

Creation Goes Berserk

TEXT: Ex 7:8-10:29

PHBF 1.15.12

Scr. Reading: Ex 7:8-25

GETTING OUT: Exodus, part 1

INTRO:

- Dismiss the children
- Reading through the Bible in 2012
- Memorizing the SOS verses
- Read our text – will be on this passage for next 3-4 weeks
- Outline/Chart

Exodus is a great book to learn what Christianity is all about. Even though the narrative takes place 3½ millennia ago, even though it includes unusual elements like a burning bush and dreadful plagues and a miraculous escape through the sea, even though it is about Israel and not the church, it's a great story for learning the basics of Christianity.

As Tom so clearly showed us last week, the Bible is one unified book which tells one unified story. It's God's story about His quest for glory in the salvation of His people and the judgment of His enemies. And he does it all through one glorious hero, Jesus Christ. Every "small-s story" in the Bible retells and advances the "big-s Story" of God's quest for glory by redeeming His people through His Son.

This is why we're going to deal with the plagues as one unit—to derive their overarching theology and see them in Christological perspective. We're not merely looking for moral applications, as though the Bible were an inspired version of Aesop's Fables. It's insufficient to read the plagues and walk away with a pithy truism like: "Submit to God or He'll bring the rod."

What we're going to see instead is that the plagues are a story of redemption and a story of faith. The plagues will show us that what it means to be a Christian is to be a person who has been remade, reborn, redeemed. Christianity is not a series of steps, a list of rules, or a forced religious lifestyle. Christianity is more about Christ than it is about you. See, the fundamental truth in Christianity is that we cannot help ourselves. Human effort won't do it. We are slaves, willing and unwilling slaves. We need help. We need a Redeemer.

The plagues also show us that the Christian life is a life of faith from beginning to end. This story reminds us that it just won't work to hold out picture of redemption out to God and say, "Save me like this." From the very beginning, God has called His people to faith, where we have to say, "I believe you are good. I don't understand what you are doing, but I will trust and obey. Save me however you want to."

I've called the sermon "Creation Goes Berserk." The reason is obvious: almost all the plagues involve the natural world – the animal kingdom, the heavens, the elements become unleashed and destroy human civilization. Water is polluted, animals swarm, death and disease come, the skies turn violent and dark. It's chaos. In the original creation, humankind was to subdue and have dominion over the earth; but now creation reigns and destruction ensues. It's as if creation has overthrown human dominion, and "uncreation" is the result.

Prelude: Staff becomes a Snake (7:8-13)

The Lord sends Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh with a miraculous sign: Aaron will throw down his staff, and it will become a serpent. But instead of being impressed, Pharaoh calls for a show of force with his wise men and sorcerers (v 11).

It's worth noting that Moses and Aaron do not conjure up tricks by "their secret arts" like the Egyptian magicians. They simply obey God. Are there counterfeit supernatural powers in the universe? Oh yes. But don't be fooled by initial appearances. They are no match for the power of God, and time will always bear that out.

"Swallow" is used only here (v 12) and in 15:12, where the water of the Red Sea "swallows" the Egyptian army. It's a verbal foreshadowing of Egypt's final demise. It's also a dramatic visual one, because the snake was representative of Egyptian power. When Aaron's snake swallows theirs, it's a striking illustration of God's ability and intent to take down the whole Egyptian snake in one gulp.

This incident embodies the rest of the main elements of the plagues which follow. Yahweh shows His power, the scene ends with an obvious

victory for Moses and Aaron, yet Pharaoh resists the obvious conclusion that he is no match for Israel's God. As verses 13-14 say, "Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen. He refused to let the people go."

First Plague: Water to Blood (7:14-25)

Many have suggested that this is an entirely natural phenomenon – heavy rains, resulting in flooding, which brought large amounts of red sediment down into the Nile and made it appear red like blood. This explanation, while it might be able to account for the succession of plagues which follow (frogs leave the Nile, die, become breeding material for flies and gnats, etc.), isn't satisfying at all.

- The detail about polluted water even in buckets and stone jars (v 19 end) indicates that this was more than a natural occurrence in the river.
- The text attributes the polluted water to Moses' action of raising his staff, not a heavy rainfall. If rain created the problem, Moses is performing empty theatrics. (same with the tossing of ash into the air to initiate the plague of boils, etc.)
- The biggest problem with a naturalistic explanation is that this wouldn't accomplish the Lord's main purpose in the plagues – namely, to show that He was Lord (7:17, cf. v 5). If the Nile turned red at every flood, this event wouldn't have raised Pharaoh's eyebrows.

