

## **Book of Exodus: Who Is the LORD?**

Caleb Nelson | Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church | Spring 2021

### **Sermon 23, Introduction to the Ten Plagues, Exodus 7-11, select.**

**Thus says the LORD: "By this you shall know that I am the LORD. Behold, I will strike the waters which are in the river with the rod that is in my hand, and they shall be turned to blood. (Exo 7:17 NKJ)**

**And in that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, in which My people dwell, that no swarms of flies shall be there, in order that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the land. (Exo 8:22 NKJ)**

**for at this time I will send all My plagues to your very heart, and on your servants and on your people, that you may know that there is none like Me in all the earth.**

**15 "Now if I had stretched out My hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, then you would have been cut off from the earth.**

**16 "But indeed for this purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.**

**(Exo 9:14-16 NKJ)**

**So Moses said to him, "As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will spread out my hands to the LORD; the thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, that you may know that the earth is the LORD'S. (Exo 9:29 NKJ)**

**But against none of the children of Israel shall a dog move its tongue, against man or beast, that you may know that the LORD does make a difference between the Egyptians and Israel.' (Exo 11:7 NKJ)**

#### **Metallic skirt**

**Proposition:** The plagues are the great school of the power of God. They teach us His identity, His location, His uniqueness, His ownership, and His discrimination — and they teach the world His name.

- I. The Nature of the Ten Strikes
  - A. Strikes (not "Plagues")
  - B. Supernatural Nuisances; Destructions; Slaughter
- II. The Lessons of the Ten Strikes
  - A. God's Identity: He Is Yahweh, 7:17
  - B. God's Location: He Is in the Midst of the Land, 8:22
  - C. God's Uniqueness, 9:14
  - D. God's Ownership of the Earth, 9:29

- E. God's Discrimination between Egypt and His People, 11:7
- III. The Evangelistic Thrust of the Ten Strikes, 9:15-16
  - A. To Make God's Enemy an Example of God's Power, 9:16a
  - B. To Declare God's Name in All the Earth, 9:16b

## **Introduction**

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we begin this evening to look together at what are popularly known in English as the "Ten Plagues." Some of you recall the discussions last year around the coronavirus pandemic, and specifically whether it was warranted to call it a "plague." Epidemiologists said "No". Well, as it turns out, Bible scholars also say "No" to the use of the word "plague" for these ten blows with which God struck Egypt. In Hebrew, they are not really called "plagues," which in English carries the sense of a deadly sickness or infection. Rather, they are more frequently described as "blows" or "smitings" with which God struck Egypt. But why? Why did God smite Egypt with all those plagues? The answer, brothers and sisters, was first of all to teach Pharaoh a lesson — and then, by extension, to teach that lesson to the Egyptians and to the rest of the world. God wanted the king of Egypt to know His identity, His location, His uniqueness, His ownership of the earth, and His discrimination between Egypt and His own people — and God wanted this to be clear not just to Pharaoh, not just to Egypt, not just to Israel, but to the whole world. The plague account clarifies who God is, where He is, and how powerful He is on behalf of His people.

### **I. The Nature of the Ten Strikes**

So let's talk for a moment about these ten disasters that befell Egypt sometime around 1446 B.C.

#### **A. Strikes (not "Plagues")**

First of all, a better technical description of them is "strikes." The one that best fits the name of "plague" is the sickness of animals, the fifth plague. But the others were blows that the Almighty struck against Egypt.

#### **B. Supernatural Nuisances; Destructions; Slaughter**

The question is, what kind of blows were these? Rationalist reconstructions of the events have red silt washing down the Nile from places upstream; this silt made the water bloody red, caused an algae bloom which sucked the oxygen out of the water and killed all the fish, and so on. Then, the story goes, the dead fish allowed the frogs to multiply, and when the frogs died, the flies multiplied. Then the lice brought sickness to the animals, and then to the humans. These events were accompanied by severe hailstorms, a locust invasion, and a sandstorm that blotted out the sun for days. In other words, according to some critical and scholarly reconstructions, at least plagues 1-9 were nothing more than natural events, perhaps oddly close together.

Obviously this position is not the position of the text, which clearly ascribes all of these events to the hand of God. And yet there is nothing unnatural or "miraculous" in the strong sense of an event that transcends the entire order of nature, except perhaps in the first and last of the plagues. Water will never turn into blood; death will never strike based on birth order. Those two things transcend the order of nature, and they begin and end the sequence of plagues. Yet the

remaining plagues are entirely within the order of nature. Hailstorms, frogs, flies, disease — all of these things are not only completely natural, but even quotidian. They happen all the time.

