

God's Judgment

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Date: 02 May 2021

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[0 : 00] Can I start with this? Can you turn to the person next to you? Which one of the ten plagues of Egypt would you like to live through the least? Which one of the plagues would you like the least?

Over to you. I wonder which one you said. I wonder which plague you said. When I was growing up, I watched the Ten Commandments movie, the Cecil B. DeMille version, and the hail was always depicted as this fire coming down from heaven.

So I was always terrified at that. But now that I read the story, I think it's the gnats that get me. Like gnats. You can swap flies away, but what are you going to do with a gnat? They're tiny and everywhere. No thanks.

I don't know if you're like me and you like watching movies like that, or movies in general, but I realized something that in every movie that I watch, it's always the good guy who wins in the end. Actually, almost every movie, every TV show, it's the bad guy that loses. And that is Pharaoh in our story today. God gives Pharaoh ten words or ten plagues, ten chances to repent and let his people go.

[1 : 06] But there is a relentlessness to the story. Even that song, it's quite exhausting how it just goes on and on and on. And so why did the author write down ten plagues for us?

Why are there ten? And you might say, well, look, you know, the author is just documenting history and ten plagues is just what happened. So the author is just recording that for us.

And that's fair enough. But if this is like a superhero movie, God is clearly more powerful. Why did he take ten plagues to change Pharaoh's heart and not just one?

Is there something wrong with God's power? We're going to attack this passage and get to the author's purpose. But to do it, we're going to investigate why there are ten plagues and not just one from the beginning.

So as I said, please keep the passage open and the handout. What I'm going to do is suggest a bunch of theories that are out there as to why there are ten and not one plagues.

[2 : 07] So here's the first theory. It's called the Plan J approach. Okay, first theory, Plan J approach. Can you look at 7 verse 16? 7, 16.

They said to him, Then the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you, Let my people go so that they may worship me in the wilderness. But until now you have not listened.

This is what the Lord has said. By this you will know that I am the Lord. With the staff that is in my hand, I will strike the water of the Nile and it will be changed to blood. But even that extraordinary miracle doesn't change Pharaoh's mind.

So Plan A fails. But then so does Plan B with the frogs and Plan C with the gnats. Plan D with the flies. So on and so forth until next week, the killing of the firstborn sons.

And then that changes his mind. So it's not so much a Plan A, but a Plan J. If God knew that only the last plague would work, why doesn't he start with that one and save everyone the suffering of nine other plagues?

[3 : 15] It's strange, isn't it? If the author wants to show us God failing nine times in a row, another suggestion for ten plagues and not one comes from the commentaries.

This one suggests that there were ten plagues to correspond to ten Egyptian gods or little deities, you know, the statues they have. So the Egyptian deity called Hapi or Harpi, he's the god of the Nile.

When God turns the river to blood, it's like he's sending Harpi bleeding. When the frogs appear over the land, that's Heket, the Egyptian god of frogs.

He is sent hopping mad. The sun god Ra, he gets his lights punched out, doesn't he, when the ninth plague arrives and it's darkness. You see how that works?

So on and so forth. The trouble with that theory is there were only ten plagues and about 18 or so Egyptian deities. What's more, some of the links get a bit tenuous.

[4 : 17] So the plagues of flies and gnats and locusts. The closest Egyptian god to that is a beetle. I think that's a bit thin, doesn't really wash with me.

Here is the strongest theory for ten plagues and not one. It is the wear Pharaoh down approach. That is, Pharaoh is so stubborn, he needed to be chipped away at over time with ten plagues rather than one.

The big problem with that theory is if God needed to wear Pharaoh down, why does he harden his heart? Do you see? I've highlighted that phrase in bold throughout the passage.

You can see the repetition in the story. In chapter 9 verse 11, 9 at the bottom of your page, after the plague number six, it seems that Israel are almost out the door.

But it says, the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and on all the Egyptians. They're almost out the door. But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron just as the Lord had said.

[5 : 30] Why, if God is trying to get his people out the door, does he slow down the process by hardening Pharaoh's heart? But actually, all the slowness is not just God's doing alone because many times in the story we're told that Pharaoh hardens his own heart.

That means Pharaoh is also culpable for his actions. See, this story is clear that God is in control of our actions, yet we are morally responsible as well.

And that dual dynamic is true in lots of the Bible stories. So when Joseph's wicked brothers sold him into slavery, God intended that for good.

When the king of Assyria boasted over his victory of Israel, he didn't know that God was using him as a tool to judge his people.

When Judas betrayed Jesus for pieces of silver, God was using that to bring about his salvation purposes. God is sovereign over our actions, but we are responsible for them as well.

[6 : 41] If God needed 10 plagues to grind Pharaoh down, it doesn't explain why he hardens Pharaoh's heart to make the process slower. That would be counterproductive.

And all of those are the major theories as to why there are 10 plagues and not just one in Egypt. But I think God himself shows us his reason.

Can you go to 9 verse 15? It's over the page. 9, 15. This is the key verse today. 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. Here is the reason for all the plagues.

He wanted to give Pharaoh a front row seat to his power. A river to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, pestilence, boils, hails, locust darkness, 10 chances to see his power, 10 chances to see him ruling over creation.

