



FIRST SIGNS OF DEATH

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Exodus 7:8-25

Eleventh Message

Brian Morgan

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We come now to that part of the Exodus commonly known as the Ten Plagues. This can be pictured as a 10-round heavy-weight boxing match between the Creator God and Pharaoh, the most powerful monarch of the ancient world. It could be considered one of the most intense confrontations in history, a battle that unleashed forces of a magnitude unequalled until the advent of atomic weapons. There is no question that Pharaoh possessed real clout. Earlier, in response to just one request by Moses, Pharaoh turned an entire nation into a death camp for the Israelites, and it seemed God did nothing in response. Now that Moses and all the people are thoroughly demoralized, God directs Moses to go back into the ring for another round of confrontation.

I don't know about you, but I am averse to confrontation, especially with people in authority. As a child, I used to cry even if I had to ask a question of my elementary school teacher. Growing up, I seldom articulated negative feelings to others. Even now, my initial response to confrontation is to deny it. If I can't deny it, I'll try to avoid it. If I can't avoid it, I'll at least try to delay it. But most of the time God makes me face and embrace it. I wonder if part of the reason we have a nation of shallow disciples is our lack of confrontation. We often water down the gospel to merely "believe on Jesus and be saved," without ever confronting the idolatry that people are living in.

The message today is that we will never advance the kingdom of God without confrontation. The birth of Israel as the people of God did not occur in a historical vacuum, but in the aftermath of a cataclysmic confrontation, when all of Egypt's idols were challenged and decimated before the living God. The importance of this story cannot be overemphasized, for the Exodus gave shape to the ministry of Jesus. It is the paradigm of our spiritual birth, and on a larger scale it becomes a preview to world history. If you want to understand what is going on in the book of Revelation, knowing the significance of the ten plagues in Egypt is indispensable.

I. The Terminology of the Plagues

In order to grasp the scope and significance of these mighty acts in Egypt we need to look at the wide range of vocabulary used to describe them. In Deut 6:34, God underscores the uniqueness of Exodus by using seven different terms to help Israel grasp the magnitude of what he had just done:

"Indeed, ask now concerning the former days which were before you, since the day God that created man on the earth, and inquire from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything been done like this great thing, or has anything been heard like it?...Or has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within another nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?" (Deut 4:32, 34)

For our purposes, I would like to examine three terms which will give us an adequate breadth of understanding.

A. Plague

The term "plague" (*nega'* Exod 9:14; *magesah* 11:1; *negef* 12:13; 30:12) indicates a devastating blow, or inflicting harm by touch. Other terms synonymous with this idea ("to strike," "great judgments," "punishing blows," "outstretched arm," etc.) suggest intense and strenuous fighting. This is hand-to-hand combat. But it is important not to view these life and death "blows" in purely nationalistic terms, i.e. Egypt vs. Israel, but in terms of divine attacks against the grip of idolatry that lay behind Pharaoh's Hitler-like tyranny. As God himself declared on the night of the Passover, "For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the LORD" (Exod 12:12). And God warned Israel that if she fell into the same idolatry, she would not be spared similar plagues. It was idolatry that supremely provoked God to take the gloves off.

B. Wonder

A second major term is "wonder" (*mopheth* 4:21; 7:3, 9; 11:9-10; Deut 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; Jer 32:21). This expression speaks of the fact that these mighty deeds were designed to provoke awe. Something extraordinary and divine was at work. There was never an event in Israel's history that provoked such awe as the Exodus. In fact, most of the occurrences of the term "marvel" in the Old Testament refer to the Exodus. In the case of the plagues, the divine "wonder" was due to nature running amuck, leaving its natural boundaries and wreaking havoc in Egypt. It was as if the whole cosmos was revolting under Pharaoh's anti-creation policies. Both in Old Testament theology and in the world of the Ancient Near East "there is a symbiotic relationship of ethical order and cosmic order."¹ Following the first murder of mankind, God said to Cain, "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground" (Gen 4:10). When Pharaoh spills the blood of Hebrew infants in the Nile, the entire Nile will react and turn to blood. In this manner, Israel's deliverance can be seen as creation realigning itself, just as an earthquake releases the tremendous tension held in the earth's plates.

