

The Book of Exodus, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: The First Plagues on Egypt

Exodus 7:14–9:7

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

What is doctrinally at stake in these chapters is nothing less than the answer to the question, who is God? Egypt had answered that question with a crowded sky of deities, and Pharaoh had answered it with a mirror. The plagues are God's sustained, public, undeniable reply. Each one strikes at a specific object of Egyptian worship, the Nile, the frog goddess, the fertility of the soil, the sacred cattle, and demonstrates that the LORD alone is the living God. Help your class see that these are not random disasters but targeted acts of judgment and self-revelation, summed up in the recurring purpose statement, that you may know that I am the LORD. The goal of the plagues is not merely escape from Egypt but the knowledge of God.

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart must be handled with care, because it is one of the most abused passages in Scripture. The text deliberately holds two things together. Pharaoh hardened his own heart, and God hardened Pharaoh's heart. The first plagues stress Pharaoh's own stubbornness; only as the account deepens does the language of God hardening come fully forward. This is the picture of a God who, after long patience and clear revelation, gives a man over to the hardness he has insisted on choosing, the same dynamic Paul describes in Romans 1. Resist every temptation to read Calvinistic unconditional election or irresistible decree into this. The gospel call is real and universal; Ezekiel 18 and the whole tenor of Scripture insist that people are genuinely able to respond. Pharaoh is not a victim of God; he is a man who refused light until he could no longer see it.

Finally, this lesson aims squarely at the heart of your students. Every person in the room has a Nile, something trusted in God's place, and every person knows the pull toward a heart that says, not yet, Lord. The repeated cycle of Pharaoh, relief, retreat, relief, retreat, is a diagnostic tool for our own souls. Use it to move people past being merely sorry for consequences into genuine repentance, and to help them see the tender side of God who draws a protecting line around His own even in the storm. The destination is not information about ancient Egypt but transformation into people whose hearts grow softer, not harder, under the steady press of God's word.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read Exodus 7:14–18. God tells Moses to confront Pharaoh at the water and turn the Nile to blood. Why does God aim His first blow at the river itself, and what does this reveal about how He deals with the things people worship in place of Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God's instruction in 7:14–18 is striking in its precision. He sends Moses to meet Pharaoh in the morning as the king goes out to the water, the very setting of Egyptian royal and religious life. The Nile was not background scenery; it was the artery of Egyptian civilization and an object of worship, associated with the god Hapi and bound up with the life-giving inundation that made the desert bloom. By striking the river first, God announces that He intends to confront Egypt at the center of its trust, not the margins.

Notice the stated purpose in verse 17, By this you shall know that I am the LORD. The plague is revelatory before it is punitive. God is not merely inconveniencing Egypt; He is teaching, with unmistakable clarity, that the source Egypt deifies is a creature He can command. The water that gave life now carries death, the fish die, the river stinks, and Egypt is forced to dig for water it once took for granted.

There is a pattern here worth naming for the class. God often allows the very thing we trust most to fail us, not out of cruelty, but because a trusted idol is a far more dangerous master than an obvious one. As long as the Nile flowed, Egypt would never look up. The mercy hidden inside the judgment is that God is willing to disturb what we worship in order to reveal who alone deserves worship.

This sets the tone for everything that follows. The God of Israel does not negotiate with idols or share a shelf with them. He topples them. For your students, the application is direct: the things we are most confident in are often the things God must address first.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The plagues are real, historical acts of God's power, not myth or mere natural coincidence; the text presents them as direct divine judgments.
- God targets objects of false worship deliberately; the Nile, the frogs, the soil, and the cattle each carried religious significance in Egypt.
- The repeated purpose, that you may know that I am the LORD, shows the plagues are acts of self-revelation, not only punishment.
- Trusting any created thing in God's place is idolatry, and God in mercy may let that thing fail us so we will turn to Him.
- God confronts us at the center of our confidence, not only at its edges.

Discussion Prompts

- What did the Nile mean to an ordinary Egyptian, and why would striking it first be so devastating to their whole worldview?
- Where do you see God in Scripture allowing a trusted thing to fail in order to draw someone back to Himself?

- If God were to address the one thing you trust most before anything else, what would He touch in your life?

