

Prayer

Lord God, may we truly value the devotional time we spend with You. As we pray, read, think and study, may we listen to Your Word, may the light of Your truth guide us at all times, and may we both feel the benefit of Your presence and know the reality of Your power in every area of our lives. We ask this through Jesus, whose love is the evidence of all we inherit from You, Almighty and redeeming Lord: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Strengths and Weaknesses

Pray today about the leadership of the Church. Many things are required of leaders, but each have their strengths and weaknesses, and they are best understood so that God can work through them both. Pray that your own leaders may have a realistic understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, and not be threatened by this, but liberated into service.

Meditation

Living Lord, send Your Holy Spirit

Like a wind which blows throughout Your church;
Like a fire to enflame Your people with hope.

Like a wind which cleanses the sinful world;
Like a fire to purify and renew the earth.

Like a wind which brings life to those who are dying;
Like a fire to warm up humanity's coldness.

Like a wind which blows away illness and disease;
Like a fire to cleanse spirit, soul and body.

Like a wind which arouses the spirit of saints today;
Like a fire to etch the testimony of Christ on the heart.

Living lord, send Your Spirit today.

Bible Study - Exodus 7:14-8:19

¹⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Pharaoh's heart is stubborn; he refuses to let the people go. ¹⁵ Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he goes out to the water ... ¹⁶ Say to him, "The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, 'Let my people go and worship me in the desert, for until now, you have not listened.' ¹⁷ This is what the LORD says, 'By this you will know that I am the LORD.' Look, with the staff I hold I will strike the water in the Nile, and it will be turned to blood. ¹⁸ The fish in the river will die, the river will stink, and the Egyptians will be unable to drink its water."

²⁰ Moses and Aaron did as the LORD commanded. Aaron lifted his staff in the sight of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water in the river, and it ... turned into blood. ²¹ The fish in the river died, and the river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink it ...

²² But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their magic arts; so Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron; as the LORD had said ... ²⁴ All the Egyptians had to dig along the Nile for drinking water, as they could not drink its water.

^{8:1} Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh and tell him, "This is what the LORD says: Let my people go and worship me. ² If you refuse to let them go, I will plague your whole country with frogs. ³ The river will swarm with frogs; they will swarm in your palace, in your bed ... in the houses of your ... people, in your ovens and your kneading bowls ...'" But the magicians did the same by their magic arts, and made frogs overrun the land of Egypt.

⁸ Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, 'Pray to the LORD to remove the frogs from me and my subjects, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the LORD.' ⁹ Moses said to Pharaoh, 'You must say when I should pray ... that the frogs be removed ... and left in the Nile only.' ¹⁰ Pharaoh said, 'Tomorrow.' So Moses replied, 'As you say! And

this will prove to you that there is no one like the LORD our God ...¹² Moses cried out to the LORD about the frogs ...¹³ And the LORD did as Moses asked: the frogs died in the houses, courtyards and fields ...¹⁵ But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he became stubborn ... and refused to listen to them.

¹⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron, "Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, and it will become mosquitoes throughout all of Egypt."...'...¹⁸ The magicians tried to produce gnats by their magic arts, but they could not ...¹⁹ So the magicians told Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God!' But Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he refused to listen, just as the LORD had said.

Review

The reading today is quite long, and tells the story of the first three plagues; of the Nile turned to blood, the frogs and the mosquitoes. I have given a shortened version of the text which retains all the important features, but If you want to read the whole passage, please use the link provided (click here). Tomorrow we will study plagues 4 to 6, and the next day, plagues 7 to 9. I have taken this radical step because the stories of the plagues contain a great deal of repetition, and it would take a long time to study all the nine separately. Scripture helpfully recounts them in three groups of three, with each group having a similar format, but with features which illustrate the growing tension within the whole narrative. By studying the plagues like this, we will obtain a better understanding of how they build up towards the final great sign and wonder of the release and deliverance of the Israelites (chs12-14).

