

The Last Plague

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[0 : 0 0] Now, if you were here last Sunday, then probably the God versus evil part one is still fresh in your mind. But in case you missed it, let me give you a quick recap.

Sandra's already given you a recap of the actual narrative. But last week I said, as I've written in the outline, that the plague's narrative was actually a showcase of the epic battle between God and evil.

Evil is personified in the ruler of Egypt, Pharaoh. He had held Israel captive, refused to let them go, even just for a three-day journey into the wilderness.

In response, God raises up his prophet Moses to act on his behalf. And so he wages battle with Pharaoh over ten rounds of plagues until Pharaoh relents and lets God's people go.

And that's where we're at, at chapter 11, just when Pharaoh relents. Last week we also saw that the plagues had a pattern to them.

[1 : 1 0] The repetition of the plagues show us a God who is very much in control. He's the Lord of history and the Lord of creation. This week, however, we focus on the progression in the plagues.

I said last week that there was pattern and there was progression. So while there's a common pattern to each plague, there's also progression or intensification as the plagues progress.

There's intensification with the nature of the plagues, in the differences in the effects of the plagues, and finally also in the response of Pharaoh. And so the question we want to ask today is, what do we learn from the progression of the plagues?

Well, the first thing we learn is that with God in control, evil's defeat is certain. As I say in point one, evil will be finally and certainly defeated.

Last week I said God's power trumps evil. But initially, evil seems to be going toe-to-toe with God.

[2 : 1 9] But we soon find out that as the plagues progress, evil can't keep up. So, in the first two plagues, when God turns the Nile to blood in the first and then sends the frogs to invade the homes and the palace, the magicians appear to keep up, to mimic these same plagues.

But if you look at chapter 8 and verse 18, by the time of the third plague, we read, down at the bottom of the page there, that when the magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, they could not.

It becomes clear very quickly that evil is no match for God. The magicians even acknowledge that this is the finger of God, verse 19.

And by the time of the sixth plague, that of the boils, not only can they not mimic God, they are said to have been succumbed to the festering boils themselves.

So, chapter 9 and verse 11, we read, The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and all the Egyptians. Not only that, with the intensification, we see God dealing more and more decisively with evil.

[3 : 38] The plagues, as it were, is getting closer and closer to the heart of the problem, that of Pharaoh's rebellion and their allegiance to false gods. So, initially, we see the plague serving as somewhat of a warning sign.

The nail turns to blood. Yep, that's sort of not nice. But, in one sense, it's sort of largely symbolic. They still need to dig for water on the banks.

But, you know, it's a nuisance. The frogs, as well. Yep, not nice. But also a nuisance because they can be disposed of. As you see, neither cause lasting damage.

Neither those are the plague of the gnats and the flies. Because each time, God is able to reverse the effects of them. But as the plagues progress, God's judgment begins to bite.

The death of livestock, hail, locusts, they all have lasting and major consequences. What we see is permanent destruction of their food sources.

[4 : 40] In fact, even within this, we see the destruction getting worse and worse. So, with the hail, for example, God forewarns them. And they're actually allowed to bring their livestock in or their workers to find shelter.

And so, were not destroyed. In chapter 9 and verse 31, it says, Since the flax and the barley were destroyed, since the barley had hid it and the flax were in bloom. However, the wheat and the spelt were not destroyed because they ripened later.

So, with the hail, some of the crop was not destroyed. But then, if you turn over to chapter 10, verse 12, just on the next column, The Lord said to Moses, Stretch out your hand over Egypt, so that locusts swarm over the land and devour everything growing in the fields.

Everything left by the hail. So, what's happening is that whatever was left by the hail is now destroyed by the locusts. Of course, the real clincher is with the impact on human beings.

Initially, the food for humans were destroyed, along with them having festering boils on their skin. But the last plague culminates with the loss of human life itself.

[5 : 58] And not just any life, but that of their precious firstborn. And so, this intensification gets all the way to Pharaoh's firstborn.

Because that's where the source of evil lay, in Pharaoh's hard heart. If you turn back to chapter 4, verse 23, God had already warned him of this.

