

Sermon 4, A Judgment that Delivered God's People, Exodus 7-12

Proposition: The Ten Plagues teach us to know God as He really is.

- I. Plague Lessons, Ex. 7-11
 - A. They teach us that He is Yahweh, Ex. 7:17
 - B. They teach us that He is in the midst of the land, Ex. 8:22
 - C. They teach us that there is none like Him in all the world, Ex. 9:14
 - D. They teach us that He makes a distinction between His people and the rest, Ex. 11:7
- II. Learning Plague Lessons
 - A. A hard heart (i.e., a bad attitude) never learns, 14:8
 - B. God protects by the blood of the Lamb, 12:13, 27

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we continue looking this morning at how to handle judgment. Remember, we defined judgment as any consequence imposed for sin by a just and loving God. In the case of believers, we can call it discipline. In the case of unbelievers, we can call it punishment. In both cases, one of the main functions of judgment is to reveal God. Before our passage this morning opens, Pharaoh bragged “I do not know Yahweh; neither will I let Israel go” (Ex. 5:2). Well, starting in chapter 7 of Exodus, God begins to reveal Himself to Pharaoh. “You don’t know me? Well then, let me introduce myself.” Jehovah leaves His divine calling card in Egypt — and what a calling card it is. We’ll talk briefly about each of the ten plagues, but for now, what I hope to show this morning is that the ten plagues, and judgment in general, teaches us to know God as He really is.

I. Plague Lessons, Ex. 7-11

Let’s just remind ourselves of the plagues. They were water into blood, frogs, lice, flies, livestock disease, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of the firstborn. Even one of them by itself would have been a severe blow to Egypt and its gods. But together, they nearly ruined it.

Why all the carnage? Why did God send ten such plagues onto the land of Egypt? The answer is right in the text. At four different points during the plague saga, God tells us why He’s doing it.

A. They teach us that He is Yahweh, Ex. 7:17

The first and most basic that He was trying to get across was this one: “Thus says the LORD, ‘By this you shall know that I am the LORD:’ behold, I will strike the water that is in the Nile with the staff that is in my hand, and it shall be turned to blood.” The first plague is Yahweh’s announcement that He is Yahweh. Now, this is a theologically loaded statement. It sounds like a tautology. But it’s not. Why not? Because already in this book, God has proclaimed His name to

Moses. His name is Yahweh, “I am who I am.” He is the one who is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

So if you learn that He is Yahweh, what do you learn? Most fundamentally, you learn that you aren’t Yahweh. That is, you learn that He is God and you are not and that it’s going to go His way, not yours. Pharaoh did not know what Yahweh was. But Yahweh showed him who He was by turning the river into blood.

Secondly, though, if you learn that He is Yahweh you learn not just that He is God, but that He is personal and that He interacts as a person. He has a name. He has an identity. He has a character. He is not just a force.

Let me further that point a bit more. I hate to use this example, but if there is one person whose name, reputation, and character we all know that person is Donald J. Trump. Mr. Trump has been president of the USA for just over three years now, and to some of us it feels like a lifetime. But at risk of trivializing or blaspheming, I want to draw a parallel here. We can easily imagine our president saying that he is adopting a particular policy targeted at certain people or nations, and then expressing his reason for this policy “Thus says Trump: Then they will know that I am Trump!”

What does it mean to learn that he is Trump? It means becoming acquainted with all that that name signifies. And that is exactly what Yahweh was going to show to Pharaoh by means of these plagues.

In our case, today, how do we learn about the character of God from the plagues? God was trying to convince Pharaoh to let His people go and worship Him, and to that end He deployed all ten plagues. They were instruments of persuasion to make Pharaoh see that he had a vested interest in doing what God wanted. And the very first step in that process of learning to fear God is to learn His name.

Now, again, how do we learn God’s name from the plague that’s currently visiting our land and our world? Brothers and sisters, as we saw last week, every plague tells us to repent. Every plague tells us disaster is coming, that we will perish forever unless we make our peace with God now. The Covid pandemic is signaling that truth to us. We stand to lose a lot of people to this thing. We have already lost a lot of jobs and income to this thing. The wrong lesson here is that God is vindictive, absent, out to get us, or trying to get us to do some particular action — pass a law, increase funding for Israel, ban homosexuality, etc. This plague is more general than that. Like the Egyptian plagues, it is intended to teach us God’s name. What does it reveal about His character? In a nutshell, it is this: God cares more about our long-term gain than our short-term pain.