So putting these two things together — the frankly supernatural bracketing of the strikes with the obviously natural events whose miraculous character is all in the timing — we see how God usually works. As Pascal put it, there is enough light for those who wish to see, and enough darkness for those who do not. God does miracles in Egypt miraculous enough to show that it is really Him, but natural enough to allow Pharaoh's stubbornness free reign.

In the same way, today He does enough supernatural things, particularly in the church, that we continue to believe. We see bad people becoming good people, wicked people turning righteous. But in the rest of life, things pretty much go on according to the order of nature. God may supernaturally provide housing for us, but He does so virtually always through timing, etc. — not by creating a new piece of land that doesn't appear on any city plat and mysteriously building a gorgeous Victorian mansion upon it, then transferring us and our stuff there in the middle of the night. No.

While writing this I literally got a text from an acquaintance asking whether I would like a free electric stove very similar to the one whose top I broke two months ago by smashing it with a bag of frozen beans. That's how God provides, generally speaking. It does not violate the order of nature for my buddy Nick to ask me whether I want a stove. I see God's hand in it, whereas Richard Dawkins would say that there is no sign of God's hand in it.

The Lord struck Egypt, leaving enough evidence that even the magicians had to say "This is the finger of God!" but not so much that Pharaoh would fall on his face and say "I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes."

How? We have no idea. How can the Almighty be restrained enough not to overwhelm us? How can He give the creature genuine freedom to make its heart resolute against Him? We don't know. But we know that it happens every single day, in our own hearts and our neighbors'.

That, my friends, is at least one of the lessons of the ten strikes: That God uses judgments both natural and supernatural to show us that we need to submit to Him — and yet that we are perfectly capable of hardening our hearts against the most compelling and breathtaking displays of His power!

## **II. The Lessons of the Ten Strikes**

Well, to speak further about the lessons that these strikes teach us, we should look directly at the text. Five times God speaks with a purpose clause, indicating why He is sending a particular strike or set of strikes. Here's the thing: You can learn these lessons by watching Egypt suffer — or you can learn them the hard way, for yourself, by suffering some personalized version of these strikes in your own life. Most of us will need some combination of both.

### **A. God's Identity: He Is Yahweh, 7:17**

The first lesson is that He is Yahweh! Exodus is the book of the knowledge of God, and near the beginning God solemnly informs Moses that His name is Yahweh. As we have seen, that comes up repeatedly. "This is what Yahweh says/does/thinks." He last emphasized His identity as Yahweh in ch. 6, where He told us that because He is Yahweh He will keep His promises to the

patriarchs and deliver their descendants from Egypt and bring them into the land He's promised to give them.

Here, the notion of learning God's name is not so much about the promises to the patriarchs as it is a response to Pharaoh's announcement that he does not know Yahweh, back in 5:2. You don't know Yahweh? Well then, Yahweh will show you who He is. He's going to give you a little tour de force, Pharaoh. Notice, too, that Pharaoh has no name, while God's name is mentioned left and right.

Who is Yahweh? He is a God with power. He has the power to supernaturally transform water into blood. Typically, blood can only be made by the complex machinery of a cell, creating new red and white cells, plus the watery component of the blood. But this God is able to create blood from water with no intermediate step. He is also clearly a God who is accustomed to having things His own way. He insists that Pharaoh let the people go; He isn't asking. That's what each of the strikes emphasizes.

So God reveals His name, and in revealing His name He also reveals His identity to Pharaoh King of Egypt.

#### **B. God's Location: He Is in the Midst of the Land, 8:22**

Further, He shows that He is in the midst of the land. He is not an absentee God. He is not unaware of where His people are and what's happening to them. He is a God who is truly omniscient and omnipresent. Pharaoh presumably believed in gods with limitations, gods who controlled one or two aspects of reality and were present in only one place at a time. But Yahweh wanted to show him what a genuinely great God really looked like, and where such a God was to be found.

#### **C. God's Uniqueness, 9:14**

God also emphasizes to Pharaoh His uniqueness. If Pharaoh walked away from the plagues thinking "Well, time to add another deity to the pantheon," he had totally missed the point. Yahweh God is totally unique; there is none like Him in all the earth!