Question 2

Student Question:

The Nile was the source Egypt trusted for life, and God made it undrinkable. What is one thing you have leaned on for security that God has had to make bitter before you would look to Him instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the searchlight inward. Egypt trusted the Nile the way we trust our own sources of security, and God let it turn bitter. The aim is not to shame anyone but to help each person honestly name what they have leaned on in God's place: a bank account, a relationship, a reputation, a career, even good health.

Scripture is full of God making the bitter thing the doorway to dependence. Israel itself, three days into the wilderness, will reach the waters of Marah and find them bitter, and there God will teach them to trust Him as healer. The pattern is consistent. What we cling to must sometimes be loosened before our hands are free to take hold of God.

Encourage honesty here. Many believers have a testimony of a job loss, a health scare, or a broken plan that became the very moment they finally surrendered control. The bitterness was real, but so was the mercy underneath it.

Be careful as a teacher not to suggest that every hardship is a direct chastening for a specific idol; that is not the claim. The claim is narrower and gentler: God can and does use the failure of lesser things to redirect our trust to Himself, and we do well to ask what He may be teaching.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Idols are not only statues; they are anything we trust for the security only God can give.
- God's discipline is purposeful and often merciful, aimed at our dependence on Him.
- Not every hardship is punishment for a particular sin, but every hardship can be used to draw us closer to God.
- Genuine surrender usually involves the loosening of something we were gripping tightly.

Discussion Prompts

- What is one thing you have trusted for security that has, at some point, failed you?
- How did that experience change the way you relate to God?
- Is there something you are gripping tightly right now that God may be asking you to hold more loosely?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read Exodus 7:22 and 8:7. Pharaoh's magicians could imitate some of the signs. What is the difference between counterfeit power that can copy a wonder and the living God who commands creation, and how do we tell the two apart today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The detail that Pharaoh's magicians could replicate the first signs is theologically important. In 7:22 they turn water to blood, and in 8:7 they bring up frogs. The text does not dismiss this as trickery alone; it presents a real and unsettling counterfeit. There is power at work in Egypt that is not the power of God, and it can mimic enough to keep Pharaoh's heart hard.

But notice what the counterfeit can do and what it cannot. The magicians can add to the plague; they cannot remove it. They can produce more frogs; they cannot send them away. Counterfeit power can imitate God's works just far enough to confuse, but it can never undo what God has done or deliver anyone. Only Moses, speaking for the LORD, can make the frogs depart.

This is a sober reminder that the existence of a wonder is not proof of God. Scripture warns repeatedly that signs can be produced by powers opposed to God, and that we are to test the spirits. The mark of the true God is not merely impressive display but holiness, truth, and the power to save and to undo the curse.

For the class, the discernment question is timeless. We live in a world full of impressive religious and spiritual performances. The test is not, can it dazzle, but does it lead to the holy God of Scripture, does it bow to His word, does it produce repentance and deliverance, or only spectacle?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Counterfeit spiritual power is real and can imitate God's works to a point.
- The decisive difference is that false power can copy a wonder but cannot deliver, undo the curse, or save.
- A miracle by itself is not proof of God; Scripture commands us to test what we see against God's revealed truth.
- True power is bound to holiness and submission to God's word, not mere spectacle.
- Counterfeits often function to harden hearts rather than soften them.

Discussion Prompts

- What could the magicians do, and what could they never do, and why does that distinction matter?

- How does Scripture teach us to test spiritual claims rather than trust them simply because they are impressive?
- Where in our culture do you see counterfeit spirituality that dazzles but cannot deliver?

Question 4

Student Question:

When have you been tempted to settle for an imitation of God's power, a religious feeling or an impressive performance, instead of the real and humbling presence of the living God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question asks whether we have settled for the imitation. It is easy to mistake an emotional high, a moving performance, or a sense of religious excitement for the actual presence and work of God. The magicians could produce frogs; the question is whether we are content with frogs.

The living God is humbling, not merely thrilling. His presence in Scripture brings people to their knees, to confession, to changed lives. A spirituality that only entertains or comforts but never convicts or transforms may be a sophisticated counterfeit.

Help your students see that the test of authentic encounter with God is fruit over time, not goosebumps in the moment. Repentance, growing holiness, deeper love, and obedience are the marks of the real thing.