Verses 20-21 describe the damage – all the water became blood, the fish died, and the land stank. Once again Pharaoh tries to minimize the miracle by having his magicians duplicate it (v 22). How is this helpful? Wouldn't it be better if they used their magic to return the blood to water? Why add to the misery? Does Pharaoh think Egypt needs more polluted water? Obviously, that's not the point. The point is, he's doing whatever he can to avoid the obvious conclusion—Yahweh is superior, and his rebellion is putting him and his people in danger.

Don't minimize the significance of this plague. The power that Egypt originally used to destroy Israel (drowning baby boys) has turned against them. The Nile was at the center of Egypt's life. It was their mode of transportation, their source of nourishment, their agricultural

and economic foundation, even a central object of their worship. This direct strike on the Nile is the first toll of the bell, ringing out Egypt's demise. Judgment has begun.

Second Plague: Frogs (8:1-15)

The first plague was a blow to the River god. This plague is a strike at the goddess Heqet, pictured with the head and sometimes the body of a frog. Egyptians believed Heqet was the goddess of childbirth, who breathed life into the body; women thus appealed to Heket during labor and delivery. Ironic, considering Pharaoh's earlier attempt to weaken Israel by ordering the midwives to kill Israelite baby boys. Thus in the first two plagues, God humiliated the god of the Nile and the goddess who governed labor and delivery—the two instruments Pharaoh tried to use against Israel. There's a connection between Pharaoh's sin and God's judgment.

The frogs bring us to Pharaoh's first sign of softening. In 8:8, he requests relief and offers to let the people go. Remarkable, isn't it, that Pharaoh has to ask Moses to make the frogs go away? His magicians can't quite work up this trick, can they? In verse 9, Moses allows Pharaoh to set the time when the frogs would die, eliminating the possibility that Pharaoh would chalk it up to coincidence and misses the point. God brought the frogs; God eliminated them. The cessation of the plagues is as much a sign of God's power as the plagues themselves.

The cure is almost as bad as the disease. Verse 13 tells us the frogs died right where they were, and v 14 says the land reeked with their dying bodies. It stinks to be under judgment – 7:21 tells us the bloody Nile stank, too. These heaps of rotting frog carcasses makes one's mind run ahead a few months to the scene of bodies piled up around the Red Sea – Egypt's army, coming up out of the water, decimated by the judgment of God.

Is Pharaoh's repentance real? No (v 15). For the first time in the narrative, Pharaoh hardens his own heart.

Third Plague: Gnats (8:16-19)

No introduction to this plague – no warning to Pharaoh, no reminder to let the people go. It just comes upon Egypt suddenly. This fits the pattern. The plagues occur in sets of three. The first of each set (One, Four, Seven) includes a command for Moses to present himself to Pharaoh early in the morning. The second in each set (Two, Five, Eight) has God telling Moses to “Go to Pharaoh.” The third (Three, Six, Nine) offer no forewarning; they just happen on the heels of the previous plague. This cycle presents the plagues as regular, unrelenting waves of judgment. The Tenth Plague, of course, brings the whole sequence to a climax.

Aaron strikes the dust and it becomes gnats (or lice). Imagine it – how horrifying to see a patch of dust on your kitchen floor and move to sweep it up, only to have it rise into the air as a swarm of gnats. Why dust? Perhaps as a symbol of death – “Dust you are and to dust you will return” (Gen 3:19). There’s also an obvious connection with the earth here, which means plagues 2-4 involve the three primary sectors of the ecosystem – water (frogs), earth (gnats), and air (flies).

The magician’s can’t reproduce this plague, which causes them to acknowledge that this is a power beyond their sorcery. God has taken the match to the deep end of the pool, and these guys can’t swim. He’s accomplishing His stated purpose: “I will multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, ...and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD” (7:3,5).

Fourth Plague: Flies (8:20-32)

Verse 22 tells us of the first time a distinction is made between Egypt and Israel. This separation is maintained through the rest of the plagues, culminating at the Passover and again at the Red Sea. (THEOLOGICAL ASIDE: This illustrates part of the basis for my belief in a post-tribulation rapture. God is able to protect His people, even while pouring out judgment on the rest of the earth.) Judgment for Egypt means salvation for Israel.

