

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, this is one of the few moments of my day when I experience true peace. I stop and consciously turn to You, asking You to accept the prayers and requests I frequently make to you in the business of my day. And in the stillness, I begin to hear some answers to problems, troubles and distresses which I give to you without thinking about them myself. Minister to my soul within this peace and build me up, I pray, in faith and love: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Strengths and Weaknesses

Pray today for all those in everyday life or the life of the church who are misled about their own strengths and weaknesses. Some are asked to do things they cannot do; others are prevented from exercising their gifts because of the jealousy of others (for example). Pray that the God's people may be agents of justice in a world which too often prevents people from achieving.

Meditation

We have a sacred treasure which others cannot see
For deep within, our spirits know these precious truths:

The love that died on Calvary is alive, and touches me
The secrets of our hearts are safe when given up to God
The friendship of others in Christ can never be taken away
The authentic Faith is ours to receive and bear with honour
The enemy can never defeat us if we let Christ fight for us
The people who try to destroy us can never destroy our faith
The truth of life and death is this, death leads us to eternal life
The path of all our struggles now will lead us to peace in Christ

In Christ, we have the best that God has given humanity
And we need never lose the precious treasure of our faith.

Bible Study - Exodus 8:20-9:12

²⁰ Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Get up early in the morning and confront Pharaoh as he goes out to the water, and say to him, "This is what the LORD says: Let my people go to worship me. ²¹ If you do not ... I will send swarms of flies on you, your officials, and your people, and into your houses ... ²² But on that day I will separate out the land of Goshen where my people live, so that no swarms of flies will be there. In this way, you will know that I, the LORD, am present in this land. ²³ ... the sign will appear tomorrow."

²⁴ This is what the LORD did ... and the land was ruined because of the flies. ²⁵ Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron, and said, 'Go and sacrifice to your God here within the land.' ²⁶ But Moses said, 'It would not be right to do this, because the sacrifices that we offer ... are offensive to the Egyptians ... and they will surely stone us! ²⁷ We must travel for three days into the desert and sacrifice ... as he has commanded us.' ²⁸ So Pharaoh said, 'I will let you go ... but you must not go very far. Pray for me.' ²⁹ Then Moses said, 'As soon as I leave you, I will pray ... and ask that the swarms of flies may leave ... tomorrow; but Pharaoh must not deal falsely with us again ...' ³⁰ So Moses left Pharaoh and prayed ... ³¹ And the LORD ... removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh ... not one remained. ³² But yet again, Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go.

^{9:1} Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh and say, "This is what the LORD says: Let my people go to worship me. ² For if you refuse ... and still hold them, ³ the hand of the LORD will strike with a deadly pestilence all your livestock in the field: horses, donkeys, camels, herds, and flocks. ⁴ But the LORD will make a division between the livestock of Israel and of Egypt, so that nothing belonging to the Israelites will die.'" ⁵ The LORD set a time and ... did this on the very next day. All the livestock of the Egyptians died, but not one of the Israelite livestock died. ⁷ Pharaoh found this out ... but his heart was hardened, and he would not let the people go.

⁸ Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'Take handfuls of soot from a kiln, and let Moses throw it in the air in the sight of Pharaoh. ⁹ It will become fine dust throughout Egypt, and will cause festering boils on humans and animals ...' ¹⁰ So they took soot from the kiln and ... threw it in the air, and it caused festering boils ... ¹¹ The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils afflicted them as well ... ¹² But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not listen to them, just as the LORD had spoken to Moses.

Review

The trio of plagues which struck Pharaoh and the land of Egypt in this passage are plagues 4,5 and 6 of the sequence of the nine plagues of Egypt. The passage has been condensed from the full text which is available in a separate window ([click here](#)), and the short version makes it easier to follow the story of each plague and discover its distinct characteristics. The more you read about the plagues and search into their backgrounds, the more they have to say, and it is certainly not true that apart from the particular details of each, the story is the same. The common features are simple enough, the Lord's instruction to Moses containing a threat to Pharaoh and Egypt (8:20-23; 9:1-4; 9:8,9), the infliction of the plague on Egypt (8:24; 9:5,6; 9:10), and Pharaoh's response which varies, ending in the hardness of his heart (8:31; 9:7; 9:12). However, the set of three plagues we have read today show us two important things. Firstly, that there are a number of common threads running through the plagues which naturally group the plagues in 'threes', and secondly, each group of three plagues introduces substantial new material to the story which is relevant to the final outcome.