C. Sign

The plagues didn't just provoke awe, there also were signs (4:9, 17; 7:3; 8:23; 10:1-2). These carried more significance than a present miracle of nature; they also pointed forward to a future historical disaster. As Fretheim points out, "as signs/portents the intent of the plagues is not finally to leave observers with mouths open in amazement. Having gotten people's attention, they point beyond themselves toward a disastrous future ...it may be said that the plagues are ecological signs of historical disaster."² Each plague holds clues to what lay ahead for Pharaoh and his people. His future would be determined whether he gave heed to the signs or not.

II. Prologue to the Contest: "Swallowing Egyptians" (7:8-13)

Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, "When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Work a miracle,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.'" So Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh, and thus they did just as the LORD had commanded; and Aaron threw his staff down before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. (Exodus 7:8-10 NASB)

Before the onset of the initial plagues, Moses and Aaron are instructed to have a "pre-game show" with Pharaoh and his court. When Pharaoh demands a miracle as a sign of authority, Moses is to instruct Aaron to throw his shepherd's staff on the ground so that it may become a "serpent." The serpent was a key symbol of Pharaoh's authority. It is found in many ancient Egyptian artifacts, from Pharaoh's headdress and clothing to his furniture. Wadjet was the snake goddess of Lower Egypt. As Pharaoh's protector, she was depicted as a rearing cobra ready to strike and kill all his enemies. With this miracle, Moses is striking right at the heart of Pharaoh's authority. The term "serpent" (*tannin*) is not the normal word for snake. It was first used to describe large sea creatures from the deep (Gen 1:21; Ps 148:7); later it came to epitomize the chaotic forces of evil from the underworld (Isa 51:9; Jer 51:34) that posed a threat to the created order. It was much more terrifying than the average snake, and later became an apt symbol for Pharaoh in his self-proclaimed authority:

**"Speak and say, 'Thus says the Lord GOD,
'Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt,
The great monster (*tannin*) that lies in the midst of his
rivers,
That has said, 'My Nile is mine, and I myself have made
it.'
I will put hooks in your jaws
And make the fish of your rivers cling to your scales.
And I will bring you up out of the midst of your rivers,
And all the fish of your rivers will cling to your scales.
I will abandon you to the wilderness, you and all the fish
of your rivers;
You will fall on the open field; you will not be brought
together or gathered.
I have given you for food to the beasts of the earth and to
the birds of the sky.'"** (Ezek 29:3-5)

God is not at all threatened by this dragon-like creature from the deep. Like a fisherman, he will drag him up out of the Nile and give him as food for the beasts of the earth (Ezek 29:4).

Without delay, Moses and Aaron obey and do what God had commanded them, and God faithfully performs the miracle according to his word. Instead of a staff, a slithering dragon-like monster appears before Pharaoh. As Pharaoh stares into a mirror of his own image, rather than reflecting on its significance, he turns away and calls for the brightest and best in Egypt to duplicate the miracle.

Then Pharaoh also called for the wise men and the sorcerers, and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same with their secret arts. For each one threw down his staff and they turned into serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Yet Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had said. (7:11-13)

Pharaoh's "magical men" throw down their staffs with the same result, as each staff turns into a slithering serpent. Ap-

parently this was standard fare in Egypt. As Sarna notes, "Egyptian scarabs, those engraved ceramic or stone amulets or ornaments having the shape of a beetle, depict the magician performing the feat of holding a snake that is stiff as a rod. This trick is reproduced in Egypt to this day by native snake charmers...[with a certain kind of Cobra known as the naja haje whose] distinctive feature is that it can be rendered totally immobile through the skilled application of great pressure to one of the nerves at the nape of the neck. When it is thrown to the ground, the jolt causes it to recover and the snake wriggles away."³ I suspect there may have been more power in the hands of these Egyptians than mere sleight of hand. Satan is depicted in Scripture as possessing immense power which he grants to whomever he wills to perform miracles of imitation.