We see the heightening intensity of the plagues in v 24: “the land was ruined by the swarms of flies.” Each plague brings greater devastation than before. After the livestock die (Five), the boils come (Six), and the

hail falls (Seven), Pharaoh’s own servants plead with him: “How long will Moses be a snare to us? Let the people go serve Yahweh. Don’t you understand Egypt is ruined?!” (10:7) The LORD fully intends for His judgment to destroy the land of Egypt. Flies, boils, and hail are nothing compared with what will happen with the Tenth Plague, which will be executed on the land by an individual called “the destroyer” (12:23).

In verse 25 Pharaoh repents again, sort of. He offers a holiday for sacrifice, as long as the people stay in the land. It’s a clever ruse, and Moses responds with an equally clever reply: “Won’t work. We don’t want to offend you.” (vv 26-27). It’s a comical remark, coming from the guy who’s responsible for all the gnats, flies, and dead frogs everywhere. You can almost see Moses rolling his eyes and thinking, “You called me in here for *this*? Fine. Two can play that game.” So Pharaoh agrees to let them go, as long as they don’t get too far away. Anything to be rid of all these flies. Apparently, that’s enough for Moses, who consents to pray for Yahweh to remove the flies. But he warns Pharaoh: “Don’t lie to me again.” But once again, Pharaoh hardens his heart (v 32).

9:1-7 Fifth Plague: Death of Livestock

Note verse 3: “Behold, the hand of the Lord will fall with a very severe plague upon your livestock...” During the Third Plague, the magicians had warned Pharaoh that these gnats were God’s finger (8:19). Now Egypt will feel the force of His whole hand. With this plague, a pattern of death begins that will eventually include the Egyptians’ livestock, their vegetation, their crops, and ultimately, every one of their firstborn children.

Sixth Plague: Boils (9:8-12)

This might be the first real indication to the Egyptians that their lives are in real danger. Previously, the plagues have been annoying, even devastating, but now God’s judgment is touching their own bodies.

Notice the word play in verses 10 and 11. Moses and Aaron take soot from a kiln and “stand” before Pharaoh (v 10), but the court magicians cannot “stand” before Moses because of the boils. These imposters

have lost all power, even the power to stand. Their magic cannot even save *them* anymore.

Why soot/ash from a kiln? Perhaps in association with the kiln-baked bricks the Israelites spent so many years making for the Egyptians. No doubt hundreds and thousands of Israelites suffered wounds and welts from their Egyptian taskmasters while they bent before those ovens. Now in a sense, the ovens have come back to torment the Egyptians. They are getting exactly what they deserve.

Verse 12 gives us the first time where the LORD hardens Pharaoh's heart Himself. It won't be the last. We'll say much more about this in future sermons, but for now it's worth observing the extent of Yahweh's influence. He is in *complete* control. Would Pharaoh have reacted differently, especially during these last several plagues as things are really heating up? Moses never even brings that possibility into the discussion. Pharaoh never gets the chance. Yahweh hardens his heart. For now, we'll let the tension remain.

Seventh Plague: Hail (9:13-35)

We have finally come to the final round of plagues. The first five verses (13-17) create the clear impression of culmination. "Let my people go or I will send the full force of my plagues against you" (v 14 NIV). Literally, the phrase reads: "all my signs *to your heart*." The next two verses are even more terrifying: "By now I could have put out my hand and struck you... and you would have been cut off from the earth." Why hasn't He? "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." Understand this well, friends. Pharaoh is serving God's purpose. What purpose? His desire to spread the word throughout the whole earth that He alone is God, faithful Savior to His people and terrifying Judge to His enemies. There is more going on here than simply the rescue of an oppressed band of slaves in Egypt. The stakes are a lot higher than Pharaoh ever realized or planned for.

The hail falls, livestock and crops die (v 25). Pharaoh relents once more (vv 27-28). Moses agrees to pray for relief (v 29), but he expressly states that he knows Pharaoh doesn't yet fear God (v 30). And once again,

Pharaoh hardens his heart once the pressure is off (vv 34-35).