This is a gentle but searching question. Many sincere believers have leaned on the experience of worship more than on the God of worship. The invitation is to want God Himself, not merely the feelings He sometimes gives.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- We can substitute religious experience or performance for the living God Himself.
- Authentic encounter with God humbles and transforms, not merely excites.
- Lasting fruit, not momentary feeling, is the test of the real presence of God.
- It is possible to love the gifts of worship more than the God of worship.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between feeling moved and being changed?
- Have you ever mistaken a religious feeling for the real work of God? How did you discover the difference?
- What fruit in your life would show that you have truly met with God and not just enjoyed an experience?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read Exodus 8:8–15. Pharaoh begs Moses to remove the frogs, promises to let Israel go, then hardens his heart once the relief comes. What does this teach us about the difference between being sorry for consequences and truly repenting?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The frog plague gives us the clearest window yet into Pharaoh's heart. In 8:8 he summons Moses, pleads for relief, and promises to let the people go. He even lets Moses set the timing, saying tomorrow, as if to test whether the LORD really controls the swarm. But the moment the frogs die and there is respite, verse 15 says, he hardened his heart and would not listen.

This is the anatomy of false repentance. Pharaoh is sorry, but he is sorry for the frogs, not for his sin. He wants the consequence gone, not his rebellion changed. The Bible distinguishes sharply between worldly sorrow, which regrets the pain, and godly sorrow, which leads to repentance and a transformed life.

The phrase when there was respite is the hinge of the whole story. Relief, for the unrepentant heart, is not a mercy that softens but an opening that hardens. Pharaoh treats God's kindness as an opportunity to return to his old course. Paul warns about exactly this, that the kindness of God meant to lead us to repentance can instead be despised.

For the class, this is one of the most practically convicting passages in Exodus. We have all bargained with God in the foxhole and forgotten Him in the sunshine. The lesson is that true repentance is measured not by the intensity of our crisis prayers but by the direction of our lives once the crisis lifts.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Being sorry for consequences is not the same as repenting of sin.
- Worldly sorrow regrets the pain; godly sorrow turns from the rebellion.
- God's relief and kindness can either soften a heart or harden it, depending on the response.
- Crisis promises mean little if they evaporate when the pressure lifts.
- Pharaoh's bargaining shows the danger of treating God as a means to comfort rather than as Lord.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between Pharaoh wanting the frogs gone and Pharaoh wanting his heart changed?
- Why does the moment of relief so often expose the truth about our repentance?
- How can we tell whether our sorrow over sin is godly sorrow or merely regret over consequences?

Question 6

Student Question:

Think of a time you cried out to God in a crisis and made promises, then drifted back to old ways once the pressure lifted. What does that pattern reveal about your heart, and what would real repentance have looked like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites honest reflection on a pattern most of us know too well. In the crisis we pray fervently, we make commitments, we promise change. Then the diagnosis comes back clear, the job comes through, the relationship is restored, and slowly the commitments fade. We become, in miniature, Pharaoh in the moment of respite.

The point is not to manufacture guilt but to expose a real spiritual danger. A faith that only flares up under pressure and dies down in comfort is not yet a settled, obedient trust. God is after disciples, not foxhole bargainers.

Encourage students to think about what genuine repentance would have looked like in their case: not just relief and a quick thank-you, but a durable turn, a kept promise, a changed habit, a new pattern of dependence that outlasts the emergency.

Lead gently here. The aim is to awaken a desire for steadiness, for a faith that holds in the sunshine as firmly as it cried out in the storm, and to remind students that God's patience with our inconsistency is itself a call to deeper repentance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Crisis faith that fades in comfort reveals a heart not yet fully surrendered.
- God seeks durable obedience, not bargaining under pressure.
- Real repentance shows itself in kept commitments and changed patterns after the crisis passes.
- God's patience with our inconsistency is a kindness meant to lead us to deeper repentance, not a license to keep drifting.

