

The God Who Delivers (Part 3 of 6)

The Ten Plagues – Part Two

Exodus 9:13-26

Mark Vroegop

¹³ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Rise up early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, "Let my people go, that they may serve me. ¹⁴ For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. ¹⁵ For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. ¹⁶ But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. ¹⁷ You are still exalting yourself against my people and will not let them go. 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. ²² Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven, so that there may be hail in all the land of Egypt, on man and beast and every plant of the field, in the land of Egypt." ²³ Then Moses stretched out his staff toward heaven, and the LORD sent thunder and hail, and fire ran down to the earth. And the LORD rained hail upon the land of Egypt. ²⁴ There was hail and fire flashing continually in the midst of the hail, very heavy hail, such as had never been in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. ²⁵ The hail struck down everything that was in the field in all the land of Egypt, both man and beast. And the hail struck down every plant of the field and broke every tree of the field. ²⁶ Only in the land of Goshen, where the people of Israel were, was there no hail (Exodus 9:13–26).

Have you ever found yourself asking this question: "What is God trying to tell me?" Typically we ask ourselves that question in the midst of a difficult and painful situation. It is often the cry of a person who is feeling the press of hard circumstances and he or she is looking for purpose or meaning in what is happening.

I will admit to you that I have asked that question, and there are some times when I really do not know the answer. There are times when God's purposes and the circumstances of life are not clear. There are times – what I've called the "dark side of God's will" – when you know that there is a lesson or a reason behind what is happening, but it just is not clear.

But there are other moments when the circumstances of divine providence line up so clearly that it is not hard at all to see the connection. People have asked me this question: "How do I know if I'm being disciplined?" And my answer is: "Oh, you know." In other words, there are moments when

you are clearly headed down a wrong path or are not in a good place spiritually, and God allows things in your life to become difficult, or He takes away the things that are becoming too important to you. The book of 1 Peter describes this moment this way: "God resists the proud, but he gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet. 5:5). The divinely designed difficulty targets a very important question that every human being has to answer: "Who is your God?"

You see, behind the difficulties, challenges, oppositions, and hardships that we face are fundamental questions such as *Who is in control of life?*, *Who gets to set the rules?*, *Who should be obeyed?*, and *Who is God?*

The God Who Delivers and Humbles Through the Plagues

These are the questions Pharaoh is dealing with in Exodus 7-12, and he is confronted with circumstances that he cannot control and which are challenging his sense of confidence, trust, and pride. God and Pharaoh are in a battle of wills, and the Ten Plagues are the means by which God is deconstructing this powerful ruler. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has told Pharaoh what he is to do, and his failure to submit to God's command is creating more and more pressure.

God's aim and the problem are clearly identified in Exodus 9:16-17.

But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. ¹⁷ You are still exalting yourself against my people and will not let them go (Exodus 9:16-17).

So far we have seen this conflict through the first four plagues. We have seen God challenge the Egyptian worldview and their worship of the Nile by turning it into "blood." We saw God use an army of frogs to assault their belief in the goddess of fertility. We learned about the annoying presence of gnats or mosquitos or lice. And we heard about an invasion of the flies. Each plague has built on the other, and there is clear message behind them: God is supreme over all rivals.

We've watched as the magicians could replicate the first two plagues but not stop them, and we've seen them unable to reproduce the third and fourth, leading them to say that "this is the finger of God" (Ex. 8:19). But we've also seen the way that Moses is able to turn on and turn off the plagues at his will through the power of God.

God, through Moses, is attacking the gods of Egypt, their national pride and security, their understanding of the created order, and Pharaoh's pride all at once. God is bringing deliverance to His people through judgment. The plagues are tearing Egypt apart and bringing Pharaoh to his knees. God is delivering His people and humbling Pharaoh through the plagues.

Today we are turning our attention to the five remaining plagues before we come to the tenth and final judgment – the death of the firstborn. Let's look at these and then see what we can learn about our relationship with the Creator of the Universe.

Plague #5 – Death of Livestock

The fifth plague involves another warning from Moses to Pharaoh. Like the previous warnings, Pharaoh is clearly told what he is to do, and he is told in advance what will happen. Once again we hear the command from God: *“Let my people go, that they may serve me”* (Ex. 9:1). And this is the essence of the problem. Pharaoh and God are in a battle as to who is worthy of the Israelite’s service. God is essentially telling Pharaoh that the people do not belong to him, and that they should be serving the God of the Hebrews.

