



# WHEN THE END IS NEAR

## A THEOLOGY OF PLAGUES Part 3

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This morning we come to the third message in what we have entitled *A Theology of the Plagues*, from our studies in the book of Exodus. We will begin by reviewing some of the principles which we have already learned. First, the plagues were divine blows directed by God at Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. They were not nationalistic in origin, but powerful attacks against the idolatry behind the power structures of the nation. Second, they were not final judgments, but ecological disasters that served as warnings ("signs") to imminent historical disaster. Third, their intricate structure was a clear indication that the plagues were not haphazard quirks of fate, but a well designed plan by the Creator God, who was meticulously deconstructing Pharaoh's cosmos one idol at a time. Fourth, we observed that their lengthy duration was serving God's ultimate purpose, which was to make a stage for the glory of his name throughout the world. Though the delay of God's justice was painful for both the Israelites and the Egyptians, it ultimately elicited a confession from every aspect of Egyptian society. Fifth, the plagues served as types or examples of how God would shape the future history of Israel and the world. That which God did to Egypt to give birth to his people Israel he is now doing worldwide as he calls out a people for his name from all nations.

This morning I want to address the question, How do we know when the end is near? During times of ecological catastrophe, economic crisis or international threat of war, a slew of doomsday prophets arise prophesying that "the end" is near. For a brief moment, feeling that we might be sitting right at the brink of history, our "fear of the LORD" temperature rises. But it is not the end. The fever subsides, until our modern prophets can revise their calculations. That certainly was not true of Moses. The plagues that came upon Egypt were not mere endless cycles of repetition; they were designed with a clear end in view. Pharaoh had a limited time to repent before he pushed God's forbearance over the edge.

Let us examine the last two plagues to understand what were the signs that God gave to Pharaoh that the dreaded "end" was imminent. And, what did "the end" actually mean? It had far different implications for Pharaoh than it did for Israel. Since the plagues of Egypt shaped the history of Israel, what did "end of the world" language mean when it was used by Israel's prophets? Then, how do the plagues of Egypt help us understand the work and ministry of Jesus? And finally, do these signs have any relevance for us today? Are there signs in our lives or in a community or nation that may indicate that we are heading dangerously close to historical disaster?

In the ninth plague, Moses calls upon heaven (as he did in the seventh plague) to bring its terrifying destruction over the whole of Egypt.

### I. Groping in the Dark (Exod 10:21-29)

**Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward the sky, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even a darkness which may be felt." So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the sons of Israel had light in their dwellings. (Exod 10:21-23 NASB)**

At God's command, Moses stretches forth his hand, and an eerie darkness covers the land of Egypt, a darkness so dense and heavy that it was palpable. For the sun to grow dark was not at all uncommon in Egypt. During the spring, from March to May, there were sandstorms (*kham-sin*) so intense they would suffocate the light of the sun. But the intensity of this darkness seemed to defy the natural world. The fact that it did not affect Goshen, where the Israelites were living, heightened its miraculous and formidable nature. Nothing like this darkness had ever been known before. It carried a message of impending doom.

With our modern mindset we might not think this plague was as frightening and destructive as the earlier manifestations, but to the people of the Ancient Near East, the impact was devastating. As Houtman observes, "To them darkness spelled lawlessness, anarchy, an existence akin to that of the dead."<sup>1</sup> Darkness unleashes the most terrifying power inherent in chaos. All perspectives collapse, and the world presses in like a heavy weight upon the soul. In this case, the deep darkness paralyzed an entire nation in isolation so that people had to grope like blind men. It held an even greater significance for the Egyptians in that it undermined the stability of the sun god Re. Durham comments on the background from the Ancient Near East: "Chap. 17 of The book of the Dead includes these words...:

'I am he among the gods who cannot be repulsed.'  
Who is he? He is Re, when he arises on the eastern horizon of heaven."<sup>2</sup>

Since Pharaoh bore the title "Son of Re," he was considered divine and thus responsible for sustaining the cosmic order in Egypt. Throughout Egyptian art and literature he is described as maintaining order in creation through a very powerful "arm." Sarna further explains,

The plague of darkness, therefore, would have been regarded as the humiliation of the sun god. This is all the more likely in light of the powerful Egyptian cosmogonic myth relating to the monstrous serpent Apophis. This creature symbolized darkness and was viewed as the embodiment of all that is terrible. The sun's journey across the sky was thought to involve a mighty struggle between it and Apophis that ceaselessly attempted to

destroy it. Each morning's rising sun represented the defeat of the forces of darkness. A plague of three days of darkness would surely have been taken by the Egyptians as the vanquishing of the sun god by Apophis, as the triumph of demonic and chaotic powers, and as a portent of incipient horrors.<sup>3</sup>

