

What is said about the final plague is that it would bear no distinction between the classes of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, the Prince of Egypt, to the firstborn of a slave-girl who milled flour (11:5). Then, the prophecy describes a dramatic difference of sound; a great cry from all Egypt and silence in the lands of Israel (Goshen). The plague was supposed to come at midnight (11:4) a phrase which was not as specific as that with which we are familiar, but one which identified the middle of the night when everyone would normally be fast asleep (people normally went to bed at sundown). Silence would normally be expected at night, but the terrible cry of discovering the death of family members in the middle of the night would be heartbreaking, across the whole land.

Lastly, the isolation of Pharaoh at the moment Moses left him was dramatically emphasised by the end of our passage. The Lord spoke about the officials from court taking matters into their own hands to send the Israelites out of the country (11:8f.) and then spoke about the hard heart of Pharaoh, in grand isolation as the ruler of a country that he failed to protect, and as a consequence, was about to experience turmoil.

Application

It can be difficult for us to use passages of Scripture such as these which contain references to events which we find distasteful, such as the Lord's plague of death. Personally, I find it helpful to remember that God has made all people, and although life is sacred, deaths which happens because of God's acts either of nature, accident or of judgement, only return people to their Maker, and place such people at His mercy. On the other hand, as we found out in the first part of the study, God has allowed the death of His own firstborn Son, Jesus, for our salvation, and the death of Egypt's firstborn enabled the people of Israel to be set free. God used this event to teach His own people about His love and His liberating power, and in the same way, the death of Christ provides the hope for all Christian people through Jesus own subsequent death and resurrection.

It is not always possible to get to the bottom of why certain things happen in the Bible, and we are often left with many questions. This may well be the case for some people here. However, this should not distract us from learning what we can, by the grace of God. Slowly but surely, the book of Exodus describes God's people being drawn from despair to hope, to liberation and eventual victory through the work of the Lord, their God. It is a path we all need to travel.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your groups what effect these prophecies would have on the people of Israel.
2. Is there any way we can come to terms with the idea that God might kill someone, or is the idea totally unacceptable?
3. What does this text tell us about the plagues which we did not already know from reading them?

Discipleship

The whole of this passage today is prophetic, with Moses receiving things that the Lord told him, and then having the duty of passing them on. If we read back through the story of Exodus so far, there is a great deal of communication between God and Moses and Aaron. Prophetic statements from the Lord become the norm! This is true even to this day. We live at a time when God's Spirit is available to all God's people, and all of us may be those God wishes to use to pass on some message. We can all learn to hear God's voice and pass on what we hear.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, touch our lives with Your love and compassion, and as we receive from You, may we be empowered to be Your messengers of peace, love and compassion for others. May we always be willing to share the blessings we have received: AMEN

Prayer

The gift of Your glorious liberty, Lord Jesus, is a far greater treasure than I can express. Let my words praise You, let my work be a testament to You, let my love be a demonstration of Your passion, and let my life be lived for You in every conceivable way. So, may my whole life be given back to You in praise and glory, Lord, for ever more: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Sharing Bread and Wine

Pray today for those who have the responsibility of serving your own church by making preparations for the sharing of bread and wine, whether it be done formally or informally, in the main worship service, or in small groups. Good preparation takes account of the needs of those who come to receive God's blessing; pray for it to be done well, and with care.

Meditation

(speaking to yourself about priorities)

Keep going, my soul, keep pressing on:

When Satan speaks to twist the meaning of what you hear,

Fall back on the Word, your sure dependable defence.

When others seek more of your time than you can honestly give,

Put Christ and family first, and work from sure foundations.

When the church of God appears all too dull, and uninvitingly slow,

Remember its inherent power awaiting the Spirit's release.

When Christ gives you more to do than you've ever done before,

Fear nothing, act in faith, trust Him and speak your heart.

When you become enthused by the glory of earthly success

Give it all back to God; no tithe will do, give it all.

Keep pressing on, my soul, the future always comes

For the future He has awarded you is good. Yes, it's good.