Although I will continue to use the word 'plague' because of its general use for these stories, no word which is consistently used by Scripture to describe these events, and the word 'plague' is used rarely, though one instance is in this text (8:2). The nearest we can get to a Scriptural word for the plagues comes from the fact that many of them involve Moses or Aaron 'striking' something with a staff. The Lord said that He Himself would 'strike' the water of the Nile (7:17), and Aaron subsequently 'struck the water in the river' (7:20). Later, the Lord told Moses to tell Aaron to 'strike the dust of the earth' (8:16) in order to produce the mosquitoes. For this reason, some think of each story as a 'strike' or 'blow' from God against Pharaoh, rather than plagues. In each case, Pharaoh resists the strikes by standing firm (one meaning of the Hebrew word for 'harden'), and refusing to allow the Israelites to go and worship the Lord in the desert (5:1,2).

The request for liberty is the nub of the whole saga, occurring here in the first (7:16) plague and the second (8:1), reminding us that the whole confrontation had one purpose alone, to liberate God's people from their bondage so that they could follow their Lord. Neither should we be reticent in saying that by reading the stories with the benefit of hindsight (as we are supposed to do), God's people needed liberty so that they could be the 'blessing to all nations' that God raised them up to be (Gen 12:2,3). The power battle between God and Pharaoh was not about liberty for the sake of freedom alone. It is therefore true to this day that liberty is not abstract, it is a means to an end; and in God's eyes, something which enables His will to be done.

Many people find it difficult to see how God could be involved with unpleasant events such as these. The first three plagues were indeed unpleasant; the Nile was the source of life for the people of Egypt, and the first plague clearly deprived them of this, forcing them to dig for water near the Nile hoping the sand would act as a natural purifying filter. This, incidentally, is why we should avoid suggesting that this 'plague' was some trick of light (as some suggest). Whatever happened, the effects of all the plagues were real enough and severely impaired Egypt; and it was Pharaoh's job to seek all means to protect his people. He showed signs of doing this in the second of the plagues, where he asked Moses to pray for release from the plague of frogs (8:9), but he remained absorbed by the protection of his own authority and continued to stand against God. The consequences of his foolishness would be disastrous.

However, for us, the point of reading a story such as this is not just to see how God is involved in even the unpleasant events of world history (including the possible loss of life), but to see how human folly and misplaced arrogance before God can lead to catastrophe.

Going Deeper

Each of the plagues in turn has details which are of interest to us, and will help us follow the general story of the plagues. Some of these details are not obvious, but what we can find is of sufficient interest to give us a real sense of the unfolding drama of what happened in Egypt.

Plague number one: Water to blood

Curiously, the first plague begins with a reference to a scene not very different from that which began the life-story of Moses; that of a royal party going down to bathe in the Nile in the morning (7:15). The point, however, is not the ritual bathing (something attested in many ancient Egyptian texts), but the importance of the Nile. All water used in Egypt came from the Nile, for irrigation and fertilisation of the land and the growing of crops, and for washing and cleaning and drinking. The consequences of a polluted Nile were too horrendous to imagine, a point made by the seven references to 'river' or 'water' or 'Nile' in this plague (7:14-24 – see full version of text).

The first five verses of the story of the first plague are all 'words of the Lord' spoken to Moses (not Aaron – see 7:14). They contain a full set of commands about what should be done and a description of what would happen as a consequence. Moses and Aaron were obedient to what they were told to do, and what God prophesied did happen. The one thing which was different between the prophecy and the event was the intervention of Pharaoh's magicians (7:22f.) It is difficult to see how the magicians could reproduce the turning of the Nile into blood when it had already been done by Aaron, so we have to give a small amount of 'story-teller's license' to what we read, and conclude that all the magicians could possibly have done was to make matters worse! It is rather comic that the magicians could not see the essential difference between performing stunts before Pharaoh, as they had just done in throwing their sticks onto the ground like Aaron to make them into snakes (7:8-13), and the serious business of denying the citizens of Egypt their lifeline of water via the Nile!

The first plague concluded with Pharaoh acting as he intended to continue. He denied Moses and Aaron their request, and in so doing, forced his own people to scavenge for their water in a very undignified manner.

Plague number two: Frogs.