The event was no less powerful from the Israelite point of view. They would have interpreted the thick darkness as a cosmic reversal to the first day of creation, before light was created and "darkness was over the surface of the deep" (Gen 1:2). It was as if for three days the Creator was reversing the created order in Egypt back to its initial state of darkness and chaos – except within the dwellings of the Israelites. There the boundary of darkness ended. The very heart of Pharaoh's power base was undermined by the "strong hand" and "outstretched arm" of God (cf Exod 15:6, 12, 16; Deut 9:29).

The image of "thick darkness" (*aphelah*, a darkness so thick it evokes gloom and calamity, often preceding judgment) continued to revitalize Israel's memory in times of impending doom. God warned Israel that if they became "hardhearted," like Pharaoh, they too would be visited by the plague of darkness as a precursor to "the great day of the Lord":

**"The LORD will smite you with madness and with blindness and with bewilderment of heart; and you will grope at noon, as the blind man gropes in darkness." (Deut 28:28-29a; cf. Isa 8:22)**

The prophet Zephaniah made a similar pronouncement during the reign of Josiah (640-609 BC). Josiah followed the wicked kings of Manasseh and Amon, who made Baal worship with all its sensual practices the state religion in Israel. The height of evil was reached when Manasseh took the carved image of Asherah (the Canaanite goddess of fertility, depicted by a sensuous woman with large breasts) and placed it inside the temple, desecrating the holy place. God said that this act had pushed his forbearance over the edge, and now he would "wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down" (2 Kgs 21:13). This sets the context for Zephaniah's pronouncement:

**"Near is the great day of the LORD,  
Near and coming very quickly;  
Listen, the day of the LORD!  
In it the warrior cries out bitterly.  
A day of wrath is that day,  
A day of trouble and distress,  
A day of destruction and desolation,  
A day of darkness and gloom,  
A day of clouds and thick darkness" (Zeph 1:14-15)**

These gripping images of chaos, darkness and gloom may have spurred Josiah's righteous reforms to purge the nation of its idolatry. Together with Zephaniah's words came the words of the law that had been hidden in the house of the Lord. When Josiah's scribe found the book of the law and read it before him, the king tore his clothes and wept (2 Kgs 22:11). From the memory of the Exodus, Josiah knew that this "anti-creation" warning was no idle threat; therefore he responded with a tender heart, coupled with a tenacious zeal that characterizes genuine repentance. He brought out the Asherah from the house of the Lord and burned it and ground it to dust. He cleansed the land from all the idolatrous priests and removed all of

the high places. Even today there stands a massive stone wall in the ancient city of Arad, which Josiah had built through the middle of the holy of holies of the high place to put a permanent end to the idolatrous worship that had been performed there.

The plague of darkness in Egypt gave shape to Israel's future. Darkness would be the warning sign that the end was near. But "the end" in all these cases was not the end of history as we know it, but the end to the idolatrous world which those generations had constructed. God used "end of the world" language to describe the devastating impact which the undoing of their world would have on their lives. The "anti-creation" imagery became a powerful tool to evoke memory.

Darkness was one of the tools that God used to lead the apostle Paul to repentance. God pulled the plug on the light of Paul's Pharisaical universe, and when confronted by the risen Christ, he became blind. Receiving his sight again at the hands of a Christian servant, he saw all things in a radically new light. His entire world view had been turned upside down. Later, in the book of Acts, a certain magician named Bar-Jesus was opposing Paul and Barnabas in their work of evangelism, and Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to him,

**"Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time." And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord" (Acts 13:11-12)**

The sign was an indication to the proconsul that the idolatrous world of his "magic man" was at its end. As a result, he placed his faith in Jesus of Nazareth. The sign was a demonstration of God's grace. God would reluctantly prefer to pull the plug on the "light of our world" and have us futilely grope in darkness while we yet live, than allow us to walk blindly into eternal darkness. Both situations are painful, but the latter is horrific.