Eighth Plague: Locusts (10:1-20)

Now there is no chance Pharaoh will relent. God has hardened his heart (10:1). The man is helpless to avoid all that God intends to bring against him. God wants to ensure that this event lives on forever in Israelite lore (v 2).

His officials have caught on (10:7). His magicians have long ago abandoned him. Only Pharaoh remains unyielding. It's God and Pharaoh one-on-one, a clear confrontation between the true God and the false one.

Ninth Plague: Darkness (10:21-29)

This plague and the previous one are clear reversals of God's original act of creation. In Plague Eight, "everything growing in the fields, fruit on the trees, everything green" (v 15) was all destroyed. Plague Nine is a return to the darkness which covered the whole earth before God's first words: "Let there be light."

It's a theme of creation reversal that's been developing all through this narrative. Life-giving water becomes death-evoking blood; animals and the elements harm rather than serve humanity; light ceases and darkness takes over. God could have used other means of judgment, means we see elsewhere in Scripture like, say, a foreign army or a destroying angel. Instead, He uses natural means. Why?

At least part of the reason is justice. The punishment fits the crime. Pharaoh has set himself up, not just as a god, but as an anti-God force who overturns God's creation mandate to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Instead of respecting and protecting life, Pharaoh kills and restrains and tries to wipe Israel from the earth. Drowning in the Red Sea is a fitting punishment for an army who tried to drown a generation of babies in the Nile River. Pharaoh tried to overthrow the creation mandate; now God will use creation to overthrow Pharaoh.

There's also a point here to be made about God's sovereignty over all

things. If He controls creation, what hope do we have to defend ourselves? “Acts of God,” as they are called by insurance companies, are random, unavoidable, and calamitous. His ability to stop the plague and restore order is meaningful here too. The initiation and cessation of each plague at God’s command is a reminder that He holds the chaos at bay, but should He choose, He could easily step aside and let madness take over completely. And as we see in Revelation, someday He will.

But there’s a more important reason for the motif of creation reversal in this story. Creation language is often associated in the Bible with judgment and redemption. When God judges, creation comes undone – “the heavens fall, the earth trembles, the mountains melt, etc.” Likewise, when God saves, He re-creates. Salvation is a new beginning, a fresh start. Paul makes this point explicitly: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation...” (2 Cor 5:17).

So how does this apply to us? Katrina was God’s judgment on New Orleans? The tsunami was His judgment on the nations of the Indian Ocean? No. The plagues aren’t a morality story with a stirring lesson at the end: “Don’t be like Pharaoh or God will bring the house. Don’t change your mind with God or you’re in trouble.” No. It applies to us by calling us to become Christians, people who find their security and identity wholly in Jesus Christ.

The coming of Christ re-creates humanity, re-boots culture, re-creates the cosmos. He called it the “Kingdom of God,” and it was a new world order where we enjoy forever the glory of God as intended at the very beginning. At Christ’s death – darkness, earthquake, rocks split. Creation was being reversed. God’s judgment was falling on His enemy so that His people could go free. But this time, the enemy was God’s own Son. Yahweh’s anger was directed at Jesus instead of at Pharaoh or Egypt or Babylon or Nineveh. Blood, water, death, and darkness – He’s taking the plagues into His own body; and all creation revolts at the horror.

But then came another great moment of re-creation. Three days later, God reversed the most stubborn law of nature—the universal law of death. Death does not bargain, it does not relent, it does not get bested. It takes us all, and once it takes, it keeps. But death is no match for our God or His Son, Jesus. The resurrection of the Son of God brought death

to its knees and scored the ultimate creation reversal for God.

Applications:

1. Jesus is your redemption. He was unmade so you could be remade. If you are not a Christian, come to Him in faith. If you are a Christian, you come to Him in faith, too! Everywhere in your life where you see creation reversal, judgment, sin, struggle, you need Jesus to be your redemption.
2. Fear the Lord for His terrifying power and inescapable judgment. Pharaoh demonstrates how much a person can know about God without truly (savingly) *knowing God*. **[This is such an important application, especially in our church where I have such burdens for so many particular people’s salvation.]**
3. Praise Him for His might and power, which He employs for the good of His people. Don’t overlook the importance of this. Praise is what the whole biblical story is driving toward. Revelation envisions a day when all of God’s people are settled into the New Heaven and New Earth, praising Him forever and ever the redemption that He has wrought, recreating them for their great delight and His great glory.

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