

p 27 WEEK 4: THE PLAGUES AGAINST EGYPT

Exodus 7:8–11:10

The Place of the Passage

Whereas the previous section highlighted God’s repeated promises of deliverance and Israel’s struggle to believe, in this section God begins to deliver Israel by showcasing his sovereignty over Egypt through the plagues. By repeatedly hardening Pharaoh’s heart, God creates an environment in which his gracious salvation of Israel may be fully acknowledged. Ultimately, these chapters depict a power contest between the Lord (represented by Moses and Aaron) and the gods of Egypt (represented by Pharaoh). Although Pharaoh resists and disobeys the divine word, God will eventually overpower him until he submits and releases the people.

The Big Picture

God demonstrates his supremacy over Egypt and his faithfulness to Israel by sending plagues against the Egyptians while protecting Israel from the destructive effects of the plagues.

p 28 Reflection and Discussion

Read through the whole passage for this study, Exodus 7:8–11:10. Then review the shorter passages below and write your answers to the following questions. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 154–162; also available online at www.esvbible.org.)

1. Introductory Sign (7:8–13)

In Exodus 7:8–13, in order to validate his and Moses’ message before Pharaoh, Aaron casts down his staff so that it becomes a serpent. Earlier this same sign had caused Israel to believe (see 4:1–5, 30–31), but here Pharaoh refuses to listen and believe. What do these different responses reveal about the effectiveness of miraculous signs for bringing about faith?

In ancient Egypt, the serpent was a symbol of Pharaoh’s power. What does this introductory section therefore imply about the plagues that will follow?

2. The First Nine Plagues (7:14–10:29)

Exodus 7:14–25 records the first plague, in which the Nile is turned to blood. Here God tells Moses to stand “on the bank of the Nile” and to take with him “the staff that turned into a

serpent” (v. 15). Recalling previous passages, what p 29 is the combined significance of Moses confronting Pharaoh by *the Nile* (see 2:10) and taking this particular staff with him (see 7:8–13)?

Several times throughout the plagues, Pharaoh attempts to bargain with Moses and dictate the terms of his obedience. He offers to allow Israel to sacrifice within the land of Egypt (Ex. 8:25), to allow them to sacrifice but “not go very far away” (8:28), for only the men to go (10:11), and for the people to go without their flocks and herds (10:24). All of these bargains are rejected. What are some ways that we attempt to “bargain” with God when it comes to our obedience?

Although this section is primarily concerned with God’s judgments against Pharaoh and Egypt, on several occasions Moses intercedes with God on behalf of Pharaoh (Ex. 8:12, 29; 9:33; 10:18). Why might these intercessions be recorded throughout this section? What do they contribute to this narrative filled with judgment?

p 30 According to Exodus 9:14–16, why did God bring these plagues against the Egyptians? What is therefore the ultimate goal of God’s judgment of his enemies?

At various points, certain Egyptians recognize God’s power throughout the plagues. After the magicians fail to replicate the plague of gnats, they exclaim, “This is the finger of God” (Ex. 8:19). During the plague of hail there are some who “feared the word of the LORD among the servants of Pharaoh” and rush their slaves and livestock inside (9:20). Some of these servants also later implore Pharaoh to release Israel, saying, “Do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?” (10:7). In light of Pharaoh’s attitude, what do these responses contribute to the story?

3. The Threat of the Tenth Plague (11:1–10)

How is God portrayed as supremely sovereign in Exodus 11:1–3? What does he control? How does this inform our understanding of our own salvation?

In the ancient world, the firstborn was the primary heir of the father’s estate. With this background, what are some implications of the tenth plague—the p 31 death of all the firstborn in Egypt (11:4–5)—as well as of Israel’s being God’s “firstborn son” (4:22–23)?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to reflect on the *Personal Implications* these sections may have for your walk with the Lord.

Gospel Glimpses

THE WORD OF GOD. These chapters emphasize that the driving force behind the judgment of the plagues is the word of God. Repeatedly we see phrases such as, “the LORD said to Moses” (Ex. 7:14; 8:1, 16, 20; 9:1, 8, 13, 22; 10:1, 12, 21; 11:1), “as the LORD had said/spoken” (7:13, 22; 8:15, 19; 9:12, 35), “as the LORD commanded” (7:10, 20), and “Thus says the LORD” (7:17; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3; 11:4). Just as God’s word was the primary means by which he created the world (Genesis 1), so is his word the primary means by which he saves his people through judgment against Egypt. Similarly, the Son of God came to earth as the Word of God (John 1:1), and through him God again brought salvation through judgment. However, in the case of Jesus, he as the Son and Word of God took God’s judgment upon himself in order to bring salvation to his people.

