

Sunday 14th June 2015 AM Making plagues our friends - Exodus 7-10

Title: Making plagues our friends - Exodus 7-10

Purpose: To consider what lessons the plagues in Exodus teach.

INTRODUCTION

Travelling up to London on the M4 at one point you see massive billboards and they have a lot of power on their side simply because of the scale of them.

Today we are looking at the plagues in Exodus and they too have a great power for carrying across a message just because of their sheer Egypt-wide scale.

Now - for all the action that goes on in the plagues which make this section of Exodus very colourful to the say the least - there is something of a difficulty and that is simply that the section covers through a lot of chapters and one easy end result of that is to not really be able to see the wood for the trees.

Some observations about the plagues

So what I want to do is to collect together a number of observations about the plagues as a whole that will hopefully help us to stand back a bit and see things from more of a distance.

And when we do this I want to suggest that we will see three things:

#1 - That which is GREAT

#2 - That which is NORMAL

& #3 - That which is a REMEDY

So then #1:

1] That which is GREAT

The trigger

So the first thing to say and to see is that there is essentially, **a trigger verse** which comes right early on **at the head of chapter 5** where Pharaoh makes his response to the first of many repeated requests from God through Moses - we read:

Exodus 5 verse 1-2 "Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert.' "

Pharaoh said, "**Q. Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go.**"

A good question

And actually this IS a good question that we all have to wrestle with and come to a clear answer on.

It isn't really good enough to simply inherit some Christian belief system from your parents because some day your worldview will become challenged:

- maybe it will be as simple as someone mocking you - and saying "surely you don't believe in that OLD BOOK do you, I thought no-one really believed in that anymore - at least anyone with a brain!!"
- it could be the increasing pressure to fit in and to fall in line with the norms of our Western society
- it could be that the events of your life have gone a bit pear-shaped and you thought that being a Christian was supposed to protect you from really bad consequences in life

So we need to BOTH:

- ASK this question - Q. Who IS the LORD, that I should obey, that I should bow down, that I should yield all that I am and all that I have to Him?
- **AND** we need to be able to have the resources to ANSWER this question - and hopefully this section of chapters from Exodus 7 through to 10 will go some way to provide these answers.

Like planks of wood => sufficient RAFT

So the lessons from the PLAGUES are very much like a number of planks of wood which when tied all together make up a raft that is sufficient to get you through the rapids of life in this topsy-turvy unbelieving world.

The spiritual battle - God the greatest

So the first thing that is worth saying is that there is a spiritual battle going on and we will see very demonstrably that our God is: "God of gods and LORD of lords".

Now, we ought to be clear here - Pharaoh was not at all an atheist.

When we start reading about Moses coming to him on behalf of the LORD, the way he talks does seem to sound very militant like a lot of modern day atheists.

The fact is he was anything but an atheist.

He wasn't even an apatheist. Q. What is that?

Well someone who is apathetic, who doesn't have the slightest interest in God -whether there is one or whether there isn't. Somehow they just think it isn't very relevant, the whole subject is just about as engaging as double glazing.

Q. So what was Pharaoh then? Well he was a religious pluralist, which simply means that he had a plurality, a whole selection of gods that he worshipped and appeased and bowed down to.

And in that day an age, as you may know, the gods had their different domain - you could almost say the gods had their different uses.

And many believe that these plagues were in part **God's way of taking on and taking down the whole of the Egyptian pantheon, one by one** - David Pawson, in his overview of the Bible - lists over a dozen gods (and some of these names you might have already heard of):

- Khum - the guardian of the Nile
- Hapi - the spirit of the Nile
- Osiris - for whom the Nile was believed to be her bloodstream
- Heqt - a frog-like god of resurrection
- Hathor - a mother-goddess who took the form of a cow
- Apis and Minevis- both bull-gods

- Nut - the sky goddess
- Seth - the protector of crops
- Re, Atun, Atum and Horus - all sun gods

And we should not forget that Pharaoh himself was considered to have god-like status.

So one very obvious lesson of the plagues is **that God, our God is THE GREATEST.**

And at least **four times** through the course of the various plagues you hear that tell-tale phrase - **"so that you may know"**:

- chap 8v10 "it will be as you say, **so that you may know** there is no one like the LORD our God"
- chap 9v14 "**so that you may know** that there is no one like me in all the earth"
- chap 9v29 "The thunder will stop and there will be no more hail, **so that you may know** that the earth is the LORD's."
- chap 10v2 "how I performed my signs among them, and that **you may know** that I am the LORD."