The first plague, which we read yesterday (7:14f.) began with Moses and Aaron confronting Pharaoh and his court as they processed down to the Nile, and here in this passage, we find the same thing happening again (8:20). The previous plagues were all strongly connected with the Nile as the source of life for Egypt; the first plague turned the river into blood, then it bred frogs and finally mosquitoes! It is reckoned that the procession of Pharaoh down to the Nile was a religious ritual which celebrated the Nile as Egypt's source of life, so for Pharaoh, the early morning procession to the Nile was like a great affirmation that the gods of Egypt were still in control, and the river had returned to its normal life-giving flow. The river had never failed, and Pharaoh would have regarded the first three plagues delivered by Moses as confrontations which he, Pharaoh, had won.

We must remember that Moses did not know for himself what was coming next, until the Lord told him each action to be taken. Moses was instructed to interrupt the Nile procession once again and challenge Pharaoh with yet another threat of plague, this time of swarms of flies; the Hebrew word indicating large biting or stinging flies of some kind; certainly larger than the mosquitoes of plague three! The different feature of Moses' challenge to Pharaoh in this instance is the threat from the Lord to separate His own people in the land of Goshen from the rest of Egypt so that they do not experience the plague of flies everywhere else (8:22). In this way, the Lord intended to show Pharaoh that He was real in a way that Pharaoh would understand, thereby putting further pressure on him.

It was a generally held ancient belief that gods were 'localised', which means that they were powerful only in those places where they were worshipped. When Moses kept asking Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to go into the desert to worship their God, Pharaoh would not have felt threatened by a God he presumed to live in the desert. He did object to losing his slaves, however, as has been clear since the beginning of chapter 5. Now in the first three plagues, Pharaoh was forced to consider that God was active even in Egypt, but he brushed this threat aside after the removal of their discomfort. But in today's group of plagues, God made a separation of land (8:22; 9:4), to demonstrate that He was Lord of one part of Egypt, Goshen, where the Israelites lived. This was a far more direct challenge to Pharaoh, and may well explain the fact that in this group of plagues, Pharaoh appeared, at least initially, to be ready to bargain with Moses, and check out what was happening for himself (8:25-29; 9:7). Although Pharaoh ended up hardening his heart, God was making progress, through Moses.

Going Deeper

There is plenty for us to study as we look more closely at the text, in particular the way that Pharaoh bargained with Moses in a very different way than previously in the second plague of frogs (8:8f.). In addition to this, the plagues of 'pestilence' and 'boils' are both difficult to assess. Many theories about what they were have been put forward, and one of these is that the land of Egypt was poisoned by anthrax after the death of fish in the river! This may be

interesting, but our eyes must be on the achievement of God's goals, not on our interest for interest's sake.

Plague number four; the flies

The Lord told Moses to emphasise to Pharaoh the result of the plague of flies on the whole of his Empire. This is the effect of the threat; 'I will send swarms of flies on you, your officials, and your people, and into your houses ...' (8:21). The large stinging flies brought a similar unpleasantness to life as the previous frogs and mosquitoes, but the Hebrew specifically says that these flies were large and bit. Having lived in Africa and seen the extensive insect life which thrived in what appeared to be desert-like surroundings and the great variety of large flies with an ability to inflict a severe sting, I find the thought of this extremely unpleasant.

The main two features of this story however, are the separation of the land of Goshen from the effects of the flies, and the response of Pharaoh to immediately begin negotiating with Moses about his demands. Goshen was the place where the Israelites has settled since the days of their forefather Jacob (and Joseph – see Gen 47:1, 50:8), and the absence of the flies there when the rest of Egypt was 'ruined' (8:24) may have spurred Pharaoh to consider negotiations. As we have already seen in these studies, oriental bargaining began small and worked large, so Pharaoh began by granting part of Moses' request, but not all of it by far.

Pharaoh said the Israelites could worship the Lord, but they would have to do it 'in the land'. From Pharaoh's perspective, this was to his advantage. If this 'God' (from his point of view) was responsible for the flies, and Israel's God was showing His power by keeping Goshen free of flies, then this is where he believed the Israelites should worship, not leaving the land of Egypt for the desert. To Pharaoh, this was the common sense approach for the immediate problem of getting rid of the flies. Moses, however, was consistent to the message God had given him, and insisted that the Israelites be given permission to travel out into the desert.