The plagues build on one another. They are going to get worse and worse, and we get a hint of that in 9:2 when Moses talks to Pharaoh about “the hand of the LORD.” The magicians had attributed the plague of the flies to “finger of God” (8:19), but this is a different plague. In fact, the term “hand of God” often refers to substantial acts of judgment in Bible (e.g., 1 Sam. 5:11). The costliness of the plague will be dramatically more significant than the others. And God will continue to make a distinction between Israel and Egypt. Pharaoh will see the devastating hand of God while at the same time seeing His favor toward and protection of His people.

Here is what Moses said would happen:

Behold, the hand of the LORD will fall with a very severe plague upon your livestock that are in the field, the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks. 4 But the LORD will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing of all that belongs to the people of Israel shall die”” Exodus 9:3–4 (ESV).

Now in our modern culture, it is hard to fully appreciate the kind of trauma that would happen if there was a widespread slaughter of livestock. It would mean that life in Egypt would be altered for many years. Livestock were the main means of transportation, commerce, agriculture, clothing, and food. When I was in India a number of years ago, I learned that the dowry payment traditionally went to the groom and not the bride, and that it was often in the payment of a cow. When I ignorantly asked why a person would want a cow instead of cash, our host told me that a cow was usually more valuable than cash because it could be used for transportation, for producing more cattle, for fuel (think cow patties), and for milk. One cow would be considered very valuable. So you can imagine how culturally devastating it would be to have the centerpiece of your daily life nearly destroyed.

In fact, livestock were so important to Egyptian life that they had a “livestock god.” This particular goddess was named Hathor, and she was one of the most important deities throughout the history of Ancient Egypt.¹ She was depicted as a cow goddess with a head of horns with a sun in the middle, and she was attributed powers of fertility as well as powers connected to the sky.² Therefore, a plague involving livestock and a plague that didn’t affect Israel would have been a scary possibility. Another Egyptian god would have been humiliated, and the Egyptian economy would have been devastated.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hathor>

² Peter Enns, *Exodus – The NIV Application Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2000), 216.

Verses 5-7 tell us what happened, and notice that once again we see the specific control of God to decide when the plagues take place. It is not just the devastation that is frightening; it is the fact that God controls the timing. The plagues come and go at His command.

And the LORD set a time, saying, "Tomorrow the LORD will do this thing in the land." 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. 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 (Exodus 9:5-7).

God struck the Egyptian cattle while sparing the Israelites³. And even after Pharaoh had confirmed this fact, he still refused to obey the command of God. However, the pressure was starting to mount. Disobedience was proving very costly.

Plague #6 – Boils

The next plague is the first to directly affect human beings, and it was delivered unannounced, which is the pattern for every third plague. It involved some kind of painful skin infection that included boils. The Hebrew word for "boils" derives its meaning from another word which means "to be hot."⁴ And if you've ever had any kind of boil, you know how painful they can be. One boil can be painful and uncomfortable, but an outbreak would have been personally devastating.

As with the other plagues, there is a message that is sent through this infirmity. Notice that Moses and Aaron are instructed in 9:8 to "take handfuls of soot from the kiln." Remember that Pharaoh's first punishment on Israel was the making of bricks without straw? It seems likely that Moses and Aaron were using the soot from brick-making kilns as a part of this plague.

Additionally, this plague was so devastating that even the magicians were affected. Those who once were replicating Moses and Aaron's signs are now unable to stand before them (9:11). The plague of boils had made them helpless and powerless.

There was also religious significance to this plague. Egypt, like most Ancient Near East countries, viewed skin infections as religious impurity.⁵ And to think that the Egyptians had been infected with the sores, but Israel had not, must have been deeply offensive to the Egyptian understanding of their superiority and their gods' power. It must have seemed as if creation itself was turning against them.

The plagues were getting closer and closer to the center of power in Egyptian life. Yet Pharaoh still refused to repent. Verse 12 tells us that "God hardened Pharaoh's heart and he refused to listen" (9:12).

³ The text says "all", however in the plague of the hail the Egyptians are told to "get your livestock...into safe shelter" (9:19). Therefore it seems that "all" in 9:6 probably means "all manner of" indicating the comprehensiveness of the plague and not necessarily that every livestock animal was killed.