[7 : 46] In this story, every time God says a plague is coming, it happens. God says it was so. It's the creator at work just as he was back in Genesis.

Some people try to explain away the plagues as natural phenomenon. There are locust swarms all over Africa, so that's all plague number eight was. Livestock die by massive disease all the time. Remember mad cow? Well, that's all plague number five was. When we explain away Bible miracles like that, it doesn't allow God to be powerful enough to rule over the creation which he has made.

Perhaps natural coincidence might allay to explain a couple of plagues here and there, but the river Nile turning to blood, darkness in Egypt for three days.

It doesn't allow Yahweh to be creator over the creation he has made. It assumes the author was using a natural coincidence and sneakily calling it God's power instead.

[8 : 56] And that is true for Noah's Ark, the crossing of the Red Sea, Jonah's fish, all of Jesus' miracles. Can you think of a better way to get our attention than if the creator interrupted the regularly observed laws of physics which he made to make a statement?

Did you notice that Pharaoh's own magicians were able to do a couple of miracles along the way? That always stumps people. They were able to copy God when he turned the river Nile to blood, but wouldn't Pharaoh have been happier if they turned the blood back into the Nile?

Well, the magicians were able to summon some frogs as if there weren't enough already hopping around Egypt. Their miracles weren't helping but only adding to the problem. You see, I think the author is poking fun at the magicians.

Have a look at the third plague which is 8 verse 18. 8, 18. Yeah, sorry, flicking backwards. When the magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, they could not.

Since the gnats were on people and animals everywhere, the magicians said to Pharaoh, this is the finger of God. You see, if his mighty hand and outstretched arm were against Egypt, the magicians couldn't even keep up with his finger.

[10:15] They are clearly outgunned. It is no contest. Actually, in this story, the real power seems to be in reversing the plagues rather than making them in the beginning.

In fact, isn't that what God did in creation? Where there was chaos, he brought order. In the New Testament reading, which Sue brought us, a furious squall, now completely calm.

Who is this, they said, about Jesus? Even the wind and the waves obey him. And this story is so famous, it's almost entertaining. It's a movie.

It's like a superhero movie, but actually, it's more accurately a horror story. So look at 7:18. It says, the fish in the Nile will die, the river will stink, the Egyptians will not be able to drink its water.

The Nile is their life source, but now it's turned to blood. I don't know, are you squeamish at blood? I used to be pretty tough, but I fainted once when I was getting my teeth checked, so not very good.

[11:20] Imagine a river of it running through your whole city. Terrible, isn't it? Handfuls of soot, it will become fine dust over the whole land of Egypt.

Festering boils will break out on people and animals throughout the land. Talk about an airborne virus. It says, chapter 9, verse 18, this time tomorrow, I will send the worst hailstorm that has ever fallen on Egypt from the day it was founded till now.

After the hail, if you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country. They will cover the face of the ground so that it cannot be seen. They will devour what little you have left after the hail, including every tree that is growing in your fields.

That is a famine after the hail to add insult to serious injury. The darkness, it says for some reason, darkness that can be felt.

I have no idea what that means, but it's not good, is it? Darkness that can be felt. It says, there was total darkness covered over all Egypt for three days.

[12:31] No one could see anyone else or move about for three days. That is isolation. That is a lockdown for three days. In 10, verse 7, the Egyptians have had enough.

10, verse 7, how long will this man be a snare to us? Let his people go so that they may worship the Lord their God. Do you not realize that Egypt is ruined? You see, it's not entertaining, is it?

It's a horror show. It's nine plagues with the worst one to come next week, 10 chances to repent, 10 chances to let God's people go, and the reason, 9, verse 16, I have raised you up for this very purpose that I might show you my power.

You see, when Pharaoh first encountered God last week, he said, who is the Lord that I should obey him? I do not know the Lord. Why should I let these people go?

But after today, he's not so ignorant, is he? It's 10 plagues rather than one, so Pharaoh knows exactly who God is.

[13:35] So he knows that God is not to be messed with. So he knows how God treats opposition. Not just Pharaoh, the whole world, in fact. It says that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

That's for everyone, down through the ages as well. 10, verse 2, talks about your children and your grandchildren hearing this story. Why? So that you may know that I am the Lord.

That is God's agenda for the whole book of Exodus, a world that knows him. Remember he said, I am the Lord. Holy and incomparable. I am what I do.

The way to know me, look at what I do. Look at how I treat opposition. And as we keep reading this story, we will be screaming at Pharaoh to realize who he's up against, to change his mind.

But he won't listen, will he? Not because there's anything wrong with his ears, remember? But because there's a deeper disease in his heart. You see, Pharaoh is a cautionary tale.

[14:44] The plagues are a shock tactic to show us how God treats opposition in your life. Maybe you've seen people like Pharaoh who oppose God in their lives, who want nothing to do with his son.

Whether they're a politician or a government or maybe someone in your circle, they need to know not to mess with God, that he won't tolerate opposition forever.

When the military seized control of Myanmar and brought chaos, they need to know that Yahweh won't stand for that. When the clever atheists suggest that belief in God is just a delusion, Yahweh won't stand for that.

When our culture suggests that Yahweh is just one of...