

LESSON 19 THE PLAGUES IN EGYPT

READING: Exodus 5 to 9:1-12; Psalm 78:43-52

AIM: To show God's almighty power in saving His chosen people from Egyptian idolatry.

1. BACKGROUND

For a long period Israel had been slaves of the Egyptians. It was God's purpose to make of them "a people for His name". But most of them were probably more familiar with the gods of Egypt. It was necessary that God should make Himself known to them if they were to obey Him (as in Isa. 43:7).

The God of Israel was unknown to the Egyptians, who were an idolatrous people (Exod. 5:2). They were, perhaps, the most powerful people on earth at the time, and yet the mighty hand of God, revealed through His servant Moses, was to humiliate them. Pharaoh was the supreme ruler in Egypt.

This lesson concerns a long struggle between God and Pharaoh. In this struggle the Israelites were further humbled and the might and power of the Egyptians crushed. Through the plagues God made His power known with the result:

- (1) That the God of Israel appeared all-powerful over the gods of Egypt.
- (2) That the Israelites were redeemed to be a people unto God (Exod... 6:8).

2. MOSES AND AARON BEFORE PHARAOH – Exodus 5

Moses appeared before Pharaoh with the message God had given him, but this was angrily rejected by Pharaoh, who in consequence increased but this was angrily rejected by Pharaoh, who in consequence increased the difficulties of his slaves. The Israelites appealed to Moses, who in turn sought God's instructions in prayer (Exod. 5:15-23). Again Moses appeared before Pharaoh, this time showing the signs that God had given him – but these signs were imitated by the Egyptian sorcerers. The supremacy of God was shown however, by Aaron's serpent devouring those of the Egyptians. Moses and Aaron were once more dismissed from the presence of Pharaoh (Exod. 7:8-13).

The intercession of Moses, had to this point only increased the affliction of Israel (Exod. 5:15-19). Now at the direction of God the plagues commenced.

After the sixth plague it is recorded that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. From this some have imagined that God exerted His influence to prevent Pharaoh repenting even if he wanted to. But such was not the case for Pharaoh hardened his own heart at first. He was that obstinate type of man who once the immediate trouble was removed, refused to give way. The manner in which God "hardened his heart" is shown in Exod. 9:34-35 and 1 Sam. 6:6. It was by removing the plagues. Once these were out of the way, Pharaoh refused to humble himself and submit to the God of Moses.

3. THE PLAGUES – Exod. 7 – 10

(1) Water into Blood (Exod. 7:20-25). Moses smote with his rod and the River Nile was changed into blood for seven days. The Egyptians were proud of the River Nile, and worshipped it as a god. The people relied upon it for their crops, for Egypt receives very little rain (Zech. 14:18). To turn this beautiful river into blood and to kill all the fish in it was a blow against their god and their commerce. Instead of rejoicing in its waters, they were forced to loathe them (Exod. 7:18). The Egyptians had to dig wells throughout the land for water to drink. However, in their own clever manner the Egyptian magicians imitated this miracle so that Pharaoh was not yet convinced of the superiority of the God of Israel.

- (2) **Frogs** (Exod. 8:6-11): God caused frogs to come out of the rivers and streams and cover the land. The frogs were sacred emblems of a goddess in Egypt but now their dead bodies were gathered together in heaps and they were abhorred by the Egyptians. This was another blow against the religious beliefs of the land. Pharaoh promised that he would let the people go to sacrifice unto the Lord if Moses would entreat the Lord to cause the frogs to go back to the rivers. The plague was stayed at the appointed time that **“thou mayest know that there is none like unto the Lord our God”** (Exod. 8:10). The Egyptian magicians again appeared to duplicate the miracle (on a small scale) with their trickery and again Pharaoh hardened his heart.
- (3) **Lice** (Exod. 8:16-19): The land was smitten with lice. The religious observances would be brought to a standstill, as priests contaminated with lice were not allowed to officiate. (This also applied to priests suffering from “boils” in the sixth plague). The magicians could not cope with this miracle. They admitted **“this is the finger of God”**. They were unable to compete with Moses and Aaron in any plagues other than the first two. Despite this Pharaoh refused to give in.
- (4) **Flies** (Exod. 8:20-32): A division was placed between Egypt and Israel (Exod. 8:21-23) and the land of Goshen was separated from the plagues which fell on Egypt. Swarms of “flies” invaded the land. These were not ordinary flies as we know them, but were most likely the Egyptian beetle which they worshipped. They are said to “destroy the land” and “devour” or bit the Egyptians (Exod. 8:24; Psa. 78:45). The Egyptian beetle is a loathsome black beetle, which devours everything that comes in its way, even clothe, books and plants, and also inflicts severe bites.

Pharaoh told Moses to “go and worship your God in the land”. But such worship would have meant sacrifice, and Israel would have sacrificed animals revered as gods by the Egyptians in their presence. Moses refused to do this, and demanded that they depart from Egypt to worship God in the wilderness. Pharaoh was forced to agree. But again, when the plague was halted, he refused to let the people go.