Discussion Prompts

- Recall a crisis prayer you prayed. What did you promise God, and did the promise hold?
- What would genuine, lasting repentance have looked like in that situation?
- How can you build a faith that stays steady in comfort as well as in crisis?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read Exodus 8:16–19. The magicians fail at the plague of gnats and tell Pharaoh, This is the finger of God. Why does God let even His enemies recognize His hand, and why does Pharaoh still refuse to listen?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The plague of gnats marks a turning point. For the first time, the magicians cannot reproduce the sign. They try, they fail, and in 8:19 they say to Pharaoh, This is the finger of God. Even the enemies of the LORD are forced to confess His unmistakable hand at work. The counterfeit has reached its limit.

It is remarkable that God allows even his opponents to recognize Him. This is consistent with the whole revelation of Scripture: the truth about God is not hidden from honest eyes. The magicians see clearly what is happening. The problem is not lack of evidence but lack of will. Pharaoh, the text says, would not listen, just as the LORD had said.

This exposes a crucial truth about the human heart. Knowledge is not the same as surrender. A person can have overwhelming evidence of God and still refuse Him. Pharaoh is not unconvinced; he is unwilling. The hardening is not the failure of the evidence but the failure of the will.

For the class, this dismantles the common excuse that people would believe if only they had enough proof. The magicians had proof and confessed it. Pharaoh had proof and resisted it. The deepest barrier between people and God is rarely intellectual; it is a heart that does not want to bend.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's hand can be recognized even by His enemies; the truth about Him is not hidden from honest observation.
- Knowing the truth and submitting to it are two different things.
- Pharaoh's refusal shows that the real barrier to God is usually the will, not the evidence.
- The confession this is the finger of God foreshadows the limits of all power opposed to the LORD.
- Continued resistance in the face of clear revelation is what deepens the hardening of a heart.

Discussion Prompts

- Why could the magicians admit the finger of God and Pharaoh still refuse to obey?
- What does this teach us about the relationship between evidence and faith?
- Where in your life have you known the truth clearly and still resisted acting on it?

Question 8

Student Question:

Have you ever clearly recognized that something was the finger of God in your life and still resisted obeying Him? What held you back, and what did that resistance cost you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks each student to find the Pharaoh in themselves. Most believers can name a moment when they knew, beyond reasonable doubt, that God was at work and calling them to a particular obedience, and yet they hesitated or refused.

The resistance usually has a name: fear of what obedience will cost, love of a comfort we are unwilling to surrender, pride that does not want to admit we were wrong, or simple unbelief that God will be good if we let go. Naming the specific resistance is the first step toward overcoming it.

It is also worth counting the cost of that resistance. Pharaoh's refusal did not stop God; it only multiplied the plagues and deepened his ruin. Our resistance rarely changes God's will; it usually just prolongs our own pain and delays our blessing.

Guide the conversation toward hope. Unlike Pharaoh, we are not yet at the end of the story. A heart that recognizes the finger of God can still choose to bend today. The very fact that we feel the pull is evidence that the door is still open.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- We can recognize God's clear leading and still resist it.
- Resistance usually has an identifiable root: fear, comfort, pride, or unbelief.
- Resisting God's will tends to prolong our own suffering rather than change His purpose.
- As long as we can feel the pull of God, the door to obedience is still open.

Discussion Prompts

- Describe a time you sensed it was the finger of God and still held back.
- What was the real root of your resistance: fear, pride, comfort, or unbelief?
- What did the delay cost you, and what would obedience cost you now?

Question 9**Student Question:**

Read Exodus 8:22-23 and 9:4-7, where God sets a division between Egypt and Israel so that no swarm touches Goshen and no Israelite livestock dies. At the same time the text says both that Pharaoh hardened his own heart and that God hardened it. How do we hold these truths together without concluding that God forced an unwilling man to sin or that some people are simply doomed and unable to respond to Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest question of the lesson, and it raises two great themes at once: God's protecting distinction between His people and Egypt, and the mystery of the hardened heart. Take it slowly. First, the distinction. In 8:22–23 God declares that He will set apart the land of Goshen so that no swarm of flies will be there, and in 9:4–7 He spares the livestock of Israel while Egypt's cattle die. God says He does this so that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth. This is covenant care made visible. Even in the storm of judgment, God knows His own and shields them.