And this is a message picked up many times throughout the course of Scripture, e.g. take **Isaiah**, to give just one example:

Isaiah 46 verse 9 "Remember the former things, those of long ago (and perhaps he was thinking back to the plagues); **I am God**, and there is no other; **I am God**, and there is none like me."

So one role of the PLAGUES is to leave no room for doubt over who is the greatest.

Order in the plagues

Another thing that you can't help but become aware when you delve a little into the detail of these 10 plagues is that there is a lot of order present. They are anything but RANDOM. And this should not really surprise us because our God doesn't do random. In every way our God is a God of order and a God of purpose.

Q. So what sort of order do we notice in the PLAGUES?

- Well **the FIRST thing** to see is that the PLAGUES come in series of 3 with one final culminating plague.

Q. How do we know they are in series of 3?

Well because there is a repeating pattern in the way in which the plagues are announced.

The first plague in each series involves Moses going early in the morning to Pharaoh and requesting that God's people can leave to go and worship.

The second plague in each series is simply a request to go to Pharaoh and make the usual request.

The third plague in each series is completely unannounced - Moses is told just to go and do it.

Not only this - the first series of 3 plagues is done by way of Aaron's rod

- the 2nd series by way of no rod at all
- the 3rd series by way of Moses' rod

Also - the 1st series of plagues we see a distinction being clearly drawn between what God can do and what Pharaoh's magicians can do.

In the 2nd series and also in the 3rd series the distinction now is between what will befall the Egyptians and what will *NOT* befall the Israelites.

- **The SECOND thing** that we notices is that there is a grading, if you like, of the PLAGUES:

The first 3 -> blood, frogs, gnats - these are all things that bring **DISCOMFORT**

The next 3 ->flies, livestock and boils - are things that are worse and bring real and progressive **DISTRESS**

The final set of 3 -> hail, locusts and darkness - are things that signal true **DISASTER**

The culmination -> the 10th plague on the firstborn - has only one further notch it can go - and that is **WHOLESALE DEATH**

Q. So what are the lessons here?

Lesson #1

One thing is that God is remarkably patient, he is giving Pharaoh lots of very real opportunities to change his tune and to come to a place of true repentance.

As 2 Peter 3 verse 9 says: "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

CS Lewis in this book "The Problem of PAIN", writes this very memorable sentence and you may have heard this quoted before:

"PAIN insists upon being attended to.
God **whispers** to us in our **pleasures**, **speaks** in our **consciences**, but **shouts** in our **PAINS**.
It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Lesson #2

The second lesson is in this area of **RESPONSIVENESS** i.e. how **open OR closed** somebody is to something.

You know from your own experience that as children we all had various bad habits and our parents, bless them, would on a pretty regular basis say essentially the same things - and over time (if you are like me) you would become progressively immune to their particular exhortations and admonitions - they were pretty well like water off a ducks back.

Q. I wonder this morning how responsive you are to God and to his pleadings with you through His Holy Spirit and through His Holy Word?

It is, of course, easy to feel - "Well I'm pretty open really". But the thing is:

Q. How do you know whether there are some areas which you've heard quite a number of times and now you don't even really register at all?

Let's take a look at Pharaoh:

Q. Did God harden him OR was Pharaoh himself responsible?

And the reason I bring this up is that early on in Exodus 4 Verse 21 we read these words:

"The Lord said to Moses, 'When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.'"

And similarly in the NT in [Romans chapter 9 verse 17ff](#) we read:

"For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth' Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden."

And so if these are the only verses we read, and they do seem pretty strong sounding verses, then we are definitely left with the impression that God operates a very ACTIVE HARDENING policy - at least with regard to Pharaoh, King of Egypt.

[RC Sproul - Active or Passive Hardening](#)

[RC Sproul](#), who is a very helpful writer - helps to cut through this question by making a useful distinction - he writes:

"To understand this, we have to distinguish between **active hardening** and **passive hardening**.

What we have in this verse is an example of God's punitive judgment against a wicked man. Pharaoh was already wicked. Pharaoh already had an evil heart, out of which came evil continually. Pharaoh delighted in doing evil. If Pharaoh ever did anything good at all, it was as a result of the constraining and restraining work of God's common grace.