So, in chapter 4, verse 23, he said, God killing of the firstborn is in direct response to Pharaoh's hard heartedness of not letting his people go.

Finally, one more point. God also attacks Egypt's false gods. So, the sun, which is worshipped by the Egyptians, is the object of the ninth plague.

God easily blocks it out in the plague of darkness. Pharaoh himself is revered as semi-divine by the Egyptians. And so, what better way to expose his mortality, that is actually not a divine king, than to strike at his heir and firstborn?

[7 : 23] Pharaoh will be exposed as being no more powerful than even the female slave working at the hand mill. His son will suffer the same fate as her son.

And so, what we see with the last plague as well is a sense of finality and totality of God's judgment. So, in the reading today, chapter 11, verse 5, what happens is that at midnight, that is at the very depth of darkness, God will go through the land of Egypt, and every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the female slave, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well.

It's almost as if God is saying, no stone will be left untouched. No object of judgment will be spared. So, what we have here, friends, is a picture of God's judgment on all evil.

And just like Exodus, all evil in our world, today, will be similarly dealt with. To use my illustration from last week, God will put all things in His home, that is this world, back in its rightful place.

And the illegal squatters of evil will be turfed out. Of course, we already know that God has dealt decisively with evil by sending Jesus to die on the cross.

[8 : 57] But we have this added assurance that all the evil and suffering that we face in this life will be dealt with justly by God as well. Last week, our encouragement was to know that God will bring good even out of evil.

But this week, we have the assurance that no evil will go unpunished. One way or another, God will deal justly with evil. No one, no one will get away with it.

That's why Jesus could encourage His disciples, as they face persecution, not to be afraid. So, He says in Matthew 10, verse 26, Likewise, Paul tells us in Romans 12, verse 17, that this is what we have to do instead.

Do not repay evil, anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath. For it is written, It is mine to avenge. I will repay, says the Lord.

[10 : 15] Now, it's true that God has wired in all of us a strong sense of justice, a sense of fairness, what is right and what is wrong.

And sometimes, when we experience injustice, or we see it, our natural response is to retaliate, to act. Now, if we are in a position of authority, to make a difference, then yes, we ought to do what we can.

Moreover, if we are the ones in the wrong, and we've abused our power, then yes, we need to repent. But when we are victims or powerless, then God's encouragement is that we don't need to despair.

Because God has promised that He will repay. We don't need to fight every battle of injustice. We don't, despite what people think.

Because God has taken ownership of injustice. Vengeance is mine, He says. He says, leave room for me. Leave room.

[11 : 23] Don't act and then act in an evil way. Leave room for my wrath. And so, sometimes, you know, we need to trust God in this. We need to leave it in His hands.

We need to believe that He will handle injustice and deal with it better than we can. The second thing, then, as we go to, we learn from the progression of the plagues, is that because God is patient, even evildoers are given a chance to repent.

So, yes, Pharaoh is a personification of evil, but as a person, he's afforded the opportunity to repent. Time and time again, when the effects of the plagues get too much for him, and he pleads, God listens to his plea.

So, it happens as early as the second plague, chapter 8 and verse 8. In fact, well, let me read it. Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, Pray to the Lord to take the frogs away from me and my people, and I will let your people go to offer sacrifices.

And Moses even gives Pharaoh the honor of setting the time for him to pray. But when the Lord listens, Pharaoh, when he sees that he's got relief, instead of repenting and letting the people go, he hardens his heart.

[12 : 41] And this pattern happens again and again, and intensifies actually, because later on, Pharaoh even goes so much as to say that he's actually sinned before the Lord.

Each time, the Lord shows mercy, but Pharaoh, given another chance, only reneges on his word. Now, I have to admit that even as a loving and gracious father, it's a self-assessment, go with me on that, I'm not nearly as generous as God is.

You can ask my children. They often get second chances, maybe even thirds, but fourth and fifth and sixth chances, never.

Maybe I should, but rarely do I. Now, I know that as we look at this passage, and last week as well, I had people come up to me afterwards. We've grappled with, haven't we?