Bible Study - Exodus 11

¹ The LORD said to Moses, 'I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and Egypt, and after that he will let you leave here. Indeed, when he lets you go, he will evict you!' ² Tell the people that everyone, man and woman, must ask their neighbour for anything silver or gold. ³ The LORD made His people well thought of in the eyes of the Egyptians. Moreover, Moses was himself a man of great importance in Egypt, in the eyes of Pharaoh's officials and of the people.

⁴ Moses said, 'This is what the LORD says: At midnight I will go throughout Egypt. ⁵ All the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the slave-girl behind the hand-mill, and all the firstborn of the livestock. ⁶ There will then be a loud cry throughout, such as has never been or will ever be again. ⁷ But not even a dog will growl at any of the Israelites, either at people or at animals, so that you may know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. ⁸ All these officials of yours will then come down to me, bow down low to me, and say, "Leave us, you and all those who follow you." After that I will leave.' And with that, he left Pharaoh in hot anger.

⁹ The LORD said to Moses, 'Pharaoh refuses to listen to you, and this means that my wonders will be even greater in the land of Egypt.' ¹⁰ Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh; but the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel leave his land.

Review

The nine great plagues had come to an end, and the stage was now set for the last and final act of God which would lead to the freedom of the Israelites, the Exodus. The Lord had prophesied that when confronted by Moses and Aaron, Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go, and although he came near to yielding in the latter plagues, all negotiations failed, and no compromise was ever reached because the Lord's demand for the unconditional release of His people, made through Moses, was absolute. He required complete freedom in which His people would not only be liberated from Egypt, but also blessed with wealth, as Abraham had been when he left Egypt (see Gen 12:16) so many years before.

Today's reading summarises what the Lord said he would do by Himself to free His people. He would deliver His people out of Egypt with two completely contrasting signs. Firstly, the Egyptians would be so glad to see the Israelites go they would give them gold and silver, this being a sign of God's blessing on and generosity towards His people (11:2). Incidentally, the idea that the Israelites 'plundered' the Egyptians is a little wide of the mark, and we will look at the reasons for this later on in the study. The second sign would come with the killing of the Egyptian firstborn (11:5f.), an event which would create such shock and awe that Pharaoh's court officials would beg the Israelites to leave Egypt with all haste.

Moses delivered this news in an awesome speech to Pharaoh in the heat of their final exchange (continuing from the end of chapter 10), and then stormed out of Pharaoh's court (11:8). Everything had happened as the Lord had prophesied (7:1-6). Moses and Aaron had been faithful to their task by receiving instructions from the Lord before each plague, confronting Pharaoh, and then doing what was necessary to begin the plague. The whole plague scenario had one purpose, however, which was to show the power and might of God. The Israelites needed to see the Lord's power at work in order to recover their faith. They had been so oppressed they had been unwilling to follow Moses and Aaron, and unable to believe that the Lord their God was capable of saving them (5:20f.; 6:9). But they had just seen the progressive humiliation of their bitter enemy Pharaoh, eventually enjoying safety from the plagues falling catastrophically upon the rest of Egypt (8:22; 9:4; 9:26).

In addition, the power and authority of the Lord demonstrated in the plagues had one other very important purpose. This was to show that the Lord was far more powerful than the greatest and most advanced civilisation of the day; Egypt. As each plague was unleashed on the great empire, Pharaoh's obstinacy continued, but the people around him clearly began to see that their own king was not the greatest god either in Egypt or the whole world. They recognised the awesome power of the God of Moses and Aaron, and they tried in vain to persuade Pharaoh that his policy of obstinacy was ruining Egypt (10:7f.).

Whilst the demonstration of God's power and the liberation of Israel are clearly very important matters, our reading today brings into sharp focus some very difficult problems for those who try to understand what God was doing. Why would God allow firstborn children to die in order to set people free? To us it seems cruel. There are indeed some mysteries of God's nature and work which lie beyond our understanding, and this incident appears to display something difficult and unpleasant about God. It is a complex subject, but it is worth reminding ourselves that although the historic circumstances may be difficult for us to understand, the principle God used was the same one He used later in history to bring salvation to the whole world. In this case God's own firstborn (Jesus) died so that all people might be free! Whatever we think about it, what God did in Egypt points towards His plan of salvation which is ultimately for the entire world and for all people.