What happened next is difficult to explain. The record is clear enough, but we can only guess at Pharaoh's motives, because there is no clear logic which explains his reactions, except, that is, the complete control of God over Pharaoh! Moses gave a reasoned response to Pharaoh's suggestion, stating the obvious that if Egyptians were offended by shepherds and their profession (see Genesis 46:32-34) then they would most likely object even more if their religious animal sacrifices were conducted in their presence. No, Moses insisted, Egypt was not the place to worship the Lord, and they had to go to the desert.

We must remember that Moses had no prior knowledge of when Pharaoh would give in to the demand to leave, even though the Lord had said that Pharaoh, in general, would harden his heart. Perhaps Moses thought he had achieved the required breakthrough at this point? Certainly, Pharaoh asked Moses to pray for him (8:28) and this had the appearance of a coded acceptance of defeat, for Pharaoh would surely not accept defeat openly and in front of his courtiers! Moses left, demanded that Pharaoh deal honestly with him, and prayed. The flies were promptly removed by the Lord, but Pharaoh then changed his mind and forbade the Israelites to do anything; his game of bluff leaving everyone exactly where they were! But has all this shown the beginnings of some weakness in Pharaoh?

Plague number five; the pestilence

The Lord told Moses to respond immediately to Pharaoh by sending a plague of 'pestilence' which would kill the cattle in Egypt, and again, making a division between the Israelite cattle, flocks and herds and those of the Egyptians (9:4). This threat was clearly designed to keep Pharaoh's mind on the folly of his previous decision. Israel was separated from Egypt because God wanted His people set apart, and He was not going to allow Pharaoh to continue to enslave them. In addition, the unknown 'pestilence' was a disease of some kind which brought death and slaughter to Egypt for the first time. The stakes were being raised.

Some people have estimated that there was logic to the order of the plagues which created the spread of any number of diseases, and some have studied this and suggested anthrax! The blood in the river caused the death of fish, and rotting frogs and the spread of mosquitoes followed by biting flies then spread the spores. It is better to regard such speculation with some caution, as there is no way that we can verify this analytically, but the death of cattle was certainly a deadly blow to an ancient society. Cattle were the means of life for large numbers of people. Pharaoh saw the separation of the Israelites and discovered that their cattle had survived, but settled back into his arrogant ignorance. He would not let the Israelites go.

Plague number six; boils

The last plague in this sequence of three, boils, is like the last plague in the first sequence (mosquitoes). The same protagonists of the 'anthrax' theory suggest that this is what caused the boils and festering skin conditions experienced by people in this plague. The structure of this plague story is the same as that of the others, with Moses receiving instructions from the Lord first of all before performing the deed; but the only significant thing about this plague is the mention of the magicians, and the fact that they could not stand 'before Moses' (9:11). Apart from the impression that the magicians were hanging around Moses attempting to see what he was doing and why, their significance in the story is considerable. They, if anyone in Egypt, should be qualified not only to do such a feat of 'magic', but as the learned and wise men of their day, counter Moses' actions and offer Pharaoh and all Egypt a cure for the boils. They were, in fact, helpless.

Although people undoubtedly suffered with all of the plagues, this is the first direct mention of human suffering. If you look at the way the plagues are effecting Egypt, then you must come to the conclusion that things were certainly getting worse, and life and limb were now directly affected with the death of cattle in plague five and the physical sores and festering boils of plague six. What more could possibly happen?

Application

Pharaoh never accepted that you cannot negotiate with Almighty God. However, he did not really know the One true God, who stands above all human negotiation! And yet we act like Pharaoh even to this day by trying to negotiate with Him! When God's people attempt to build a church which is according to their own desires rather than for God's glory, they are attempting to negotiate with Him. When people attempt to find their 'spirituality' rather than submit to Christ's exclusive call of discipleship, they are attempting to negotiate with Him. When people govern the church and its institutions according to their own assessment of how the Gospel must be declared to the world, then they are attempting to negotiate with Him. Unwittingly, we join with Pharaoh and demonstrate hardness of heart.