Many people stuck in epidemics and other judgments conclude that God doesn’t care about their pain. Brothers and sisters, that is more or less correct. You’re right: He doesn’t care about your pain! At least, not compared to your long-term good. What’s better for you is repentance and reconciliation with Him. Of course, you can say, I was already living in repentance. I was already reconciled to God. I had a better Christian walk than anyone I know!

My friends, that is precisely the problem. If you really believed your walk was better than that of anyone else, you were kidding yourself. You were walking in pride rather than walking with God. Judgment and the pain it brings is designed to draw you out of yourself and your self-sufficiency and get you to rely on God. It was designed to make Pharaoh stop thinking that he could stand up to God Almighty. It is designed to let you know that you can't stand without Him. You can't stand at all. Judgment which (for the Christian) is discipline is designed to bring about long-term gain through short-term pain. That's the meaning of discipline. It is the training which enables you to do what's right.

Did God care that Pharaoh was miserable, and that the poor Egyptians were far more miserable? Yes, of course He did. But He cared far more that they learn to fear Him than that they be comfortable for the next twelve hours or twelve years here on earth. In other words, God cares about you — but in a way that is often going to make you say “He doesn't care at all!” His priorities look different from yours. Only when you have adjusted your priorities to mirror His will you know the secret of contentment.

So God is teaching you that He is Yahweh and you are not. That means that He is teaching you to exchange your priorities for His. He cares more about making you holy than about making you happy. If you aren't feeling happy, He may very well be judging you, with the goal of making you as holy as you can be. He offered Pharaoh that opportunity through the first plague. He said, “Pharaoh, I will tell you who I am.” Pharaoh, as we will see, preferred not to listen.

B. They teach us that He is in the midst of the land, Ex. 8:22

Well, the plagues not only teach us that God is Yahweh — that is, tell us His name; they also tell us His location. Specifically, during the second cycle of three plagues, the LORD showed that He knew where the Egyptians were and where His own people were. And in order to know that, the reasoning goes, He needs to be there on the scene. This is not a remote weapon. It is not a missile fired from far away. It is a surgical strike, as surgical as a surgeon with a scalpel standing there and sticking the knife into you exactly where it needs to be stuck.

In other words, judgments reveal God's location to us. They show us that He is right where we are. What does that teach us? In a plague like this Covid thing, where no distinction is drawn between God's people and the rest of the world, how can we be sure that God is here? The answer is that He is always present. As Thomas Aquinas says, an angel is in a place by exercising power in that place. In the same way, when we see a display of God's power all around us, we can know that He is here. He is doing this, and He is fully present while He does it.

Now, what of the reality that Covid is a perfectly natural event? Viruses arise all the time. Governing officials make decisions all the time about health and safety. There is nothing supernatural about that. So why should we think there is something supernatural in the Covid-19 plague? For the same reason that Pharaoh should have known there was something supernatural in the plagues Moses brought down upon him.

For instance, many scholars claim that heavy rains in red-soiled Ethiopia can bring lots of red silt down the Nile, making the water look like blood. Frogs, flies, and lice are a reality of life all the time, and sometimes they get worse. Livestock diseases are prevalent today just like they were then, except then there were no antibiotics. But even today, they sometimes get really bad and wipe out vast quantities of livestock. Witness the African swine flu, which killed close to one quarter of all the world's pigs last year. And as for the hail and locusts, these things happen. Even the darkness was probably just a dust storm blowing in from the Sahara. Yeah, not fun, but not exactly "divine wrath" either. As for the death of the firstborn, well, it too can be rationalized. There are all kinds of possible explanations, none of them necessarily involving the wrath of God or the angel of death.

Right? Wrong, brothers and sisters. Of course the plagues were ten natural events. Perhaps almost everything in these events was perfectly natural, with the only providential intervention lying in the timing of events that would have happened anyway. But the natural and the supernatural or divine are not enemies, and certainly not mutually exclusive. They coexist and interpenetrate each other. Pharaoh could have pulled the rationalist card and said, "Moses, this happens all the time. I'm not about to let Israel go." And in a judgment like Covid, you and I can pull the rationalist card too. "God's judgment has nothing to do with it. These events just happen from time to time." Some of our Christian brothers getting really specific and naming particular people and groups as the targets of this judgment only exacerbate this tendency among the unbelievers to say "God has nothing to do with this, so shut up for bleep's sake."