The fact that we've said that God is sovereign, He's in control, and ultimately, He's the one that hardens or softens Pharaoh's heart, and yet, at the same time, Pharaoh is responsible.

[13 : 49] And so, as we see again today, where Pharaoh sits, he's given a real chance to repent, notwithstanding God's sovereignty. We can never say that actually God stopped him from letting the people go.

Pharaoh had that choice. He was responsible for what he did. Now, I don't intend to rehearse again how this is all so. We looked at it last week, but in our second reading from the New Testament today, Paul tackles this very question again.

And I just want to read it to you, because I think it helps explain a bit more. Romans 9, verse 14, it says, What then shall we say? Is God unjust?

Not at all. For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

And here, Paul uses Pharaoh as the very example. For Scripture says to Pharaoh, I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

[14 : 58] Therefore, God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. And then we might say, Then why does God still blame us?

For who is able to resist his will? But God replies, Who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? So what is formed?

Say to the one who formed it, Why did you make me like this? Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?

And so I guess my point is this, that while it's okay to be asking questions and to be trying to work things out and trying to reconcile things in our minds regarding God's sovereignty and human responsibility, Paul's point at the end of the day is this, we need to realize who we really are.

God, mere clay in the hands of the potter. Us, creatures. God, creator.

[16 : 03] And at some point, even as God is gracious to reveal some of these things to us, we need to let God be God. He can do as he sees fit.

He doesn't have to bend to our understanding of fairness, you know, which an understanding which frankly he gave us that understanding to start with. And so instead of trying to judge God in the way he governs, we need to actually look at our own lives.

Because we'll have to answer for what we do and how we respond to God. We have to ask ourselves, have we always done what is right?

Before we ask of God, has he done what is right? How do we measure up in terms of doing good? And you know, sometimes I look at my own lives and I say, you know, don't even talk about measuring up to God's standards.

Because I can't even measure up to my own standards. Because I expect people to treat me a certain way, don't I? And how often sometimes do I not do the same of others?

[17 : 12] We don't want people to judge us when we make an honest mistake. But how often do we do the same to others without knowing their intentions? If you ask my daughters again, they'll tell you how good I am at setting rules in the house.

Last one to use the toilet paper needs to replace the roll. Folded clothes on the living room in the living room needs to be packed away. Immediately. Dirty cutlery in the sink needs to be washed and put away instead of left in there.

And yet, I'm often reminded how I fail to follow my own rules. And it's not just house rules, is it? It's generally most things.

I can't keep my own laws and expectations perfectly, much less God's law. And so for those of us who have not yet come before God in submission, well, the thing is, one day we all have to face God, come to Him face to face.

And at that time, I think we'll have to ask, will we have any right to accuse God of judging us unfairly? Would He be right to punish us?

[18 : 27] Of course He would. And so we may want to ask God to justify Himself how He's treated Pharaoh. but I suspect the moment we turn up before God, without even Him having to say a word, His attention, we would know that His attention has turned to us.

And I don't know about you, but without Jesus, I will not have any legs to stand on. But thankfully, we do have Jesus. And so we do have a leg to stand on.

We have actually Jesus to stand with, not on, but with. Because the last thing I want to say today, and that's the third point, is that even though we don't deserve it, God will save His people from judgment.

He will do it because He's gracious. And He will do it because He's faithful to His promises. And again, we see that in the progression of the plagues. So at first, both Egypt and Israel fall under the same effect of the plagues.

the Nile turning red, the frogs, the gnats, there are no indication of any difference between Egypt and Israel. But when we get to verse 22 of chapter 8, God begins to make a distinction.

[19 : 42] So look there with me. He says, verse 22, But on that day, I will deal differently with the land of Goshen, where my people live. No swarms of flies will be there, so that you will know that I, the Lord, am in this land.

I will make a distinction between my people and your people. This sign will occur tomorrow. And this is repeated again with the livestock, the hail, the darkness, and of course, when we come to the death of the firstborn.

And so we read, back in chapter 11 and verse 6 of our reading tonight, There will be loud wailing through Egypt at the death of your firstborn, worse than there has ever been or ever will be again.