But lest we think Pharaoh has upstaged the God of Moses with his Egyptian tricks of the trade, Aaron's staff swiftly swallows all the staffs of the Egyptians. Something new has appeared on the horizon in Egypt: a new authority that bows to no one. For a brief moment a holy awe fills the air. This confrontation has more significance than a mere conflict of competing magicians. As Fretheim carefully points out, each of these miracles foreshadows a looming historical disaster. The swallowing of the Egyptian rods "is a sign of the fate of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. The only other use of the verb, *bala'*, "swallow," occurs in 15:12, where it refers to the swallowing of the Egyptians in the depths of the earth beneath the sea."⁴ This is a sign of Pharaoh's fate. His army will be "swallowed" by the watery chaos of the Red Sea.

Had Pharaoh and his court been spiritually sensitive they might have comprehended the significance of what had just happened. But instead of allowing the divine wonder to penetrate his heart he chooses to ignore what he sees and harden his heart, just as the Lord had predicted. This hardening of the heart becomes a major theme in our story (it occurs twenty times), and "connotes the willful suppression of the capacity for reflection, for self-examination, for unbiased judgments about good and evil. In short, the 'hardening of the heart' becomes synonymous with the numbing of the soul, a condition of moral atrophy."⁵ With Pharaoh's heart firmly fixed, the stage is now set for one of the greatest confrontations in human history: the battle for the sons of Israel.

III. First Round: "Whose Blood is in the Water?"⁶ (7:14-25)

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is stubborn; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning as he is going out to the water, and station yourself to meet him on the bank of the Nile; and you shall take in your hand the staff that was turned into a serpent. You shall say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, "Let My people go, that they may serve Me in the wilderness. But behold, you have not listened until now."' (7:14-16)

Now that the pre-game show is over, God reminds Moses that everything is under control. Pharaoh is behaving just as God had predicted. Rather than being an obstacle to Israel's salvation, his recalcitrance will only serve to enhance God's purposes. God will be able to flex his muscles and strike a fatal blow to every idol that Pharaoh relies on.

Now Moses is told to prepare for his first confrontation. We can imagine his adrenaline rising as fear takes hold of his heart. Yet God explains that his role will be remarkably simple. All he needs to do is show up with his shepherd's staff; God will pick the time and place of the encounter. On this oc-

casation it will be in the morning, when the first rays of sunlight suggest an end to the rule of darkness. The place will be beside the banks of the Nile, the very site where Pharaoh ordered the extermination of Hebrew male children, and, ironically, where Moses found salvation through Pharaoh's daughter. I imagine the memory of five women defying Pharaoh's edict served to greatly encourage Moses. Now he stands in their shoes, completing the destiny of their courageous acts of faith. But this time it will be Moses who "will shape the future of Pharaoh's household, not the other way around. The staff will provide some strong symbolism for the occasion; he was just 'swallowed' by it."⁷

Once Moses meets Pharaoh his sole responsibility is that of a prophet ("Thus says the LORD"), to deliver the message with which God had entrusted him. There are to be no niceties or protocol, just an unconditional demand of the Creator God for the immediate release of his people. God insists that they serve him instead of Pharaoh. This will be the single issue that Moses will keep before Pharaoh during the entire crisis. But because Pharaoh refuses to listen to the Creator God, the creation itself will run amuck and fight back.

"Thus says the LORD, "By this you shall know that I am the LORD: behold, I will strike the water that is in the Nile with the staff that is in my hand, and it will be turned to blood. The fish that are in the Nile will die, and the Nile will become foul, and the Egyptians will find difficulty in drinking water from the Nile."'" (7:17-18)

God's first blow strikes right at the Nile, the heart of the Egyptian soul. The Nile was the life source of all Egypt. It teemed with fish and fowl, and its predictable tides provided irrigation for the entire nation. The rest of the ancient Near East was forced to depend on rainfall for their water supply, and as a result they were in constant threat of drought and famine. But the Nile and her gods became a longstanding symbol of sacred stability in an unstable world. Each year a new season of flooding brought new life to over a thousand miles of Egyptian settlements. An assortment of gods protected the Nile from contamination of human blood (Khnum, the ram-headed god) and kept her waters pure and teeming with fertility (Hapi, depicted as an obese male with the breasts of a female). As each new season flooded with new life, hymns of praise resounded throughout Egypt.