One of the ways God punishes evil is to allow men to do what they really want, which is to become even more evil. As Paul puts it in Romans 1v24, 26, and 28, God 'gave them over' to the evil they want to do. God does this by withdrawing His restraint, which has the result of allowing men's hearts to harden against Him. Thus, God does not cause men to sin, nor does He make them bad. Rather, He simply lets them harden themselves, as a punishment for their wickedness."

[David Pawson](#) writes:

"If you study the text carefully you find that Pharaoh's heart was hardened 10 times. On the first 7 occasions Pharaoh hardens his own heart, in the next 3 God hardens Pharaoh's heart."

[Alec Motyer](#), the very helpful OT scholar writes:

"Exodus tells us three things about Pharaoh's heart: 1) that the LORD hardened it; 2) that Pharaoh hardened his heart and 3) that his heart became hard."

He goes on to say that all 3 components are brought together in [the 3 verses at the end of chapter 9 and the beginning of chapter 10](#) - let me read them:

[Exodus 9 verse 34 - 10 verse 1](#) "When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, **he sinned again**: He and his officials hardened their hearts (**SO THIS IS THE HABIT FORMING PART WHEREBY HE IS CHANGING AND HARDENING IS TAKING PLACE**). So Pharaoh's heart was hard (**SO HERE WE SEE THAT PHARAOH, BECAUSE OF HIS CHOICES HAS REACHED THIS POINT OF NO RETURN - HIS HEART HAS TRULY BECOME HARD**) and he would not let the Israelites go, just as the Lord had said through Moses. Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these miraculous signs of mine among them ...' (**SO THEN GOD HARDENS HIS HEART**)"

[Pirate Gibbs \(James Jeffers\)](#)

Back in the 19th Century there was a pirate by the name of Gibbs (Charles Gibbs - James Jeffers) and he was completely notorious. For many years he was a terror to commerce between the West Indies and South America. However after a long time he was taken captive, condemned and executed in the city of New York.

Before his death he acknowledged that when he committed the first murder and plundered the first ship, his guilty feelings were severe; his conscience was on the rack and deep within his heart it was hell.

But after he had sailed for years under the black flag, his conscience became so hardened and blunted that he could rob a vessel and murder all its crew, and then lie down and sleep as sweetly at night as an infant in its cradle. His remorse diminished as his crimes increased.

Well this is one of the lessons of the plagues - it questions everyone of us as to how responsive we are.

So that which is GREAT about the plagues - now #2:

2] That which is NORMAL

I don't know whether it has struck you, since the plagues are Egypt-wide and thus pretty epic in scale - that there is **also a definite sense in which they are RATHER TAME**.

Q. Something more persuasive?

Just think for a moment, if God was solely out to flex His divine muscles, to establish his unique superiority and to get His people out of Egypt - Q. don't you think he could have just given Moses some more persuasive powers?

Q. What do I mean?

Well - how about God giving Moses a rod that could instantly vapourise people. It is **not** hard to imagine that this whole process, that takes a full half-a-dozen chapters to accomplish, could really have been over in a matter of minutes.

Imagine the scene

Imagine the scene in the Royal palace - in walks Moses and says to Pharaoh:

"You know what you're going to have to let the Israelites all go and I mean you have to give the order today, right now and you've got no choice - because God, the LORD, says so!!!"

And Pharaoh says: "I don't know the LORD, so why on earth do I need to obey him? Because I absolutely don't feel inclined - and by the way I'm the Pharaoh if it has skipped your notice!!!" (You know an equally emphatic stance)

And then Moses says: "Ok - so I see you'll need a little persuasion" and then Moses notices the sitting on the overlarge Egyptian throne is a Royal Chihuahua (I believe they've moved onto Corgi nowadays!)

And so Moses bends down to the ground pulls out a sausage and says here boy! And then as the dog tucks into his treat he takes the rod of God and says to Pharaoh: "Say you farewells to your dog!" and then he instantly vapourises the dog! (You know 'no suffering', very humane!!)

And then he says to Pharaoh - "Still not going to let the Israelites go?" - then he turns to a lowly courtier and BLAM!! He's gone.

"Who's next - yes what about you - you're the Prime Minister aren't you OR should I say weren't you" - BLAM!! He's gone.

I don't think it takes too much imagination to realise that Pharaoh's not going to remain bolshy for too long!!

The plagues themselves

And then think about the plagues themselves.