In the second plague, Moses and Aaron were commanded by the Lord to perform the deed whilst confronting Pharaoh again about God's demand to let the Israelites go free to worship Him in the desert (8:8:1). Again, they were obedient, and again, the magicians competed with Moses and Aaron, compounding the problem of the number of frogs infesting their land! It does not take too much imagination to think about the consequences of large numbers of frogs in a land such as Egypt. Even today, significant populations of bullfrogs make a considerable noise in parts of Egypt at the breeding season. They were more than a pest, getting everywhere and making life very difficult.

The main point of interest in this plague is the intervention of Pharaoh (8:8). Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and politely asked Moses to remove the frogs. Equally politely, Moses placed the matter back into Pharaoh's hands; 'you must say when I should pray ...' (8:9). Some translations have Moses sounding even more subservient to Pharaoh at this point, and this sentence is not easy to translate. It is my opinion that Moses and Pharaoh were testing each other out with the polite language of bargaining, and it does not reflect any serious intent on Pharaoh's part to negotiate about Moses' request for the freedom of the Israelites. Pharaoh had not dealt with the matter of the Nile turning to blood very well and his magicians had made the matter worse. He simply wanted the problem, in this case, the frogs, to go away.

One small matter worthy of note is that frogs were associated with two gods of Egypt, Hapi and Heqt, both of these being symbols of fertility. The whole plague could be said to mock the Egyptian beliefs in gods representing almost every feature of normal life; making 'gods' as common as frogs!

Plagues number three: Mosquitoes

Traditionally, the third plague is that of 'gnats'. It is impossible to know exactly what insect wildlife there was in ancient Egypt, but the small insects referred to were most probably mosquitoes of some kind (although it would be presumptuous of us to suggest they were malaria – carrying). The plague account begins with instructions from the Lord (8:16), telling Moses to command Aaron to 'strike the dust of the earth'. This expression is used in a number of places in Scripture to indicate impossibly large numbers, and this is exactly what it means here. The 'dust' turned into an immeasurable swarm of mosquitoes, a fearsome and potentially dangerous phenomenon capable of doing much harm to Egypt.

It is possible that at this point, the magicians failed to reproduce the 'trick' because it was no longer a joke. Why should they want to reproduce a plague of mosquitoes? They recognised that what was happening in their midst was not normal, and for the first time in the story, we

hear what seems to be an echo of the voice of the Egyptian people; a voice we rarely hear in Exodus. They said to Pharaoh 'This is the finger of God!' Pharaoh appears to have been unmoved by their observation, and, isolating himself in the fashion of most dictators, he entrenched himself in his position, refusing to give way on the central demand put to him by his protagonists Moses and Aaron. He would not let the Israelites go.

Application

So how is it that we can imagine that God was involved in events which adversely affected the lives of innocent Egyptians and others, at the time of the plagues? This is a question which many people today find hard to answer, but largely because we live with a quite different understanding of the world than ancient peoples. One answer to this question is that the Israelite people in Old Testament times had little idea of 'evil' personified, as, for example, we find in the New Testament description of Satan. Satan is only mentioned 3 times in the Old Testament (1 Chron 21:1, Job 1, Zech 3:1,2) and almost all evil things are regarded as part of God's unfolding plan. Even the terrible things Satan did to Job, for example, were ultimately under God's authority and eventually resolved (Job 42). Because of this, those who wrote down the stories we have from ancient times did not see things in any other way than the unfolding of God's plans, and they saw this in both the good and bad things that happened to people. We should pause and consider this, because even now, in New Testament times, we should perhaps be prepared to see God's hand in all things, not condoning evil, but in the greater and eternal scheme of things, obtaining the upper hand over all evil to achieve His purposes.

It may also be important for us to realise that life and death issues which seem black and white to us; life is good, death is bad, for example, may not be what we think. No-one would suggest that death of itself is 'good', but the Gospel tells us that Christ has redeemed death through the resurrection, so the only ultimately tragic thing about death is that it is the end of the life we live here on earth before we face our Maker. Throughout the stories of Exodus, Egyptian people and Israelite people died as a result of their own actions and as a result of God's work to liberate His people. Those people, as all who die today, are at the mercy of our Almighty Creator and God, and although we have the privilege of knowing that we are saved for eternity through faith in Christ, the ultimate end of those people is an issue the Old Testament hardly considers, and one which we may only be able to resolve when we have access to Heaven ourselves!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss how long you think people could have survived in Egypt without clean water from the Nile? How widespread do you believe the first plague to have been?
2. Discuss in your group why Moses may have asked Pharaoh about when he should pray for the frogs to go.
3. Why do you think it was necessary for there to have been many plagues before Pharaoh let the people of Israel go?

