power to protect them, and thus no power to save them. Only Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews could save.

The plague which struck the livestock dead was yet another stab at the pagan deities. If their pagan gods had any power, they should have come through here. The Egyptians worshiped Hathor, the cow-headed mother goddess. But she was powerless against the true God.

The plague of darkness was a direct attack on the worship of Amon-Re, the personification of the sun and the chief deity of the Egyptians. He had no power to cause the sun to shine because he was not a god, there was an is only one true God.

Diligent study shows us how God used the plagues to execute His judgment on the gods of Egypt. But that was not the only purpose for the plagues. Consider a second reason.

B. God used the plague to reveal Himself and make Himself known.

For one thing, God wanted the Hebrews, His chosen people to know who it was that was redeeming them from slavery. He did not want them to be under any misguided delusions that their salvation was somehow due to Moses or Aaron. He did not want them to think that some freaky weather system would cause Pharaoh to relent and let them God. God would use the plagues to let the Hebrews know that He was their God and that He was fighting for them.

But additionally, and just as importantly, God used the plagues to demonstrate to the Egyptians, who, as you recall were Pantheists and Polytheistic, that there was only one God, the God of the Hebrews. He wanted them to know Him.
Riding in the car yesterday, my daughter asked me what happened to all the gentiles in the Old Testament. She wanted to know if any of them could be saved. As you recall, God wanted everyone to know Him. As we will see when we come to the giving of the law, God’s intention was that Israel would be a royal priesthood, a kingdom of priests who would spread His name and His glory to all nations. They refused the task, but that did not negate God’s plan, His desire, or design.

We see this same purpose in the plagues, and even in the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. In 9:16, speaking about the plague of hail that He would send, God says to Pharaoh, “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.”

God used the plagues, not only to discredit the false gods of the Egyptians, but to proclaim His name, or to reveal Himself in all the earth. God is ever in the process of speaking, He is always about drawing people to Himself. Sometimes He does so through the ordinary circumstances of live, other times, like with the plagues, He does so through miracles, through signs and wonders. His perfect revelation was in the person of Jesus Christ who was born of a virgin and lived among us. But God always has been about the business of drawing His supreme creation to Himself. He loves us and wants us to be in fellowship with Him.

He even used the plagues to reveal Himself to people who otherwise would never have had the opportunity to know Him.

C. But thirdly, consider with me that through the plagues, God demonstrates to us that sins have consequences.

Chapter 9:34 says, “Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned again and hardened his heart, he and his servants, and Pharaoh’s heart was hardened and he did not let the sons of Israel go.” The plagues were punitive in their nature. God used them to show Pharaoh, and all who were observing, that He is not one to trifle with.

God brought the plagues about in order to punish Pharaoh for his stubborn and hard heart. There is a lesson here: You cannot disobey God without suffering the consequences. Be certain that your sins will find you out. Not only will they find you out but they will invariably affect more people than you realize. Pharaoh would realize that you cannot sin in a vacuum, every sin you commit will have ripple effects in the lives of others, often times those you love the most.

James tells us in James 1:13-15 says, “But let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin and when sin is accomplished it brings forth death.”
Last week we studied the issue of Pharaoh’s heart, and how God merely permitted Pharaoh to be steadfast in the position that he chose. God did not make Pharaoh choose to sin, Pharaoh sinned of his own accord. The verse from James assures us of that. Pharaoh’s sin had consequences. It brought forth death, not only for his firstborn, but for the firstborn of every house in Israel, every house that did not have the blood of the lamb on the doorpost.

The plagues should serve as an example to all of us that we cannot sin and get away with it. Sooner or later our sins will catch up with us, God is not mocked, whatsoever a man sows, that will he also reap.

The Plagues were meaningful; they served to demonstrate the futility of worshiping idols, to demonstrate the power and reveal the person of the one true God and to demonstrate the reality of the consequences of sin.

But there is a third thing I want to show you about the plagues and that is that in them we can see the mercy of God.

III. The Plagues reveal the Mercy of God –

Someone has rightly asked, “Why all the theatrics? Why didn’t God just cut to the chase and kill the Egyptian firstborns to begin with?” For that matter, if God had wanted to, He could have killed all the Egyptians dead in one fell swoop. Why didn’t He? The answer is mercy. God is a merciful God.

It has been noted that the plagues started small and ended large. They started relatively mild in their intensity, with the annoyance of water into blood, frogs and gnats, which many biblical scholars believe were mosquitoes. Then, when Pharaoh would not relent God turned up the heat. The flies came and devastated the land, followed by the death of the livestock and the festering boils on all living things. Then when Pharaoh would still not relent, things got even worse. The hail came and destroyed crops, then the locusts came and ate everything else, and then darkness covered the parts of Egypt where Egyptians lived for three days. It was so dark that it literally stopped people from even leaving their houses.

The tenth plague, the death of the firstborn, was the capstone of all the plagues. It was within His providence and within His mercy that God went through nine arduous plagues before He began killing Egyptians. God is a merciful God, one who gives us chance after chance after chance to repent. He takes no delight in death.

Ezekiel 33:11 says, “As I live, declared the Lord God, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live.”

God did not begin with the death of the Egyptian firstborn. He sent nine other miraculous signs to get Pharaoh’s attention and to cause him to repent and let the Hebrews go. But in the end Pharaoh would not budge and it took drastic measures to get his attention.
It has well been said that the plagues begin with the misery sin brings and they end in death, to which all sin invariably leads. God has given them to us as eternal reminders of timeless truths. They should speak to each of us this morning about the lengths to which God will go to get our attention. Time after time He speaks to us, trying to get our attention, trying to show us that we should surrender our lives to His control, and like Pharaoh, sometimes in the midst of our pain we will repent, only to turn stubborn again once the pain is gone.

They should tell us that God will go only so far with us till judgment falls.

Genesis 6:3 God says, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever…”

There came a time in Pharaoh’s life, and there will come a time in the life of each person who willfully walks in disobedience, when God will say “Enough!” Then it will be too late; then there will be no turning back.

The plagues serve as a warning to us this morning, a warning against disobedience, a warning against exerting our will against God’s and a warning that assures us sin has consequences.

God has worked miracles in your life and mine. If we cannot recall them it is simply because we have allowed our thoughts and attention to be captured by lesser things. He has worked His wonders in our lives through His provision, through His presence and through His salvation. And all of these things He has done for a purpose. He works in our lives to show us the futility of serving things which cannot save us. Some serve money, others serve power, influence or pleasure, but like the false gods of Egypt, they are not worth serving. He works in our lives to make Himself known to us, to reveal Himself to us, to receive the glory He is due and to speak to us, telling us what it is He would have us do and how He would have us live. If we listen and obey, things go well, it’s just when we don’t that He brings things into our lives to get our attention.

What is it that God is telling you this morning? What decision is there that you need to make that you’ve been putting off? What will it take to get your attention?

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