So far the Egyptians had been tormented without loss of life of man or beast. **God had exalted Himself above the gods of Egypt by showing that the forces of nature were subject to His command.**

- (5) **Murrain on animals** (Exod. 9:1-7): Murrain is a contagious disease among cattle. Usually this ends in death. The animals of Egypt (worshipped by the Egyptians as gods) were affected by this terrible disease, until they were destroyed. Those in the land of Goshen however, were not affected. It is interesting to note that Pharaoh “sent” to see if any of the Israelites’ cattle were affected (Exod. 9:7) but he still refused to let them go.
- (6) **Burning boils on man and beast (Exod. 9:8-12)**: Ashes from the furnaces where the Hebrews slaved to make bricks were sprinkled towards heaven in the sight of Pharaoh. They became like small dust, and falling towards the earth, became as boils breaking forth with blains upon man and beast throughout Egypt (Exod. 9:8) including the magicians. These boils or blisters caused painful, burning ulcers which burst with tormenting pain. So the whole of Egypt was given over to misery. But still Pharaoh refused to let the people go.
- (7) **A Storm of Hail** (Exod. 9:13-35): Before the seventh plague, Pharaoh received the usual warnings and was told on this occasion that “tomorrow” a grievous hail would be sent on the land. The fearful storm of hail – so unusual in Egypt – destroyed crops and killed men and beasts in the fields. The land of Goshen only escaped and those Egyptians who now feared the Lord, heeded the warning and escaped the calamity by locking up their cattle. Pharaoh admitted his crime and acknowledged God as righteous, pleading for mercy. The plague was stilled – but still the king refused to let the people go.

The fifth, sixth and seventh plagues affected man, beast and standing crops. The success of the industry and agriculture of the Egyptians depended on the God of Israel. As Deut 32:39 says **“He kills and He makes alive”**.

- (8) **Locusts** (Exod. 10:1-20): The usual warning was given by Moses to Pharaoh. And now the servants of Pharaoh interceded, pleading with the king to let the people go. Pharaoh seemed inclined to let Israel go, so long as they left their children in Egypt as hostages. When Moses said that all of Israel together with their cattle would leave, Pharaoh refused to give way. He said: "The Lord be with you, if ever I let you and your little ones go: Look you have some evil purpose in mind"(Exod. 10:10 RSV). This verse gives the key to the obstinate attitude of Pharaoh. He feared to let the people go because he thought that they would join up with enemies of Egypt in Canaan and return to overthrow him. Egypt had already suffered by invaders (the Shepherd kings) and Pharaoh feared they might do so again. He also feared the plagues. He was thus in a terrible plight. The locusts were sent over the land, devouring all the herbage that had escaped the hail. When they were at last driven away, Egypt was completely eaten out though the land of Goshen was untouched. After this calamity, the Israelites were still not allowed to depart.
- (9) **Complete darkness** (Exod. 10:21-29): Now the sun, which the Egyptians worshipped as one of its foremost gods, was blotted out. The God of Israel thus showed His complete control of these things that the people, in their ignorance, worshipped. The darkness was such as could be felt – yet in the land of Goshen, there was light. Again Pharaoh called for Moses and pleaded for help. He bargained with him as to who should leave the land, but Moses refused to bargain. All must leave, men, women, children and possessions. Pharaoh refused to agree and Moses left the court of Egypt to receive further instructions of God.

The eighth and ninth plagues showed God's control over the natural elements as well as His control over the efforts of the Egyptians. The wind and the locusts came from beyond the borders of Egypt, proving that the God of Israel was a God both at hand and afar off. Now the greatest of all plagues was about to fall upon the unhappy Egyptians; a plague so terrible and widespread as to force Pharaoh to obey God and to constitute a memorial to future generations. Death was to strike through all Egypt, a death from which Israel would be exempt if they placed their trust in God through the Passover Lamb He would provide.

4. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The judgement on Egypt was almost complete. Israel was about to leave Egypt and become an independent nation. They were to leave behind the false worship and evil ways of Egypt and become a people separated to God, observing His Law. In the same way the servants of God in all ages have been called to separate themselves from the world and observe a different way of life – holy unto the Lord.

The day is fast approaching when the judgements of God will be poured out on the nations of the world and those who humble themselves under the mighty hand of God (I Pet. 5:6) will be taken out to be with Christ in His Kingdom (Dan. 12:1)

REFERENCE LIBRARY

"The Visible Hand of God", chapters 11 to 13

"The Ways of Providence", chapter 10

"Elpis Israel", part 2, chapter 4.

"Moses My Servant", chapter 2

QUESTIONS

1. What were the ten plagues?
2. How did the plagues show God's power over the earth?
3. Briefly describe the contest between Moses and Pharaoh.
4. What was Moses told to demand of Pharaoh and why?
5. How did the plagues show that God was pre-eminent over the gods of Egypt?
6. What portents does the lesson of the plagues have for a world that does not know the Lord?