We must also remember that merely because we go to church is no guarantee that we are walking in the light. In the book of Revelation, Jesus personally warned several churches in Asia Minor that they were in danger of losing their "lampstand." He described the most outwardly successful of them all, Laodicea, as "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked." (Rev 3:17). But, worse than that, they were "blind" to their condition. They believed they were "rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing" (Rev 3:17). We seldom think of wealth as an idol that leads to blindness. But all we have to do is look at the dot.com craze and the promise of stock options that blinded so many victims to forsake all values and human decency for a fading crown of success. I wonder if Jesus would deliver the same word to churches that profited handsomely by these successes with new buildings and programs, but paid dearly in the number of fractured families. In Laodicea, Jesus advises the Christians that they needed to purchase "eyesalve to anoint your eyes, that you may see." Did they heed the warning? Apparently they did, for the church there continued to have an effective witness for quite some time. Late in the second century, one of her bishops, Sagaris, proved a noteworthy example of faithfulness, and was martyred for his uncom-

promising testimony to Christ (AD 161-167). He entered the kingdom a rich man.

After the plague of deep darkness comes the final blow to Pharaoh's heart: the announcement of the death of the firstborn:

## II. Striking Down the Future: The Firstborn (Exod 11:1-10)

**Now the LORD said to Moses, "One more plague I will bring on Pharaoh and on Egypt; after that he will let you go from here. When he lets you go, he will surely drive you out from here completely." (11:1)**

Fretheim captures the scene, "Yet one more plague. The end is near. An impasse has been reached. There is no more room to maneuver. The stream of negotiation has reached the narrows, and the waters are shortly going to go crashing through the gorge. There is no stopping things now. A final judgment will fall upon Pharaoh and Egypt."<sup>4</sup>

**Moses said, "Thus says the LORD, 'About midnight I am going out into the midst of Egypt, and all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of the Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the millstones; all the firstborn of the cattle as well.'" (11:4-5)**

The final plague will take place at midnight, the very heart of darkness. No one reading the text can help but shudder at the horrific announcement. Houtman describes the situation: "All firstborn, the flower, the hope and strength of the nation (cf. Gen 49:3), will die without exception and without distinction (11:5). In the death of his own eldest son, and also in the death of the firstborn of the people and the cattle, YHWH himself will strike Pharaoh in the very core of his being."<sup>5</sup> The loss of a child strikes right at the heart of any parent. Memories of the loss of our firstborn son are still as fresh in my mind today as they were twenty-eight years ago. But in the ancient world, the firstborn male represented more than the life of an offspring. He symbolized the very future of a family, a clan and a nation, embodying its very hopes and dreams. This final plague not only deconstructs Pharaoh's present universe, it also robs it of any future or hope. Understanding this we can begin to comprehend the raw and heart-rending wail that resounded through the land of Egypt on that dark night, a night that no one in Egypt would ever forget.

**"Moreover, there shall be a great cry in all the land of Egypt, such as there has not been before and such as shall never be again. But against any of the sons of Israel a dog will not even bark, whether against man or beast, that you may understand how the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel." (11:6-7)**

An eerie contrast will fill the land. Throughout the nation there will be a cry (*tze'aqah*, an intense cry or wailing) of such magnitude it will be unique in Egypt's history. This cry will remind Pharaoh of the wailing cry of the Israelites after years of his torturous oppression in the slave labor camps (3:7, 9), and the execution of innocent Israelite male babies in the Nile (1:22). The shock waves of this cry make us shudder. By contrast, among the Israelites everything will be peaceful and tranquil, so calm that not even a dog will bark in their presence. This final distinction in Egypt will have a tremendous impact on Pharaoh's ser-

vants. They will actually bow down before the Lord and join the call for Moses to lead the people out of Egypt.

**"All these your servants will come down to me and bow themselves before me, saying, 'Go out, you and all the people who follow you,' and after that I will go out." And he went out from Pharaoh in hot anger. (11:8)**

The plagues have the ultimate effect of isolating Pharaoh from everyone in his stubbornness and hard heartedness. The court still functioned, but now there was no respect or relational connection. It is obvious that no one close to Pharaoh believed the rumor about divinity. The Titanic is sinking and everyone is abandoning ship.

This same scenario seems to be repeated in history. In the crossing fates of King Saul and David, Saul became more and more isolated from everyone in Israel through his pride, jealousy and savage cruelty. Finally, at his darkest hour, he had to disguise his own identity before his final religious act as he consulted a medium regarding the outcome of his life. The next day he committed suicide on Mount Gilboa by falling on his own sword after being wounded by an archer's arrow.