⁴ Nahum Sarna, *Exodus - The JPS Torah Commentary*, (New York, New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 45.

⁵ Enns, 218.

Plague #7 – Hail

The seventh plague is the first of the last set of judgments, and with it we see an increase in the intensity and irreversibility of what transpires. But before this plague hits the people of Egypt, God issues a lengthy warning:

13 ... Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, "Let my people go, that they may serve me. 14 For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. 15 For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. 16 But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. 17 You are still exalting yourself against my people and will not let them go. 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."'" Exodus 9:13–19 (ESV)

There are a number of things to observe in this warning: 1) God is highlighting His mercy to Pharaoh in that He could have destroyed them long ago. 2) God issues a warning for people and animals not to be outside when the plague comes. Even in judgment there is mercy. 3) Verse 16 gives us a summary of God's purposes – to display His power and proclaim His name. 4) Pharaoh's central problem is his pride.

Pharaoh would not obey the Lord, but many of his people did when they heard this about this warning. Verses 20-21 identify another division in the land between those who "feared the word of the Lord" and those who did not. Parts of Egypt began to submit to God's judgment, while others obstinately and foolishly refused to heed the warning.

Verses 22-26 describe the plague of hail which decimated the land of Egypt, again while sparing the land of Goshen where Israel lived. If you skip ahead to verse 31 you will find that this was particularly destructive because the flax and the barley were at a sensitive time in their growing season. The plague couldn't have come at a worse time.

But there was also a religious significance here too. Weather disturbances were viewed as the language of the gods. In fact the Egyptian god Seth was considered the god of wind and storms.⁶ Therefore, it would have felt as if the sky was falling on them, and the sense of divine judgment would have been intensified. And for a moment it seemed as if Pharaoh got the message:

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. 28 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 9:27–28 (ESV).

But once again when the pressure was lifted as the hail stopped, Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he refused to let the people go (Ex 9:35).

⁶ Enns, 221.

Plague #8 – Locusts

The next plague of locusts is equally devastating to the land. There is sense that creation is coming apart at the seams, and that the powers of the created order are set against Egypt. Once again Moses is told to present himself to Pharaoh with a stern warning:

"... Moses and Aaron went in 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, that they may serve me. 4 For if you refuse to let my people go, behold, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your country, 5 and they shall cover the face of the land, so that no one can see the land. And they shall eat what is left to you after the hail, and they shall eat every tree of yours that grows in the field...' (Exodus 10:3–5).

The locusts were going to destroy whatever is left, and the pressure began to mount on Pharaoh. His servants were emboldened to appeal to him to end the destruction. They said, *"Let the men go, that they may serve the Lord their God. Do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?" (Ex. 10:7).* However, when Moses and Aaron were summoned back to Pharaoh's court, the ruler of Egypt still refused to fully submit. He attempted to convince Moses to only take the men with him (Ex. 10:8-11).

Therefore, the locusts came. An east wind (something that will reappear in the Red Sea deliverance in Exodus 14:21) brought an inundation of plant-eating locust, which destroyed anything that was left after the plague of hail.

¹⁵ They covered the face of the whole land, so that the land was darkened, and they ate all the plants in the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left. Not a green thing remained, neither tree nor plant of the field, through all the land of Egypt (Exodus 10:15).

The combination of the hail and the locusts sent a strong statement to the Egyptians about their belief in the Egyptians gods Isis and Min who controlled the yearly crop cycle. It is likely that these two plagues could have been timed with an annual celebration at harvest time.⁷ You can imagine the dismay at the combination of hail and locusts hitting your land during the very time you were supposed to be celebrating.

Pharaoh issued another feigned statement of repentance. God withdrew the locusts by driving them into the Red Sea (note this!), but as soon as the pressure was off, Pharaoh refused to let the people go. He seems to be on a path of personal and national destruction. Despite the obvious connection between the painful consequences and his stubborn heart, he still refuses to humble himself before the God of the Hebrews. The hardness of his heart almost seems unstoppable. God is clearly sending Pharaoh a message, but he will not listen.

⁷ Enns, 223.