But now, waters that once teemed with life will contain the stench of death.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, over their streams, and over their pools, and over all their reservoirs of water, that they may become blood; and there will be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.'" So Moses and Aaron did even as the LORD had commanded. And he lifted up the staff and struck the water that was in the Nile, in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants, and all the water that was in the Nile was turned to blood. The fish that were in the Nile died, and the Nile became foul, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. And the blood was through all the land of Egypt. (7:19-21)

At God's command, Aaron waves the shepherd's staff, which now had become a symbol for the hand of God, over Egypt's entire water supply. The waters of the Nile become blood; the fish within it die and the entire water supply is contaminated from its source to its smallest tributary and standing pool. Blood was everywhere, bringing the whole land under the grip of death. There was no escape. Even in-

side buildings of wood or stone blood broke through (this is Houtman's interpretation of the phrase "wood and stone"⁸). But, as Fretheim points out, the plague was a sign of more than "just a bloody mess, a lot of dead fish, and a headache for waterworks personnel."⁹ There was an ominous message contained in the first plague: a greater disaster loomed on the horizon. The creation became a blazing mirror that screamed back at Pharaoh for his heinous crimes of exterminating Hebrew children. The Egyptians will pay with their own blood in the sea.

But lest the truth penetrate Pharaoh's heart, his magic men quickly respond with another miracle of imitation.

But the magicians of Egypt did the same with their secret arts; and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had said. Then Pharaoh turned and went into his house with no concern even for this. So all the Egyptians dug around the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink of the water of the Nile. Seven days passed after the LORD had struck the Nile. (7:22-25)

The irony is that, in an attempt to combat the problem, Pharaoh's magicians only add to it as more water is changed into blood. But it is enough for Pharaoh to continue in denial. Typical of most tyrants, he refuses to be moved. His pride is more important than the suffering of his people. Irrational and inhumane, he turns away, refusing to allow himself any concern. But that certainly was not the case for the average Egyptian. For a people who never had to be concerned about their water supply, they now became exhausted in their search for clean water to drink.

The plague went on for one week, underscoring the fact that this was the work of the Creator God deconstructing Pharaoh's world, one idol at a time. So devastating was this blow to the Egyptians it left its mark permanently in Egyptian history books. Durham notes that,

"The River Nile as blood is mentioned in a catalogue of catastrophe describing the disastrous conditions in Egypt in a period of transition from the Old Kingdom to the Middle Kingdom..."

Why really, the River is blood.
If one drinks of it,
one rejects (it) as human
and thirsts for water."¹⁰

Let me conclude with three reflections on our text that give shape to Jesus' ministry and our spiritual rebirth.

IV. Signs to Come

A. Jesus' ministry of confrontation

The birth of Israel as the people of God took place through ten labor pains in Egypt. These powerful blows of the Creator God were not motivated out of nationalistic concerns but as a rescue operation from the grip of idolatry. Afterwards, Israel was warned that similar plagues would befall her if she followed after false gods and became tyrannically oppressive like Pharaoh. Jesus came to Israel as a New and Greater Moses to give birth to a new people of God of all races and nationalities. To liberate the captives, Jesus had to confront the Pharaohs of his day. Ironically, most of this confrontation occurred within the leadership of the nation of Israel. Despite her religious devotion Israel was rampant with idolatry and was as resistant to the liberation of God's people as Pharaoh was in Egypt. After years of hardening her heart against the divine witness to Jesus, the Lord performed one last sign, in two acts: He cursed the fig tree, and violently overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple in Jerusalem. Both

acts served as warning signs to the nation that the temple was soon to be overrun by the Romans, and that, as a nation, Israel's spiritual authority had completely withered. Much of the imagery contained in the Olivet Discourse regarding the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 comes right out of the plagues of Exodus. In this manner the church was born out of the destruction of Jerusalem.

