

PLAGUES TO PASSOVER -- BIBLICAL EXPLANATION & BACKGROUND

One of the first things that stands out of the Biblical background of the Ten Plagues is that God both foreknew and foretold that His people would be enslaved and mistreated in Egypt for over 400 years, that He would deliver them from slavery, that they would come out “with great possessions”, and that He would punish the nation that enslaved His people. God promised these things in Genesis 15:13 – 14 when He made a covenant with Abraham, and He repeated this promise to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:19–22), and again when Moses set out for Egypt (Exodus 4:21–23) God said that “Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you [Pharaoh], ‘Let my son go, so he may worship me.’ But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.” God had a plan to form Israel into a nation that would see His mighty works to deliver them from the Egyptians; God knew that His people needed to see His faithful, loving, delivering works on their behalf.

In contrast to God’s foreknowledge and loving plan for His people is their perception of the situation as dismal, terrible and hopeless. The people complained to Moses (Exodus 5:20), and Moses complained to God (Exodus 5:22-23), and God again reassured Moses of His loving plan to deliver Israel in spite of the circumstances. He said, “I have remembered my covenant” (Exodus 6: 5) and “I am the LORD...I will bring you out...I will free you...I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God...And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD.” (Exodus 6:6-8) Although Moses reported what God had said to the Israelites, “they did not listen to him because of their discouragement and cruel bondage.” (Exodus 6:9) We also can experience life as if God has forgotten us, and need to be reassured that God does have a good, loving plan for each of us. Therefore it is one of our goals to teach children that God faithfully loves them at all times and in all places.

As we examine each of the plagues on the Egyptians another phrase that stands out is that “God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let them go.” God, in His sovereignty, chose to cause Pharaoh to refuse to let the Israelites leave until after the tenth plague in which Pharaoh’s own firstborn son died. The only answer to this is that God knows the overall plan; He knows and does what is best. Note the progression of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart: Ex. 7:22, the first plague, “Pharaoh’s heart became hard”; Ex. 8:15, the second plague, “he hardened his heart”; Ex. 8:19, the third plague, “Pharaoh’s heart was hard”; Ex. 8:32, the fourth plague, “Pharaoh hardened his heart”; Ex. 9:7, the fifth plague, “his heart was unyielding”; Ex. 9:12, the sixth plague, “the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart”; Ex. 9:34, the seventh plague, “He and his officials hardened their hearts; Ex. 10:20, the eighth plague, Ex. 10:27, the ninth plague, and Ex. 11:10, “the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” It appears that in choosing to harden his heart, the Pharaoh eventually became incapable of making any other choice. We need to be tender and responsive toward God. Encourage and accept children’s responsiveness to God’s Word.

The plagues on the Egyptians were designed to show who was really God. The Egyptians worshipped many gods.

The **first** plague, the Nile river water turning to blood, is against their worship of the Nile as a god.

The **second** plague, the plague of frogs, was against the Egyptians’ worship of the frog as a god.

The **third** plague, lice or gnats, and the **fourth** plague, flies, could not be imitated by the Egyptian magicians as the first two could. None of the succeeding plagues could be imitated either, and starting with the fourth plague the “land of Goshen” where the Israelites lived was protected from the plagues. The Egyptians did have a scarab beetle god; some people think the plague of flies was against this god.

The **fifth** plague, in which the Egyptians’ livestock died, was against the Egyptians’ chief god, the bull.

The **sixth** plague, boils on the Egyptians personally and on their animals, but not on the Israelites, is the first one of which it is said “the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart”.

The **seventh** plague, hail, is preceded by God giving the Egyptians a choice to shelter their animals if they

believe that God will indeed send the plague of hail. Exodus 9:21, “But those who ignored the word of the LORD left their slaves and their livestock in the field.” God still gives us a choice today as to whether to believe and obey His Word, or to ignore it and live with the consequences.

Of the **eighth** plague, locusts, God says in Ex. 10:1 to Moses “Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these miraculous signs of mine among them, that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the LORD.” Pharaoh’s officials actually begged him “let the people go...Do you not yet realize that Egypt is ruined?”(Ex. 10:7) He did not let them go, and they suffered the plague of locusts. It is said that not only can locusts eat every living green thing, but that they also can pile themselves up to five inches deep on the ground, and that when they are mashed they give off an offensive odor. They swarm in large clouds that darken the sky as well. Sometimes God’s Word warns us of some behavior that has terrible consequences; maybe the children in some discussion sessions could think of such a warning and consequences, such as behaviors that involve breaking either the moral or the civil law and the consequences of those behaviors. Also, do we remember and pass down to our children the ways in which God has been real and alive in our own personal lives? God tells us to do this, and it is also worthy of discussion.