Plague #9 - Darkness

The ninth plague, the final warning before the ultimate plague, came without warning, and it was a clear statement about an important Egyptian god. Like many cultures, the Egyptians worshipped the sun. Historically his name was Ra or Re, and he came to be viewed as the creator of all forms of life. Since the sun provided light, warmth and growth, it is hard to overestimate his importance in the Egyptian world-view.

Therefore, the plague of darkness would not only make life difficult, but it would also cause the people to feel as though life were completely out of control. In verse 21 God describes this plague as “a darkness to be felt.” Verses 22-23 tell us about the effect on Egyptian life:

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 (Exodus 10:22–23).

For three days everything in Egyptian life stopped. People were isolated and cut off. The plagues had now personally impacted everyone and everything. Egypt was being judged. Pharaoh was being judged. And the people must have felt the individualization of this plague. They were all alone in the dark.

Once again Pharaoh tried to broker a deal by suggesting that the people could leave but that they had to leave their livestock behind. He likely wanted some kind of leverage to be sure that they would return. But once again Moses refused to compromise.

The ninth plague narrative ends with an emotionally charged statement from Pharaoh. Nine times he has been told to obey God, and nine times he has refused. The Nile, frogs, gnats, flies, livestock, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness have all been sent to break him. And yet he still refuses to humble himself. In arrogant anger he says “*Get away from me; take care never to see my face again, for on the day you see my face you shall die*” (Exodus 10:28). Pharaoh’s world is falling apart around him, and he refuses to listen to what God is saying to him despite what should be so obvious. His hardened heart has become self-destructive.

What is God saying?

I was recently talking with a friend in our church about the Ten Plagues and the idols of our hearts, and he later emailed me that he spent a part of the evening recording the “plagues” that God had sent to him – moments when God turned his idols against him. He had to stop at 19. Can you think of your own plagues? Maybe it was a relationship which became consuming, a desire for approval that made you hate people, a purchase that you regretted for years, a career that became more important than anything, or a longing to be loved that almost cost you your marriage. If you look back on your life, I’m sure you could find many such plagues. My friend’s comment got me thinking about all the ways that God has tried to get our attention, and the ways that He has had to “wake us up” from our self-destructive state of self-delusion.

So when I read the story of Pharaoh, Egypt, and the Ten Plagues, I cannot help but think about the ways that God has mercifully gotten my attention over the years. And in light of what we've seen in Exodus today, I want you to ask yourself "What is God saying?" I want you to ask yourself "Why am I here today?"

Let me try to summarize for you what this text tells us about God, our lives, and the gospel:

- 1) **God's supremacy is the ultimate goal of everything.** The purpose of the Exodus is the same purpose in creation, which is the same purpose in redemption, which is the same purpose for the new heavens and the new earth. Since there is nothing more glorious than the glory of God, then there is nothing more worthy of honor, worship, and obedience than Him. The aim of everything is to magnify and glorify Him. Any attempt to magnify something else as equal to Him by virtue of affection or obedience is sin. God is supreme, and He is supreme over all rivals because there is no one like Him.
- 2) **Goodness and hardship are meant to point us to Him.** The apostle Paul said that the "kindness of God is meant to lead you to repentance" (Rom. 2:4). In other words, all the good things we receive and God's patience with us are meant to lead to gratitude such that we would turn from trusting ourselves. But hardship has the same effect. Again the apostle Paul said that when he experienced such great hardship that he thought he was going to die, that it was "to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9). In other words, everything – whether blessing or bruising – is meant to turn us toward God. The message to Pharaoh is the same message to us: know that He is God!
- 3) **Brokenness is the starting point.** Throughout the plagues, as we've watch Pharaoh become more and more isolated and more and more stubborn, you almost want to beg him to lay aside his pride and become a broken man before God. Brokenness is frightening because it means that you are giving up control. It means that you have come to an end of yourself. But Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3), and He also said that unless you become as helpless as little children, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:3). Brokenness is where a relationship with God begins.

You see, I think that I can confidently tell everyone in this room that God is trying to get your attention. Maybe today you are finally listening. Maybe God finally has your attention. And if He does, maybe today should be a day when you put your faith in Christ to save you from your own self-destruction – from the plagues of your own making. Or, if having already received Him, perhaps you need to keep turning from the things which can never really satisfy.

God delivers His people through the judgment of His son and the humbling of sinners who come to the end of themselves and turn to Jesus as their only hope.

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