

God displays his power
Exodus 7-10

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As we continue in our sermon series in the book of Exodus, we come to what is one of the most well-known sections of the book. We have talked about God seeing his people in bondage and promising to set them free. We've watched as he revealed himself to Moses and then sent him back with a message: Let my people go. Last week we saw that Pharaoh wasn't that interested in the idea of letting go of 2,000,000 slaves and giving up their work output, which is somewhat understandable. In modern figures, that would be like giving up 300 billion dollars worth of labor value every year. Pharaoh says no thanks. And to teach you not to ask about freedom any longer, to reinstill the slavery mentality in you, I'm going to make your work harder. You are going to have to make bricks without straw. After Pharaoh tightened his fist and the Israelites were demoralized and discouraged, God spoke again and said, I am the Lord, I promise, I swear, no matter what Pharaoh says or does, I will set you free. So the stage is set for one of the most epic showdowns in all of history: In one corner, Egypt—at that time the most powerful nation in the history of the world, the strongest army the world had ever seen, the brightest minds on the planet, the ingenuity and the strength to give us the pyramids, the first true superpower of the world, with the 80 gods they worshipped, and Pharaoh himself as their deified leader. And in the other corner was the God who promised to set his people free. This showdown takes place in Exodus 7-10. As we look at the key themes of those four chapters today, we are going to see God unleash ten plagues against Egypt, and we are going to see is that through these ten plagues, God reveals his power, his mercy, and his judgment.

First God strikes a plague against the Nile. We read this in 7:20-21 **Moses raised his staff in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was changed into blood. 21 The fish in the Nile died, and the river smelled so bad that the Egyptians could not drink its water. Blood was everywhere in Egypt.** Think about what you know of Egypt. How dry and arid and uninhabitable most of the nation is. Let's take a look at a satellite image of Egypt. Let's begin here in Indianapolis and then lift up and head to Egypt. Look at all that sand. The entire country is dry and lifeless...except what? Except that one narrow little green strip, the land that borders what? The Nile River, and of course the Nile basin. That's where all the life is. **In fact, look at this satellite image of Egypt at night.** All the life, all the vitality, all the economy of the entire nation is centered around that river. The river was the lifeblood of the nation. They worshipped it as a god, the god Hapi. **Here is a picture of their god.** Because of Hapi, they were happy. Because of the Nile, they had life and vitality. God turned their river red. And all the fish in it died, too. So they have no fresh water and dead fish everywhere. Think about both of those realities. Think about how particular we are about our water these days. People come over to my house and I hand them a glass of water and they are like, "Hey bro, is this filtered?" And I'm like yeah, "It's been through water softener, a double osmosis system." And they say: "Not enough!" People these days want you to drill a hole into the side of a volcano and find a virgin spring that has never been exposed to air. That's the world we live in. Can you imagine your main water source being turned to blood?

And the fish died. How many of you have ever been to the Gulf coast when red tide hits? It happens almost every year when algae blooms contaminate the water. The marine life can't sustain it for very long, **and as you can see here**, they wash up on shore. Last year, 4,000,000 lbs. of dead fish were collected by three counties in Florida alone. My family members took that picture. They were down there. It was so disgusting to look at and so hard to breathe, they decided to leave early and come back home. No one wants to be on a beach when that happens. That happened throughout all Egypt!

So an attack on Nile's river god, the water turns to blood, the fish are dead. Why did God do this? He says in 7:17 **"By this you will know that I am the LORD."** This was God saying, I am the God who created the world and who holds it together. Hapi is not in control of the Nile, I am. I am more powerful than the gods you worship. Surrender to me. Bow to me. Open your heart to me. But what did Pharaoh do? **7:22-23 Pharaoh's heart became hard...he turned and went into his palace, and did not take even this to heart.** Pharaoh isn't having any of it. His entire life people have been bowing their knee to him; he's not about to bow his knee to God.