CONQUERING OUR ENEMIES. Bound up with God’s salvation of Israel was his conquering of their enemies. When the Egyptian magicians mimicked Aaron’s initial sign by turning a staff into a serpent, Aaron’s staff swallowed theirs (7:12). This event foreshadows the significance of the upcoming plagues: by them God is powerfully conquering Pharaoh and Egypt in order to save his people. Likewise, the gospel of Jesus is not simply the good news that we are saved from the divine wrath that our sins deserve, but also that through Jesus God has inaugurated his kingdom and is conquering all our enemies, the fiercest of which is Satan, the original serpent. In Revelation 12:10, after seeing Satan conquered and cast out of heaven, John hears a loud voice exclaim, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down.”

p 32 Whole-Bible Connections

CREATION UNDONE. The plagues are depicted as a destructive undoing of the created order in Egypt. The plague of blood on “all their *pools* of water” (Ex. 7:19) corresponds to “the waters that were *gathered* [lit. “*pooled*”] together” to make the seas in creation (Gen. 1:10). The frogs (Ex. 8:1–7) correspond to the “swarms of living creatures” from the waters (Gen. 1:20). The gnats (Ex. 8:16–19) correspond to the “creeping things” on the earth (Gen. 1:24). The flies (Ex. 8:20–24) correspond to the “flying things” (Gen. 1:20, ESV footnote). The livestock (Ex. 9:1–7) corresponds to the “livestock” that Adam named (Gen. 2:20). The hail (Ex. 9:22–26) and locusts (Ex. 10:1–15) together destroyed “all the plants in the land” (Ex. 10:15), corresponding to the “plants” and vegetation of creation (Gen. 1:12). The darkness over Egypt (Ex. 10:21–23) reverses God’s first creative act of making light (Gen. 1:3). And finally, the death of the firstborn (Ex. 11:4–5) corresponds to the creation of the first humans (Gen. 1:26). Similarly, the New Testament says that, at the end of time, God will again undo creation in a final act of judgment, after which he will re-create the world in righteousness (2 Pet. 3:10–13).

HARDNESS OF HEART. Throughout the plague narrative, Pharaoh’s heart is unswervingly hard. It is variously stated that Pharaoh’s heart “was/is hardened” (Ex. 7:13, 14; 8:19; 9:7, 35), that Pharaoh “hardened his heart” (8:15, 32; 9:34), and that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart (9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10). This hard-heartedness prevents Pharaoh from obeying God’s word and releasing Israel, and therefore results in his just judgment. Psalm 95:8–11 notes that this exodus generation of Israel also hardens their hearts after leaving Egypt, which similarly results in their not obeying God’s word and thus receiving God’s judgment. The psalmist takes this opportunity

to exhort his readers not to harden their hearts as that generation did, an exhortation that the writer of Hebrews picks up and applies to his Christian audience, encouraging them to hold fast to Christ: “For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion’ ” (Heb. 3:14–15).

Theological Soundings

HOLINESS. To be “holy” means to be set apart, and although the word “holy” does not occur in these chapters, these stories show again and again that Israel was set apart for God. While addressing Pharaoh, God repeatedly refers to Israel as “my people” who are to be released (Ex. 7:16; 8:1, 20, 21, 22, 23; 9:1, 13, 17; 10:3), while Egypt is “your people” who will suffer the judgment of the **p 33** plagues (8:3, 4, 9, 11, 21, 23; 9:14, 15). Further, as the plagues go on, Israel is increasingly set apart from the Egyptians. By the third plague the magicians are no longer able to replicate Moses and Aaron’s signs (8:18; 9:11), and beginning with the fourth plague the land of Goshen is set apart and protected from the devastating effects of the plagues (8:22; 9:26). Widening our scope, we can see that Israel’s salvation stems out of God’s own holiness (3:5) and will result in their being established as God’s “holy nation” (19:6).

ELECTION. The doctrine of election states that God sovereignly chooses whom he will save and whom he will not. As Paul notes, this doctrine is evident in God’s choosing Isaac over Ishmael (Rom. 9:6–7) and Jacob over Esau (vv. 10–12). However, Paul’s argument for election reaches its climax by recalling God’s hardening and rejection of Pharaoh: “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills” (Rom. 9:17–18; see Ex. 9:16). Pharaoh therefore serves as an example of one whom God has not elected unto salvation.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Exodus 7:8–11:10 for your own life today. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

p 34 3. Theological Soundings

4. Exodus 7:8–11:10

As You Finish This Unit ...

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Exodus. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on some key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.