The early church continued to flourish through vigorous confrontation. For the next three hundred years, new Pharaohs appeared in the guise of Roman Emperors who demanded the total allegiance and worship that Christians could give only to God. The result was a bloodbath reminiscent of the Hebrew children in the Nile. Yet the early Christians maintained the hope that just as the God of the Exodus had decimated Egypt's idols to give birth to Israel, so would the Lord Jesus Christ shatter the idols of Rome, and that the blood of the martyrs would be the seed of the church. Confrontation was not optional, and the church survived, while Rome did not.

Perhaps this is what makes us so fearful of evangelism. In order to share Christ with others we have to challenge the idols that are currently reigning in their life. Without that, Christ can really never be Lord. My first exhortation then is to be courageous and venture forth into those arenas where God wants you to confront the world with the gospel.

B. Jesus' Signs of Life: Greater than Moses

Jesus not only continued in the tradition of Moses, he was greater than Moses. The story of the Exodus is built around Moses' ten signs of death. The gospel of John shapes the second Exodus around Jesus, with seven signs of life. While the ten plagues were ecological catastrophes that served as warnings of impending historical disaster, Jesus' signs were ecological miracles (healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, raising the dead, etc.) which pointed forward to an age of unprecedented spiritual life. In the first plague in Exodus, Moses turned the life-giving water of the Nile into blood. For his first sign, Jesus took the water of Jewish purification and turned it into fine wine at a wedding in Cana. The creation of fine wine was a foretaste that a greater measure of spiritual life was about to be unleashed. That life which we now know as the New Covenant came at the expense of Jesus' own blood. So while the world lives in fear of ecological disasters and historical catastrophes, the Christian awaits eagerly for greater and greater measures of eternal life. Moses' last sign was the death of the firstborn; Jesus' last sign was the raising of the firstborn from the dead. And this is our ultimate hope. For just as Aaron's staff "swallowed" the staffs of the Egyptians, so through the resurrection of Christ, "Death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor 15:54). On that day we will possess new bodies, "so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life" (2 Cor 5:4). So my second exhortation is to keep our

hope focused on the life that is ours now and to come. While the world cowers in the face of terrorism, we ought to be celebrating weddings.

C. The Paradigm of our Spiritual Birth

Finally, this story leaves us with a warning. If God is speaking to you today, don't harden your heart like Pharaoh. As human beings we are supremely gifted in the art of denial, to the detriment of our own souls and to the lives of others around us. After these ecological disasters hit Egypt, Pharaoh drugged himself with the "imitation magic" of his own sorcerers to keep him from reflecting on where his nation was headed. Time and time again I have witnessed God orchestrating life events to arrest our attention with awe that we might reflect on where we are going. I call these events "divine mirrors." God is faithful to warn us of the dead road of idolatry. I have heard numerous testimonies of people woken up as if from the dead: after a car accident, the suicide of a friend, or the threat of divorce. But we can also be like Pharaoh. We go to our magicians, who are more than eager to give us our daily dose of imitation life to keep us from the reflection that would lead to repentance. If that describes you, let me remind you of God's word through the prophet Amos. Amos lists a litany of ecological catastrophes (Amos 4:6-13) which God brought upon Israel for her idolatry: famine, drought, total devastation of crops, war, death camps, and a conflagration of the magnitude of Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet, after each one, the Lord painfully pleads, "Yet you have not returned to Me." Israel has successfully its hardened heart as firmly as Pharaoh's. If that describes you, God's final word to you is:

**"Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel;
Because I will do this to you,
Prepare to meet your God, O Israel." (Amos 4:12)**

1. Terence E. Fretheim, "The Plagues as Ecological Signs of Historical Disaster," *JBL* 110/3 (1991), 385.
2. Fretheim, "Plagues," 387.
3. Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken 1986), 67-68.
4. Fretheim, "Plagues," 388.
5. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 64.
6. I am indebted to Fretheim for these titles.
7. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 114.
8. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, vol. 2 (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok, 1996), 37.
9. Fretheim, *Exodus*, 115.
10. John Durham, *Exodus* (Waco: Word, 1987), 98.

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