After the plague on the Nile came the plague of the frogs. **Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and say to him, 'This is what the Lord says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. 2 If you refuse to let them go, I will send a plague of frogs on your whole country. 3 The Nile will teem with frogs. They will come up into your palace and your bedroom and onto your bed, into the houses of your officials and on your people, and into your ovens and kneading troughs. 4 The frogs will come up on you and your people and all your officials.'"** Take a look at how invasive this frog situation became. They came into the **palace, the bedroom, on the bed**, into **the houses**, the **ovens**, and the **kneading troughs**, even **on you and your people**. Frogs are everywhere! Again, this is an attack against one of the gods Egypt worshipped the god Heqet. Take a look at **an image** of this god. Can you see the frog-like features? Do you know what I find fascinating about this plague? Whereas with the first plague God takes the water away by turning it to blood, with this plague he multiplies the frogs and puts them everywhere. It's like he's saying: This is the god you worship, have all of it you want. See how wonderful your god really is when he's everywhere. It's kind of like the dad who catches his kid smoking a cigarette and says, "You want to smoke? Okay. Smoke the entire pack. Smoke until you are ill and vomiting!"

Now there are several interesting things to take note of with regard to these two plagues. For example, it says twice in 7:22 and 8:7 The Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts. **7:22 The Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts. 8:7 The Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts.** Now we don't know how they did that, whether it was through illusion or demonic empowerment. But what I find fascinating is that by replicating these miracles, they only made things worse for their people, more blood, more frogs. A real miracle would have been to turn the Nile back to water, to get rid of the frogs. They can't neutralize God, they can only imitate God. And think about it this way: by practicing their dark magic, they only compounded the problem for their people.

Also, take note of what Pharaoh does here. In 8:8 he says, **"Pray to the Lord to take the frogs away from me and my people, and I will let your people go to offer sacrifices to the Lord."** You get the sense that Pharaoh is going to relent, that this is going to be a pretty quick end to the story. But then it says in 8:15 **"But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron."** It looked like Pharaoh had softened his heart. It looked like Pharaoh had surrendered to the Lord, but look, as soon he **saw that there was relief**, he hardened his heart. His repentance was just a ploy. He was trying to manipulate the situation. *He wanted to change his circumstances, not his heart.*

So more plagues came. Next came gnats. In fact it says in 8:17 **"All the dust throughout the land of Egypt became gnats."** This word for gnats could also be translated mosquitoes. Whether they were gnats or mosquitoes, we all know how annoying and frustrating flying insects can be. You're with your friends, enjoying a perfect evening, and then bugs start showing up. You keep hitting yourself and hitting yourself and everyone eventually decides to go in. It's an attack on their comfort and luxury. And take note of this: **8:19 But when the magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, they could not...the**

magicians said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God.” Surely at this point Pharaoh is going to relent, right? Even the most spiritually powerful people in the land are looking at him and saying, “We’ve never seen anything like this; the *real* God is behind this.” What did he do? **“But Pharaoh’s heart was hard, he would not listen” (8:19).** He’s made up his mind. His knee will not bow.

So the plagues keep coming. Next comes flies. And take note of what happens with the fourth plague: 8:22-23 **“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.”** This is God’s way of saying to Pharaoh: Make no mistake about it. This is not just a natural catastrophe. This is not just the nation experiencing misfortune. This is a very specific attack against you and your people. From this point on, only the Egyptians have to deal with the consequences.

After that flies came, Pharaoh wanted to bring them to a quick end. He sat down at the negotiating table. He says in 8:25 **“Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land.”** So basically, do what you want to; worship your God, just do it here in Egypt, where I can keep my eye on you, where I am still in complete control. Moses says no, that won’t work. We have to take a three-day journey into the wilderness. And Pharaoh concedes a bit and says, **“I will let you go to offer sacrifices to the Lord your God in the wilderness, but you must not go very far.”** 8:28. But this wasn’t Moses first rodeo. He had been lied to by Pharaoh before. So he says: **“Only let Pharaoh be sure that he does not act deceitfully again by not letting the people go to offer sacrifices to the Lord”** 8:29. Moses knew the kind of man he was dealing with, so there wasn’t much of a surprise when it says in 8:32 **But this time also Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go.**

Next came a plague on the livestock, and they died. Think about the economic and ecological impact of that. Economically, people have their life savings tied up in their horses, donkeys, camels, cattle, sheep, and goats. And they lost them all. The financial cost would have been devastating for the owners. And think about what it would be like if you went to the store tomorrow and there was no meat. Anywhere. You tried to find a restaurant to eat at and every restaurant was a vegetarian restaurant. No meat anywhere. What if I told you all of a sudden you had to become a vegan overnight?! People would have been irate. And think of the sight. They already had to deal with the dead fish and then dead frogs. Now the dead livestock. We’ve all driven by a dead deer on the side of the road - it’s disgusting, but we only see it for a few seconds. Could you imagine seeing and smelling dead, rotting livestock everywhere you went. It would be atrocious. But 9:7 **Yet his heart was unyielding and he would not let the people go.**