But among the Israelites, not a dog will bark at any person or animal. Then you will know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.

Yes, God will make a distinction between Egypt and Israel. He will make a distinction between those He judges and those He will save. And again, you might say, Hey God, that's not fair.

[20 : 54] Maybe Pharaoh deserves punishment, but everyone in Egypt, surely there's got to be some innocent people among them. And again, we can go through all that and there might be some valid objections on the surface.

But when again we look at Romans, Paul says that God will have mercy on whom He will have mercy. And if we look further in verse 22 of Romans 9, God adds this other point as well.

He says this, What if God, although choosing to show His wrath and make His power known, bore with great patience the objects of His wrath prepared for the destruction?

What if He did this to make the riches of His glory known to the objects of His mercy, whom He prepared in advance for glory?

Even us, whom He also called not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles? What if God did this for the people that He was saving?

[22 : 01] And God actually says so as much in Exodus. So, one last flick, chapter 10, verse 1. He actually says this, Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his officials, so that I may perform these signs of mine among them, that is the Egyptians, that you, that is the Israelites, may tell your children and your grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, so that you may know that I am the Lord.

And so, even as evil is being defeated, God is doing that so that God's people may come to know His mercy and compassion for them.

They marvel at His judgment, they marvel at the fact that we could have been there if not for God's mercy, and they say, Thank you, Lord. You are the Lord.

And that's true with life, isn't it, General? We appreciate how important it is to drive safely when we've met with an accident that's almost killed us.

A brush with death makes us value life more, don't we? And so, that's the way it is as well. As we see how devastating God's judgment is, we are so thankful for His grace to us.

[23 : 27] And Paul now says that His objects of mercy are not just the Jews, but the Gentiles, those He is called. As Paul says in Galatians chapter 3 and verse 28, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one, in Christ Jesus.

And next week we'll see in the Passover, as Andrew comes to preach to us, just how Israel is saved from the death of their firstborn. They need the cover of blood to be saved in the same way that we do as well.

We need the cover of Christ's blood to save us, for He is the Lamb of God. Well, two weeks ago, if you remember, Pharaoh asked arrogantly, who is the Lord that I should obey Him?

And over the last two weeks, we've seen God answer that question. With the progress of each play, God declares that He is the Lord. And He shows that He's the Lord, not only with His power, but with His grace and compassion as well, with His patience and justice.

Lord, He does not leave, He does not leave, He makes this explicit with words. For when Moses is up on Mount Sinai with Him, He says that, I am the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin.

[25 : 01] And then He adds, yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished. So what God says with words in chapter 34, He does so with signs and wonders in the plagues.

And so one day, all of us will stand before the Lord as well. And I hope we wouldn't be saying, who is the Lord that we should have obeyed Him?

How is it that He's not revealed Himself to us? Because God has revealed Himself in Jesus to us. He came and was accompanied with signs and wonders as well.

But the amazing thing was that when Jesus came, He died on the cross for us. That is, God's judgment was not poured out on us, but on Him. Not on evil doers and sinners like us, but on His holy and perfect Son, His substitute for us.

And so another day of judgment is coming as well. And whether we are objects of wrath or mercy will depend on what we choose to do now and how we react.

[26 : 12] And so if you're here today and you're not quite sure whether you want to commit yourself to Christ, you want to submit to His word, then I hope what you've heard tonight in God's passage in Exodus, but also in Romans 9, will serve as a bit of a warning for you, an encouragement even, to come, to submit to Him, to obey Him, to do the exact opposite of what Pharaoh did, that when he heard God's command, he did not, he did rebel, but you don't rebel, but instead that you come before Him and obey Him and then marvel at the riches of His glory and rejoice at the salvation of His people.

Let's pray. Father, we cannot understand what you have done. We have done to deserve your mercy and grace and love. In fact, we know that there is nothing we have done, and yet, you have given us your Son to receive the judgment that was meant for us, so that we may be objects of your mercy and compassion.

Thank you, God. Help us, by your Spirit, to respond with obedience and submission to you and to your Savior, Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.