The true example of a servant of God in this passage is Moses. Together with his brother Aaron, he was willing to keep on doing God's will, senseless though it may have seemed, and remain utterly obedient in the most extreme of circumstances. There is even the hint (see above) that the magicians of Egypt were gathered around waiting to see what would happen, perhaps to see if he would slip up, or perhaps to see if they could mimic his apparent tricks. Moses is nowhere described as under pressure, however, and this is because he was utterly dependent upon the will of God. His is the earliest example of true service of the highest human order.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What do you make of the sudden acceptance of Pharaoh that the people of Israel should be allowed to worship God?
2. Discuss the reasons why Pharaoh may have said that the Israelites could go, but then changed his mind.
3. Why would God use the death of animals to make a point, and should we consider this cruel? If not, can you explain why not?

Discipleship

Sometimes, the path of life seems interminable; and it is very difficult to discover what is different within the sequence of things that happen to us. Just as we can either read these stories of the plagues finding very little in them or read them closely with expectant hearts and find much more, in the same way, we can look at what has happened to us in our lives either with little hope, or with much. The everyday events of our lives may seem very boring to us, but if we read them in the light of God's love, we will see that there are changes that happen all the time, which point the way to God's purposes for us, and to know this can give us great joy.

Final Prayer

Holy Lord, great God of wonders and great Lord of all glory; do those amazing feats and signs in our midst that will encourage us to be bold and strong in our faith; prepared to take risks and join the heavenly battle against all evil. Praise You, Holy Lord for Your great power and Majesty! AMEN

Exodus 8:20-9:12

²⁰ Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Get up early in the morning and confront Pharaoh as he goes out to the water, and say to him, "This is what the LORD says: Let my people go to worship me." ²¹ If you do not let my people go, I will send swarms of flies on you, your officials, and your people, and into your houses; and the Egyptians' houses will be filled with swarms of flies, as well as the ground where they live. ²² But on that day I will separate out the land of Goshen where my people live, so that no swarms of flies will be there. In this way, you will know that I, the LORD, am present in this land. ²³ I will divide between my people and your people; and this sign will appear tomorrow.'"

²⁴ This is what the LORD did, and great swarms of flies came into Pharaoh's house and his officials' houses. Throughout Egypt, the land was ruined because of the flies. ²⁵ Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron, and said, 'Go and sacrifice to your God here within the land.' ²⁶ But Moses said, 'It would not be right to do this, because the sacrifices that we offer to the LORD our God are offensive to the Egyptians. If our sacrifices are offensive in the eyes of the Egyptians, they will surely stone us! ²⁷ We must travel for three days into the desert and sacrifice to the LORD our God as he has commanded us.' ²⁸ So Pharaoh said, 'I will let you go to sacrifice to the LORD your God in the desert, but you must not go very far. Pray for me.' ²⁹ Then Moses said, 'As soon as I leave you, I will pray to the LORD and ask that the swarms of flies may leave Pharaoh, his officials and his people, tomorrow; but Pharaoh must not deal falsely with us again by not letting the people go to sacrifice to the LORD.' ³⁰ So Moses left Pharaoh and prayed to the LORD. ³¹ And the LORD did as Moses asked: he removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh, his officials, and his people; not one remained. ³² But, yet again, Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go.

^{9:1} Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh and tell him, "This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go to worship me. ² For if you refuse to let them go and still hold them, ³ the hand of the LORD will strike with a deadly pestilence all your livestock in the field: horses, donkeys, camels, herds, and flocks. ⁴ But the LORD will make a division between the livestock of Israel and of Egypt, so that nothing belonging to the Israelites will die.'" ⁵ The LORD set a time and said, 'The LORD will do this thing in the land tomorrow.' ⁶ And the LORD did this on the very next day. All the livestock of the Egyptians died, but not one of the livestock of the Israelites died. ⁷ Pharaoh inquired and found that from the livestock of the Israelites, not one had died. But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not let the people go.

⁸ Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'Take handfuls of soot from a kiln, and let Moses throw it in the air in the sight of Pharaoh. ⁹ It will become fine dust throughout Egypt, and will cause festering boils on humans and animals across Egypt.' ¹⁰ So they took soot from the kiln and stood before Pharaoh; and Moses threw it in the air, and it caused festering boils on both humans and animals. ¹¹ The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils afflicted them as well as all the Egyptians. ¹² But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he would not listen to them, just as the LORD had spoken to Moses.