The lesson should be heeded by every generation. None of us is immune from this final plague. If we are given over to secret idolatry, it not will not only consume us, in the end it will isolate us. We become unreasonable and unreachable. We might as well be on another planet. All the external appearances may still function, but in reality there are no longer any true relational connections. Our wives and children hardly recognize us. We become a god of our own making, lost in our own universe of one. It is a frightening proposition. But the Creator God still has one warning shot in his arsenal: He strikes the firstborn. He takes away everything we invested in that makes us a "god" and that to which we look for our future hope. This last warning shot across our bow is to wake us up from the dead and deliver us from hell itself.

How do we know the end is near? How do we know if we have pushed the forbearance of God over the edge with our secret seductions and hidden habits? To begin with, a visit to the eye doctor to check our vision would be helpful. Has your universe reverted to chaos so that you seem to be groping in the dark? How isolated are you from others? Has your idolatry not only made you blind, but perhaps painfully alone?

Finally, let us examine how the plagues of Egypt give us a greater appreciation for the work and ministry of Jesus.

## III. Jesus and the Signs of Life

As we have seen over and over, the plagues become types for Israel's future history and the history of the world. Sadly, as Israel matured, her religious system became as idolatrous, immoral and oppressive as Pharaoh's. The prophet Isaiah described her as blind in her idolatry (Isa 42:19). But a day would come when the Lord would send great news of a new age of light and life:

**The people who walk in darkness  
Will see a great light;  
Those who live in a dark land,  
The light will shine on them. (Isa 9:2)**

For the Lord's Servant would come to Israel "to open

blind eyes" (Isa 42:7).

Further,

**"I will lead the blind by a way they do not know,  
In paths they do not know I will guide them.**

**I will make darkness into light before them." (Isa 42:16a)**

When Jesus came to Israel, he dwelt among a blind people and a nation which Ezekiel described in his vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37:1-14) that was as good as dead. Israel was in desperate need of a resurrection and a deliverer, not from Rome, but from herself. As the New Moses, Jesus performed signs (John shapes his gospel around seven of them), not signs of impending judgment but signs of unprecedented life. Moses' first sign was turning the water of the Nile into blood. Jesus' first sign was to transform the water of Jewish purification and turn it into fine wine. Moses' last two signs were the veil of deep darkness and the death of the firstborn. Jesus' last two signs in John are giving sight to the blind (John 9) and the resurrection of the firstborn (Lazarus, John 11). Instead of deep darkness enveloping the nation, Jesus brings life-giving light, and the blind receive their sight. The miracle of sight to the blind man signifies that Jesus offers the gift of spiritual sight to those who are willing to repent. Perhaps this was the significance behind his instructions to the blind man to "wash in the pool of Siloam." It was a miracle equivalent to a new creation, for as the blind man testified, "Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind" (John 9:32).

The final sign which Jesus gave Israel, the one that signified his ministry was coming to an end, was the raising of the firstborn, Lazarus, from the dead (John 11). Again, this was more than a miracle of postponing death; it was a sign of unprecedented life that was about to be unleashed to invade the present age. It pointed to the outpouring of God's Spirit that would infuse our dead bodies with life and write the law on our hearts so that we could love with abandon (Rom 5:5). It was the gift of the Holy Spirit that was to be the signal to Israel and the whole world that the

end was near. That is why the apostles refer to this age as the "last days." That term does not indicate how much chronological time remains, but that the sequence of events that would usher in the kingdom of God was now complete. After the pouring out of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost there is no other act of salvation to occur before the Day of Judgment.

The plagues of Egypt ought to give us a fuller appreciation for the ministry of Jesus, which speaks better than Moses. But we must never forget the terrible cost of making all things new. Jesus, as God's firstborn son, took all these plagues on himself. On the cross, blood flowed from his side, a blood more precious than all the blood in the Nile. A veil of deep darkness covered the earth for three hours to signify a return to the first day of creation, as God was about to make all things new. And the horrible cry of sorrow came from our Lord himself when he said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). It is amazing that the Father in heaven muffled the sound of his own voice lest we be overwhelmed. This cry shook the foundations of heaven itself. It was a cry so terrible that it will never be heard again. Do we cry? Tears of repentance are the first sign in your life that the days of judgment are over and that all things are becoming new. This is the end, the end that is only the beginning.

*"I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a firstborn." (Zech 12:10)*

May God grant us holy tears. Amen.

1. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (Kampen: Kok, 1996), 2:121.
2. John Durham, *Exodus* (Waco: Word, 1987), 142.
3. Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 79.
4. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 130.
5. Houtman, *Exodus*, 2:119.

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