Second, the hardening. The text deliberately uses both forms of speech. Pharaoh hardened his own heart (8:15, 8:32), and the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart (the language that comes increasingly to the fore). Scripture does not let us collapse these into one. The proper reading holds them together: after long patience and overwhelming revelation, God gave Pharaoh over to the hardness Pharaoh himself had chosen. This is the same dynamic Paul describes in Romans 1, where God hands people over to what they have insisted on. God's hardening is judicial, a confirming of a settled rebellion, not the manufacturing of sin in an unwilling man.

Be explicit with the class about what this does not mean. It does not mean God forced an innocent or willing servant into rebellion. Pharaoh was a tyrant who enslaved a nation and ordered the murder of infants long before any hardening language appears. It also does not teach Calvinistic unconditional election or an irresistible decree that dooms some and saves others apart from their choices. Ezekiel 18:20 insists the soul who sins is the one who bears guilt, and the consistent witness of Scripture is that the gospel call is real and universal and that people are genuinely able to respond.

Romans 9:17–18 quotes this very account to teach that God is sovereign in how He deals with hardened hearts, raising Pharaoh up to display His power and name throughout the earth. But Paul's point is the freedom and justice of God, not the abolition of human responsibility, which he affirms in the same letter. The mystery remains a mystery, but it is not a contradiction. A sovereign God justly confirmed a rebel in the rebellion he loved, while never ceasing to be just, and meanwhile He tenderly guarded the people who were His.

Land the lesson on both feet. The God of these chapters is fearsome toward entrenched, willful evil and faithful toward His own. The warning of Hebrews 3 is the application: Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. Pharaoh's tragedy is a sober invitation to soften ours while there is still time.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God draws a real distinction between His people and the world, shielding His own even in judgment, so that all may know He is the LORD.

- Scripture says both that Pharaoh hardened his own heart and that God hardened it; faithful teaching holds both together.
- God's hardening is judicial, giving a willful rebel over to the hardness he chose, as in Romans 1, not coercing a willing servant into sin.
- This passage does not teach unconditional election or an irresistible decree; Ezekiel 18:20 affirms personal accountability.
- The gospel call is real and universal, and people are genuinely able to respond; Pharaoh resisted clear revelation and was confirmed in his choice.
- Romans 9 uses Pharaoh to teach God's sovereignty and justice, not the removal of human responsibility.
- Hebrews 3:12-15 turns the account into a warning for us: do not harden your hearts today.

Discussion Prompts

- How does God's protection of Goshen reveal His character even in the middle of judgment?
- How can we hold together the verses that say Pharaoh hardened his heart and that God hardened it without making God the author of sin?
- Why is it important to say that Pharaoh was genuinely able to respond, and how does Ezekiel 18:20 guard against a fatalistic reading?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back across these first plagues, where is God showing you that He is Lord over an area you have tried to keep for yourself, and what is one concrete step of surrender He is forming in you through this passage?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers the whole passage and presses it toward formation. Across these first plagues, the LORD has been answering one question over and over: who is Lord here? He is Lord over the river, over the land, over the creatures, over the false gods, and over the hardest human heart. The personal version of that question is unavoidable: where am I still trying to be lord of something God means to rule?

Invite students to identify one specific area, not a vague resolution. Perhaps it is a fear they have been managing instead of surrendering, a relationship they have been controlling, a resource they have been clutching, or a sin they have been excusing because the relief of repentance never came.

Then point them to Christ, who is the true and greater deliverer that Moses only foreshadows. The same God who confronted Egypt's idols now confronts ours, not to crush us but to free us, and He has done it supremely through Jesus, who breaks the grip of everything that enslaves. Surrender is not loss; it is the exchange of a cruel master for a good one.

Close by asking each person to name one concrete step. A heart is softened not by good intentions but by specific obedience. The student who can finish the sentence, this week I will surrender ____ to the Lord, has let the lesson do its work.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The whole passage presses the question of who is truly Lord in our lives.
- Formation requires identifying one specific area of surrender, not a vague resolution.
- Jesus is the greater deliverer who frees us from every enslaving idol.
- Surrender to God is the exchange of a cruel master for a good one.
- A soft heart is cultivated through concrete acts of obedience.

Discussion Prompts

- Across these plagues, where is God showing you that He is Lord over something you have kept for yourself?
- How does Jesus, the greater deliverer, free us from the idols God exposes?
- What is one specific step of surrender you will take this week?