Next came boils all over their bodies. It says **The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and on all the Egyptians.** 9:11. They were feeling unbelievable pain. And now there is a shift in what’s happening inside of Pharaoh. 9:12 says **But the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart.** This is different than before. After each of the first five plagues Pharaoh hardened his own heart. He refused to budge. He refused to give in. He refused to listen, to change his mind, to humble himself, to bow his knee. Now, he and his entire nation are going to have to face the consequences of his pride and stubbornness. He is under the direct judgment of God. And what is that judgment? It is God ratifying the decisions he himself made.

Next comes hail and it destroys the crops, Pharaoh plays the same song, says he was wrong, says he sinned. But it says in 9:34 **When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned again: He and his officials hardened their hearts.** Then came locusts. And they devoured all that was left in Egypt. Locusts are the real deal. **Take a look at this swarm of them that came through Las Vegas just a few months ago.** Can you imagine them everywhere? But Pharaoh would not give in.

He tried to negotiate and let only the men go, without the women and children. But that wasn't what God asked for. God asks in 10:3, **'How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me?'** Clearly there was no end in sight. Next came darkness. I mentioned earlier that the Egyptians had more than 80 gods whom they worshipped. But the father of all the gods, their equivalent of Zeus, the one who controlled the sun and light was named **Amun Ra**. And so for this 9th plague God renders their most powerful god completely impotent and shuts out all light for three days. And Pharaoh tried to negotiate again: Okay, take your women and children, but not your flocks and herds. He just won't give in. He won't humble himself. He won't concede to God's sovereignty. He has to be in control. It has to be his way. And he got to the point where he was so tired of hearing the truth, where he was so tired of being confronted that he finally just said to Moses: **"Get out of my sight! Make sure you do not appear before me again! The day you see my face you will die"** 10:28.

We'll save the final plague for next week. But those are the first nine, and here is what God is doing through them: **Through the plagues, God revealed his power, his mercy, and his judgment.**

Let's talk about each of those. **God revealed his power.** More specifically, he revealed his power against the idols of Egypt. The majority of these plagues are direct assaults against the gods of the Egyptian. As we mentioned earlier, Egypt was an idol factory. More than 80 deities and Pharaoh himself were worshipped. They looked to these so-called gods as the provider of their safety, their security, their well-being. And with the plagues, one by one, each of those false gods, each of those idols were torn down and revealed to be pointless and powerless before the one true God. God flexed his muscles and the idol factory was shut down. And do you know why that is so relevant? Simple. Do you want to know what else is an idol factory? Your heart is. My heart is. We build our lives on around little-g gods and we place our faith and hope in them to bring us security, happiness and self worth. We place our hope and faith in our wealth, or in our looks, or in our intellect, our social ability, our family. But there is no god besides the one true God that can bear the sustained weight of worship and allegiance. If we build our lives on anything else, if we depend upon anything else for our happiness, our identity, our security, our hope, eventually, God's power is going to come against that. What happens when your wealth goes away? When your looks fade? When your family experiences hardship? We build our lives and place our faith and hope in these little g gods. And we need to see that the one, true God is infinitely greater, infinitely stronger, and infinitely more worthy than anything else we could put our trust and hope in.

And that leads to the second purpose of the plagues. God not only reveals his power, he reveals **his mercy**. Though the first three plagues affected everyone, the last seven God was merciful not only to his people, the Israelites, but also to the Egyptians who needed his warnings. (It says in 9:20-21 **Those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the Lord hurried to bring their slaves and their livestock inside.**) Every plague was a chance for the people to realize who God truly is and place their faith in him. Think about it this way, God could have snapped his fingers and wiped Egypt off the face of the earth in an instant. Why didn't he do that? Through these plagues, in his mercy, he gave the people opportunity after opportunity to repent and to trust him. This is what the Puritans centuries ago called **God's severe mercies**. Do you know what I'm talking about? This is when God, in his mercy, either allows or causes hardship to strike your life so that you will finally wake up and come to your senses. Some of you have been there. You've got fired from your job. You went bankrupt. You had a DUI. You've spent the night in jail. You've been served divorce papers. You've lost custody of the kids. Some of the most painful experiences anyone could ever go through, but those experiences can be like having God place smelling salts under your nose, or like having God take a defibrillator to your chest that jolts you back into reality. I can't tell you how many times I have prayed for someone and asked that God would, as quickly as possible and as painlessly as possible, cause someone to hit rock bottom so they finally call out to him for help. It seems intense. It seems severe. But the most merciful thing God can do