Discipleship

How easy do you find it to believe that God is capable of turning round something which may be evil, into something that can become good? The answer to this question may well depend upon your experience. Many find it impossible to believe in God because of the evil they see in the world around them, and this may stem from some particular evil thing that was done to them which has scarred them for life. Others who have been more fortunate are able to see how God constantly changes bad things into good. It is important, however, for the Christian disciple to have some considered answers to these questions, for troubles will always come to us, and we will survive them better if we are prepared for them.

Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, our friend and Saviour, whatever has happened to us in the course of this day, open up our hearts to give You praise. Through the difficult times, we have been sustained and encouraged by You, and through the good times, you have not changed! All praise to You Jesus Christ, our friend and Saviour. AMEN

FULL TEXT of SCRIPTURE

¹⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Pharaoh's heart is stubborn; he refuses to let the people go. ¹⁵ Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he goes out to the water; stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff which was changed into a serpent. ¹⁶ Say to him, "The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, 'Let my people go and worship me in the desert, for until now, you have not listened.' ¹⁷ This is what the LORD says, 'By this you will know that I am the LORD.' Look, with the staff I hold I will strike the water in the Nile, and it will be turned to blood. ¹⁸ The fish in the river will die, the river will stink, and the Egyptians will be unable to drink its water." ¹⁹ The LORD said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron, "Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over the streams and canals, the ponds and all the reservoirs, and they will become blood. Blood will be everywhere in Egypt, even in wooden buckets and stone jars."'

²⁰ Moses and Aaron did as the LORD commanded. Aaron lifted his staff in the sight of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water in the river, and all the water was turned into blood. ²¹ The fish in the river died, and the river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink it, and there was blood throughout the land of Egypt. ²² But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their magic arts; so Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron; as the LORD had said, ²³ Instead, Pharaoh turned and went to his palace showing no concern for this. ²⁴ All the Egyptians had to dig along the Nile for drinking water, as they could not drink its water.

^{8:1} Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh and tell him, "This is what the LORD says: Let my people go and worship me. ² If you refuse to let them go, I will plague your whole country with frogs. ³ The river will swarm with frogs; they will swarm in your palace, in your bedroom and your bed, and in the houses of your servants and your people, in your ovens and your kneading bowls. ⁴ The frogs will swarm all over you and your people and your officials. ⁵ The LORD then said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron, "Stretch out your hand with your staff over the streams and the canals and ponds, to make the frogs swarm over the land of Egypt"' ⁶ So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and frogs came up and covered the land. ⁷ But the magicians did the same by their magic arts, and also made frogs overrun the land of Egypt.

⁸ Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, 'Pray to the LORD to remove the frogs from me and my subjects, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the LORD.' ⁹ Moses said to Pharaoh, 'You must say when I should pray for you and your officials and your peoples, so that you and your houses are rid of the frogs, and they are left in the Nile only.' ¹⁰ Pharaoh said, 'Tomorrow.' So Moses replied, 'As you say! And this will prove to you that there is no one like the LORD our God ¹¹ The frogs will leave you and your houses, your officials and your peoples and will only be left in the river.' ¹² Moses cried out to the LORD about the frogs that He had brought on Pharaoh. ¹³ And the LORD did as Moses asked: the frogs died in the houses, courtyards and fields, ¹⁴ and they gathered them together in heaps so that the land reeked with them. ¹⁵ But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he became stubborn and refused to listen to them, just as the LORD had told.

¹⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron, "Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, and it will become mosquitoes throughout all of Egypt." ¹⁷ They did this, and when Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff, and struck the dust of the earth, mosquitoes came on people and animals; all the dust of the earth turned into mosquitoes throughout Egypt. ¹⁸ The magicians tried to produce gnats by their magic arts, but they could not, and there were mosquitoes on people and animals. ¹⁹ So the magicians told Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God!' But Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he refused to listen, just as the LORD had said.