Going Deeper

The first part of our reading describes the intriguing 'favour' in which the people of Israel were held in Egypt by the time they left. It is certainly a mystery which needs some explanation! Secondly, the description of the slaughter of the firstborn is an important text which needs our careful attention. No killing or slaughter in the Bible should be regarded lightly.

A turn around for Moses and the people

At the beginning of our reading, Moses has just been on the receiving end of Pharaoh's death threat (10:28). The time had come for the Lord to speak out and declare what he was going to do to bring about the conclusion of his plan. There was no more that Moses could do. It is extraordinary that at this moment of complete rejection by Pharaoh, Moses should receive these prophetic words, presumably to pass on to the Israelite people. If you read the first three verses of chapter 11 in this way, you will see that they are the Lord's re-assurance for Moses and the people of Israel that they had not been thwarted by Pharaoh, but victory was indeed just around the corner; not only that, but the slavery they had endured for so long would come to an end with 'favour' and goodwill from the Egyptian people.

Although this passage is only a prophecy of what would soon happen, it is worth looking carefully at what the Lord actually said. It has long been suggested that the Israelites 'plundered' the Egyptians (11:2), and the implication of this is that the Egyptians in some way bribed the Israelites to make them go; but this does not make sense, and none of this is true to this text. It is clear in the passage that the Israelites had to ask politely for 'silver and gold things': now most translations of the Bible say 'silver and gold jewellery', but jewellery is not suggested by the Hebrew text. The gold and silver items possessed by Egyptians people would either have been jewellery or small households 'gods' or objects for divination. Because the word for jewellery is not mentioned, it is quite reasonable to suggest that these objects were statues of the gods of Egypt, kept in people's homes. If we understand this, then the whole passage makes sense. What the Lord prophesied the Egyptians would do was only logical; they would hand over their gods because they had seen through the plagues that the Israelite's God was more powerful than theirs!

To emphasise this very point, the text continues (11:3) by telling us that during the time of the plagues, Moses and the people of Israel had risen in stature and were now highly regarded by the common people. Pharaoh, of course, could not see this because he was still blinded by his anger with Moses (10:28), but his officials were only too aware of what was going on (11:3).

One more plague

Moses turned and spoke to Pharaoh one more time. Pharaoh had cursed him (10:28), but Moses would have the last word, and that last word was terrible. Death is a terrible thing and always has been, but in ancient times when death was far more common, it also had more meaning. Today, we think of death as purely an individual matter with little meaning beyond the tragedy of the end of a life. However, we only have to think back as far as a major war such as the second world war, to realise that death can mean more than this; death in 'active service' was honourable, for example. The meaning of the 'death of the firstborn' was very specific in ancient cultures. In a small family nomadic group, the death of the firstborn might mean the obliteration of that clan, because without the male heir to hold the group together, it would fragment (as individuals married into other more stable clans).

If we hold to one side our feelings about God bringing death on 'firstborn', then we are free to look at what this might mean in this prophecy, here in this text. We will look at the reality of what happened when Exodus describes it in the next chapter. The death of the firstborn in a large nation such as Egypt (11:4,5) was the severest possible blow to its stability, life and culture, because as in Israel, society depended on the passing down of heritage from father to son, normally to the firstborn. If the firstborn died, how would Egyptian society work? No-one knew, and the instability, especially in royal circles, would have left the land open to the equivalent of revolution.

It is surprising that Scripture describes the firstborn of livestock as dying in the final plague to come on the land of Egypt. The only real explanation of this is the close connection between the health and wealth of a nation, in those days, and its animals. If the final plague was intended to completely defeat the Egyptians and their society and culture, then the animals would have to be included. We should not let our sensibilities towards animals be read back into the text and presume cruelty, any more than when we read about the animals who died because of the hailstorms, for example (9:25f.).