The **ninth** plague, darkness, was an attack on the Egyptians’ worship of the sun god, and again, the Israelites in the land of Goshen did not suffer the darkness. Pharaoh almost yielded. “Darkness” is used to describe our state of being without God, hopeless, living in sinful disobedience to God’s will. We often fear the dark; light is necessary for life.

The **tenth** plague, the death of Egypt’s first born males, could only be avoided by carefully following God’s directions. The land of Goshen was not automatically exempt from this plague, and it is forever commemorated by the Feast of Passover which Jesus fulfilled by his death on the cross for our sins as the perfect, sinless “lamb of God” so that we would have “eternal life” (John 3:16). We will include Passover briefly as part of our study of the ten plagues. The “leaven” in the bread, which is so notably avoided at Passover, is a symbol of sin. The Israelites were told to celebrate a “Feast of Unleavened Bread” as well as the Passover, but we will not dwell on that in this rotation. It is also said that their “bread was made in haste” so they did not have time to add yeast and allow the bread to rise. The Egyptians not only urged the Israelites to leave hastily, but they sent them away with valuable gifts of gold, jewelry and clothing, just as God had promised: Exodus 12:35-36, “The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing. The LORD had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians.” When God delivers us from sin and from bondage, He not only gives freedom, He also gives restoration of that which was lost so that we might give further glory to Him. The Israelites later used some of their Egyptian wealth in building the Tabernacle in the desert, a place to worship God.

The restrictions on the Passover celebration are noteworthy (Ex. 12:43-49), although probably too detailed to teach to children with the ten plagues. What is important is that the person eating the Passover had to be a circumcised member of the community of Israel. While we do not want to go into a discussion of circumcision with children, this meant that the person had to be under the Abrahamic covenant, just as we become an “adopted” member of God’s family (come under the New Covenant in Christ) when we believe on Christ for the forgiveness of sins. The person eating Passover could not be an uncircumcised foreigner, a temporary resident or a hired worker. So what is important for our teaching is that Passover symbolized God taking away our sins by Jesus’ death on the cross, and our belief and obedience to God’s way of forgiveness.

God showed Himself LORD to the Egyptians, to Israel, and to the surrounding nations when He delivered Israel from Egypt. He showed that He cared for His people, He kept His promises, that He even knew the end from the beginning and was and is completely trustworthy.

Courtesy of rotation.org, Silverdale UMC

BACKGROUND COMMENTS ON THE STORY OF EXODUS:

As you prayerfully contemplate the story and prepare to teach:

* Take the time to read all of Exodus as a single adventure story. (If time is short, read Exodus 1-15).

* God calls Moses to serve Him. Moses is uncertain of himself and his abilities — of course, speaking for God in front of Pharaoh is no easy thing. Moses finally runs out of arguments, God becomes impatient (4:14), and Moses goes. But he is not alone. Aaron is with him, and so is God ("I will be with you," 3:12 — reminiscent of Matthew 28:20 and numerous other statements by God and Jesus).

* The first nine plagues are explainable natural phenomena (possibly set off by a volcanic eruption). But the timing is God's. The point of the story is that the Lord is truly God, more powerful than the Pharaoh, who is said to be the Sun God incarnate.

* During the course of the plagues, Pharaoh vacillates over letting the Israelites go, but his heart is hardened again and again. So it is not a surprise when he decides to chase the Israelites.

* Finally, regarding the tossing of the Egyptian army into the sea: "The moral problem cannot be erased from the story. Children are chagrined over the deluged Egyptians; the famous rabbinic comment, that the angels did not celebrate after the miracle, underlines the problem. The Bible is less interested in fulfilling some perceived moral code than in exalting the figure of Yahweh. Yahweh's glorification is the unmistakable theme of this story."

(Michael E. Williams, *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible: Exodus - Joshua*. Abingdon, 1992.)

Notes from rotation.org website by Amy Crane