The word plague comes from the Latin "plaga" and means "a blow, or a strike". However, these "blows", for the most part do nothing more than wind the people rather than crushing them to pieces.

The progression - very natural

Just trace the progression with me for a second and notice - how very normal - how very natural they are (and I'm *not* saying that God didn't have any part in making all these things happen when they did and stopping them to at his command):

- So first of all the river gets hit and then the amphibians, the frogs (that can do water or land) start to leave
- Now when these die off and large piles of them decay and rot we are not surprised when next in line will be little insects - gnats and flies
- Following on from this you have the onset of disease - first on animals and then on humans
- And as things slowly ratchet up and get more serious - the next two plagues that follow are very much of the nature of natural disasters - things that are not entirely unknown (hailstorms and great locust swarms)

Exodus 5-10 <==> Genesis 1-2

Various commentators over the centuries have observed a connection between **THE PLAGUES** (Exodus 5-10) and the story of **CREATION** (Genesis 1&2):

- **In the one** God constructs a beautiful world where everything is interdependent and there is a wholesale harmony and a universal flourishing going on.
- **In the other** we see the progressive breakdown and falling apart - as one commentator puts it:
"What is going on in the plagues is that now you have the weather destroying the animals and the insects destroying the plants etc."

So the end result of this, if its duration is not shortened, is that you would have the earth once again "without form and void".

A key principle revealed

So the reason why God does *not* just use RAW DISPLAYS OF POWER is that that would fail to teach us the most vital of lessons and that is:

"That everything that I tell you to do is NATURAL - and similarly every time that we choose to disobey the consequences are also fully NATURAL."

At the start Pharaoh asked that GREAT QUESTION -> "Q. **Who is the LORD, that I should obey him?**"

The answer is that whenever we choose to disobey we unleash the forces of chaos and disorder BOTH in our lives and in that of those around us and its effect is felt right out into the fabric of our world ultimately.

So the PLAGUES speak of GREAT things - AND - they speak of NORMAL things - and very briefly - #3 they speak of:

3] That which is a REMEDY

One thing that seems pretty clear about these PLAGUES is that God is not out to wreak maximum destruction. If anything God is "pulling his punches". So, for example:

- when it comes the Nile water becoming undrinkable, God doesn't make it last for some immense period of time
- when it comes to the potentially deadly hailstorm - God issues an advance warning - bring everybody and every animal indoors

The truth is that God wants things to be reversed. God rejoices when people change their mind and change the direction in which they are walking and then God reverses things.

Un-plagues

A question worth asking is this: if there are these judgments of God, these PLAGUES that befall mankind

- Q. Is there such a thing as an **UN-PLAGUE**, an **ANTI-PLAGUE**?

We'll think for a moment of Jesus.

He is the very Son of God, (as [Colossians 1](#) says He is the express image of the invisible God) - and He too performs great & wonderful displays of divine wonder working.

Notice two things about HIS wonder working:

- **FIRST** - like God the Father, He doesn't tend to go in for displays of RAW POWER

So for example, you would never have a gospel story that sounded like this:

"After a long hard day, Jesus - knowing that his disciples were weary and in need of some good old fashioned entertainment told them to sit down in groups of 3 while he put on for them the greatest display ever seen:

First he cast great balls of blazing pitch far into the sea of Galilee leaving smoking trails a mile high in the sky. Then he juggled boulders with his bear hands each weighing half-a-ton etc. etc."

- **RATHER** - he works to **REVERSE & REMEDY** things by way of his **MIRACLES**.

His MIRACLES are like UN-PLAGUES as they restore the natural order:

- Blind people aren't supposed to be blind
- & Deaf people aren't supposed to not be able to hear
- The dying are designed to have life to the full, an undying life.

CONCLUSION

You know as we review the plagues - they're not there to see whether we can last 10 rounds with God in the ring:

- they tell us some greatly reassuring things - He is God of gods and Lord of lords

- they highlight that our God is a God of patience with us and that for us we are therefore encouraged to be responsive, open-hearted and not HARDENED.
- they remind us that the NORMAL course of Disobeying God is one that always leads, very naturally and very normally to UNRAVELLING and to JUDGMENT
- lastly they bring into mind that there is a REMEDY, one that brings ANTI-PLAGUES, one that will bring not UNRAVELLING but a true universal flourishing and SHALOM - the Lord Jesus Christ, whom we will, God willing see more of in the next episode.

Let's pray - AMEN