So let me just say these things: The plagues of Egypt were, all ten of them, natural events. They were all the kind of thing that had happened before and will happen again. At the same time, the Bible tells us that God sent them. In particular, for instance, He made it so the firstborn died and the younger children didn't. He made it so that there were no flies and no darkness in the land of Goshen. He made it so that these natural events supernaturally revealed His name and His presence.

Get out of your mind the idea that if something is natural it's not divine! God works in nature, because it is His. He owns the hailstorms and the viruses and everything else in all creation. They all answer to Him. And so to say that this virus is natural and that God sent it as a judgment are not incompatible assertions any more than "My parents gave me life" and "God gave me life" are incompatible; in fact, all four statements are perfectly true.

God is here. He is in the midst of the land. He is bringing judgment on us, reminding us that He reigns and that His name is Yahweh and that we need to fear Him.

C. They teach us that there is none like Him in all the world, Ex. 9:14

Plagues further teach us the incomparability of God. There is none like Him in all the world. What does He mean by this? That He is absolutely unique. He can do what no one else can.

But how do we see that in the Egyptian plagues? We see it first of all in the power and viciousness of the plagues. To say that something is done by nature is to admit that we cannot control it. We cannot force nature to do our bidding. Despite the alleged Soviet research

program, we can't control the weather. We can't make darkness last for days. We can't cause all the firstborn to die — at least, not without sending someone to kill them all in their beds. God can. And in fact, He did.

This novel coronavirus is unquestionably something beyond our ability to control. We can take steps to mitigate it, at a very high price. But brothers and sisters, I would venture to suggest that the hallmark of a judgment is that it's something you can't manage. It is beyond your ability to cope with. That means that it is a message from the Almighty telling you that you need to repent and trust in Him because the things of this world are beyond you. And, as always, He is exactly right. He controls the coronavirus and you don't. There is no one like Him who can control viruses, darkness, and plagues of all descriptions.

**D. They teach us that He makes a distinction between His people and the rest,
Ex. 11:7**

The final purpose statement we see comes at the end of the plague time. God wants the Egyptians to understand that He makes a distinction between them and His people. Now, that was particular to this judgement. The ten plagues were for Egypt, and Israel was spared. The coronavirus is for the whole world, and God's people are suffering just as much as the pagans. So does this not apply? It does, but in a different sense. Judgments for us are not a sign of God's wrath, but of His fatherly discipline. For non-believers, events like this are a sign that God is not just going to make their life easy and nice. They might put it like this: Covid means the universe is out to get me. Nature is trying to screw me. The world doesn't care. In other words, they take these bad events differently than we do. We have confidence and joy in them because we know Yahweh's name and know that He is using this stuff to teach us about Himself. But unbelievers don't know that — or better, don't want to know that. They would rather just see viruses and plagues as bad luck that we do our best to control and get past. The only lesson to learn is that we should get better pandemic preparedness at the CDC.

In our response, in what we know about our Lord and how it sustains us during this time, we are learning that God makes a distinction between His people and the rest — not always in what they suffer, but in what they know about why they suffer.

II. Learning Plague Lessons

So these are four important lessons from a plague, any plague. But there are two more lessons that we need to learn from these ten plagues.

A. A hard heart (i.e., a bad attitude) never learns, 14:8

The first one is that Pharaoh died in his hard-heartedness. A hard heart never learns. In our culture, we call a hard heart a bad attitude. Pharaoh had no interest in absorbing the lessons that God was teaching him. So he didn't. He refused. Yes, God hardened Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Both are true. And both are catastrophic. If you get a bad attitude about judgment, you will die. If you harden yourself and get angry at God over the loss and devastation caused by this Covid plague, you've missed it. You haven't learned the lesson you were

supposed to learn. And, like Pharaoh, you will saddle up and ride out against God one last time, and it'll be the death of you.

B. God protects by the blood of the Lamb, 12:13, 27

But the other lesson from this plague is that in the midst of death, God gives life. In the death of the firstborn, He saves His people, passing over their houses. Brothers and sisters, through the death of His firstborn, God saved His people once and for all. Do you believe that? Are you ready to stake your life on it? If so, then trust God in the plague. Learn His name as He chastens you in order that you might share His holiness. He gave His Son for you. Do you think that a little virus is a sign that He no longer loves you? Of course not. Plague means that you need to turn to Him, learn His name, learn His greatness, learn His power. There is no one like Him — and He is with us, most prominently at the Passover Meal 2.0 that we're now going to eat. So trust Him, and when judgment is over, He will still be your God and you will still be His child. Amen.