

The Book of Exodus

Lesson 5: The First Plagues on Egypt -- Exodus 7:14-9:7

Picture the most powerful man in the world standing on the bank of the Nile in the cool of the morning. Pharaoh is not just a king to his people; he is a god. The river beneath him is worshiped as the very lifeblood of Egypt, the source of every harvest, every full belly, every breath of national pride. And on this ordinary morning, an old shepherd named Moses walks down to the water's edge, lifts a staff, and the river turns to blood. The thing Egypt trusted most becomes the thing it can no longer drink. That is how God begins. He does not start at the edges of Pharaoh's confidence. He goes straight for the throat of it.

We like to imagine that when God acts, He will act gently, quietly, in ways that never disturb the settled order of our lives. But the God we meet in these chapters is not in the business of leaving idols standing. Plague by plague, He marches through the pantheon of Egypt and topples it. The Nile, the frogs, the dust of the ground, the very cattle in the field, all of it had a god attached to it, and one by one the LORD shows that He alone holds the keys. You and I have our own Niles, the things we trust to keep us safe and fed and significant. And sometimes the most loving thing God can do is let one of them turn to blood in our hands so that we finally look up.

There is a refrain that runs underneath these stories like a drumbeat. Pharaoh hardened his heart. The LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh's heart was hard. Three times over, in different voices, the text keeps returning to a heart that will not bend. It is a haunting thing to watch a man stare at miracle after miracle and choose, again and again, to dig in. We would like to think we could never be that man. But every one of us knows the quiet stubbornness that says, I see what You are doing, Lord, and I am still not ready to obey. These chapters are a mirror, and the question they ask is whether our hearts are growing softer or harder under the steady pressure of God's word.

Yet woven through the judgment is something tender. When the swarms of flies descend, God draws a line at the land of Goshen and says, in effect, not here. My people will be untouched, so that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth. Even as He shakes the gods of Egypt, He is shielding His children. That is the God we are getting to know in Exodus. He is fierce toward every false thing that enslaves us, and gentle toward every soul that belongs to Him. As you study these first plagues, do not only watch Egypt. Watch your own heart, and listen for the voice that still says, let My people go.

Group Discussion: When you look at the things our culture trusts most for security, comfort, and identity, which of them are the modern equivalents of Egypt's gods, and what would it look like for God to expose them as powerless?

Personal Reflection: Where in your own life right now do you sense God pressing on a stubborn place, some area where you have seen His clear will and keep saying not yet?

Read Exodus 7:14–9:7

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Psalm 78:43–51, a poetic retelling of the plagues that frames them as God’s mighty acts of judgment and redemption; Romans 9:17–18, Paul’s use of Pharaoh to teach that God is sovereign yet just in how He deals with hardened hearts; Ezekiel 18:20, the principle that the soul who sins is the one who bears guilt, guarding against the idea that anyone is condemned apart from his own choices; Hebrews 3:12–15, a warning to believers not to harden their hearts as God’s people once did; 1 Corinthians 10:11, that these things were written for our instruction.

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