for someone is to remove the idols their life has been built on so they will finally place their trust in him. These plagues are not just a display of power, they are an expression of the mercy. Listen to the question Paul asks in Romans 2:4 **“Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?”** When God shows us his kindness and patience—it’s not so we can keep doing our own thing. It’s so that we will finally surrender to him. Some of you are right there in your life right now. There has been so much hardship. You have faced dead end after dead end. Closed door after closed door. You are wondering why. I don’t know for sure, but maybe it is God, in his mercy, helping you to realize the idols you have built your life on, calling you to repent, and finally, finally, place your faith and trust in him.

That leads to the final observation: God reveals his power, his mercy, **and his judgment**. The judgment is against the iron-will of Pharaoh. How many times in the story did he refuse to budge? Refuse to give in? Refuse to bow his knee.

Reneged on his promise five times.
Attempted to negotiate terms with God.
Rejected the counsel of his magicians.
Rejected the counsel of his officials.
Dismissed those who spoke truth to him.

He knew God was speaking to him. He knew what God wanted him to do. And he refused to bow his knee. He refused to soften his heart. He refused to recognize God’s was in control. Ultimately everyone gets to this place in their life where they have to decide for themselves: Who is in control of their life? Is God in control? Or are you? Can I guarantee you of something? When you meet God, he is going to infringe on your autonomy. God is going to call you to do something that you don’t want to do. Something that is costly, something that is challenging, something that causes you to deny yourself. Something that proves you recognize that he is God and you are not. That he is in control and you are not. And in that moment, you have to decide what you are going to do. Are you going to harden your heart and fight against God? Or are you going to soften your heart and surrender to God?

There are not many atheists in the world. People in our culture don’t have any problem believing in God. A recent survey of Americans showed only 3.1% of Americans identify as Atheists. 97% of this country believe in some sort of god. Just like Pharaoh we don’t have a problem believing in God. But what really matters is not whether we believe in him; it’s what we do when God infringes on our autonomy, on our sovereignty, and calls us to obey him. If we refuse to surrender to him, if like Pharaoh we have a hardened heart, do you know what God does? God will do the most terrifying thing possible; he’ll affirm your decision! If we consistently harden our heart, he’ll eventually blow on the cement and help it dry. This is what Jesus called the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, which is the consistent, intentional, ongoing rejection of God’s revealed will. And what did Jesus say about the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit? Those who commit it will not be forgiven. As C.S. Lewis said: **“There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “Thy will be done.”** If like Pharaoh we refuse to budge, we refuse to give him, if we harden our heart, he may just say: ok, have it your way. But can I just tell you—a fight against God is not a fight that you are going to win.

Because Pharaoh refused to listen to God, the judgment of God fell on him, and not just on him, on all those he was responsible for leading. The most prosperous country in the world at the time, filled with an abundance of wealth and natural resources, was stripped of everything.

Can I show you an interesting connection? In Genesis 41 Joseph went to Pharaoh and told him what God wanted him to do. And what did Pharaoh do? He listened to God. It resulted in the entire nation of Egypt being blessed and having super abundance. In Exodus, Moses goes to Pharaoh and told him what God wanted him to do. This Pharaoh rejected God, and it resulted in the nation being stripped bare. The same equation will ultimately be set before every one of us. God speaks to us. God reveals his will to us. And we have to decide what to do? Obey him and be blessed. Or deny him and face destruction.

Can I point out one more thing? This is the Old Testament, but if we are reading this well, we will find Jesus in this passage. If we look closely, we will see him. The judgment of God fell on Egypt. Darkness came over all the land for three days. Because they disobeyed, total darkness. What happened to Jesus? Though he lived a perfect life, he went to the cross, and on the cross, the sky went dark. For three hours there was no sunshine. We disobeyed God, but Jesus took the darkness. We were the ones who sinned and refuse to obey, Jesus took the plague, he took the wrath of God, so that we can be free and forgiven.