Brothers and sisters, have you learned this lesson? Or are you still worshipping the old idols of autonomy, pleasure, power, wealth, and all the rest of them? Are your idols like Jehovah, the living God? Of course they're not, any more than Pharaoh's idols were like Jehovah, the living God. There is none like Him in all the earth — except, as the Bible goes on to record, His only begotten Son, who is exactly like Him in every respect. God is unique, and uniquely worthy of worship.

#### **D. God's Ownership of the Earth, 9:29**

Plus, the earth is His. Pharaoh thought that the land was his. Since Joseph had cleverly reduced the Egyptians to slavery by getting them all to trade their land for a government handout, there was no private land in Egypt. Only the priestly caste still held title to their own land.

But regardless of what Pharaoh thought, and what land deeds were recorded in his courthouses, God's ten strikes made it abundantly clear that the land belonged to Yahweh, not to Egypt's king. In the same way, God's tough providences in your life and mine make it abundantly clear that our land, and our goods, chattels, effects, and families belong not to us but

to Jehovah. God can take your child's life. He can take your house. He can take your bank account. Why? Because they all belong to Him, not you!

#### **E. God's Discrimination between Egypt and His People, 11:7**

Finally, the ten strikes taught the lesson of God's discrimination between Egypt and His people. Yahweh does make a difference between the Egyptians and Israel. That difference is ultimately the difference between life and death, between freedom and slavery, between Heaven and Hell.

God discriminates on the basis of religious creed. He does not discriminate on the basis of origin, color, personal grooming, or anything else other than whether people fear Him. Israel feared Him and hid under the blood of the paschal lamb. Egypt by and large did not fear Him, and their firstborn were struck down.

Do you know the God who plagued Egypt? Do you understand that He is Yahweh, in your land, and that it is ultimately not your land at all, but His?

#### **III. The Evangelistic Thrust of the Ten Strikes, 9:15-16**

Well, Paul picks up one of the most fascinating passages in this part of Exodus. As we read at the end of every plague that Pharaoh's heart was resolute, harder and harder each time, we have to wonder why. Why did God give Pharaoh the active energy to make his heart so resolved against obedience to God? Well, God specifically addresses that question.

First of all, the Almighty notes that He could have crushed Pharaoh like a bug if He so chose. The mighty king of Egypt could have been cut off from the earth in a millisecond by the overwhelming power of God. But God didn't do that.

#### **A. To Make God's Enemy an Example of God's Power, 9:16a**

The first reason He wanted to do that was to show His power.

What? We think of power as overwhelming might and force. If He had exercised the power to wipe Egypt off the map, surely that would have been a greater demonstration of God's power than condescending to battle with Pharaoh for perhaps months on end! Right? Apparently not to God's way of thinking. God wanted to show His power in Pharaoh. That means in Pharaoh's attitude, actions, thoughts, and plans. God was, in some important sense, in charge of both sides.

How does that explain the problem of evil? It doesn't. No explanation for the problem of evil has been found. Somehow God's power is seen better in a world where evil Pharaohs crush His people than in a world where no evil Pharaohs are allowed. And thus, we should look around for signs of God's power — even where evil is most rampant, even where it is doing its worst to all that we love and hold dear.

God made Pharaoh an example of His power. The contest between God and Pharaoh was not an even match. So the Almighty restrained Himself, rolling up His sleeve just a single turn. He didn't bare His mighty arm to the elbow; He uncovered His wrist and with that stopped Pharaoh in his tracks.

A game between an NFL team and your local high school football team would not be pleasant to watch. Yet the Detroit Lions are much more evenly matched with the Thunder Basin Bolts than Yahweh was with Pharaoh. So Yahweh, in order to show His power, showed His

power to control His power, His power to moderate His power, His power to make Himself only the bare minimum stronger than Pharaoh.

Who is this God? How He condescends to us and our “small dignities,” as C.S. Lewis called them! He raised up this stubborn king of Egypt in order to display His power.

**B. To Declare God’s Name in All the Earth, 9:16b**

And so His name has been declared in all the earth. Even now, far from Egypt, nearly four thousand years later, we are still talking about Yahweh and what He did to Pharaoh. People who have never seen a pyramid know of God’s power to vanquish Egypt. People who have never had their passport stamped in Cairo or sailed down the Suez Canal know the name of Yahweh and how He delivered His people from Egypt.

God wanted His name known. So He took on Pharaoh to deliver His people, taking them from slavery to worship via the knowledge of God.

Know this God. Worship this God. And fear His strikes. Amen.