

## The God Who Delivers (Part 2 of 6)

### The Ten Plagues – Part One

Exodus 7:14 - 8:32

Mark Vroegop

---

*14 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. 15 Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water. Stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that turned into a serpent. 16 And 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 so far, you have not obeyed. 17 Thus says the LORD, "By this you shall know that I am the LORD: behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood. 18 The fish in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile." ' " 19 And the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, their canals, and their ponds, and all their pools of water, so that they may become blood, and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.' " 20 Moses and Aaron did as the LORD commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned into blood. 21 And the fish in the Nile died, and the Nile stank, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. There was blood throughout all the land of Egypt. 22 But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts. So Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said. 23 Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart. 24 And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile. 25 Seven full days passed after the LORD had struck the Nile Exodus 7:14–25 (ESV).*

Sometime this spring we will come to one of the most familiar passages in the Bible – Exodus 20. Do you know what is recorded in this chapter? The Ten Commandments. And do you remember what the first commandment says? It says: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:1). It is the first commandment, but it is first not just in order; it is first in priority. In fact, all of the other commandments are really a reflection of the first commandment. To have no other gods means that God has an exclusive place of prominence and obedience. It means that there is no one greater, no one more important, and no one more worthy of worship than Him. It means that there is nothing greater than God.

"No other gods before me." That's the first commandment, but do you know what God said just before He gave this exclusive decree? He said, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex. 20:1). God claimed exclusive obedience from His people based upon what had previously taken place in Egypt. And what had happened in Egypt? God's people were slaves in Egypt, and God delivered them. He brought them out. There was an exodus from Egypt, and it was God who made it happen.

## **The God Who Delivers Through Judgment**

In Exodus 1-6 we previously learned that God is a God who hears. The cry of His own people reached His ears, He heard their groaning, He saw their misery, and He knew what was happening. In Exodus 7-12 we see another picture. We see a God who delivers His people. And this concept of rescuing people from hopeless oppression will become the basis of the New Testament concept of redemption through Jesus Christ.

But we also learned last week that the way in which God delivers is very important. He doesn't just deliver; He delivers through judgment. In other words, God simultaneously rescues people and brings justice. He redeems by defeating His enemies. He delivers His people by force and shows the world that He is Lord and there is no one else.

The Ten Plagues are the judgment through which God delivers his people. God turns the natural elements of Egypt against them, while at the same time demonstrating that the gods that are allegedly connected to these natural elements are nothing. God judges Egypt using their own gods in order to free His people. He delivers through judgment.

So when God says, "I am the Lord who brought you out of Egypt . . . you shall have no other gods before me," He is not just talking about deliverance; the Israelites saw what He did to the Egyptian gods, Pharaoh, and the entire Egyptian army. God has a right to declare that they have no other gods before Him. He has proven in their deliverance that He is supreme over all rivals.

### **The Ten Plagues**

The vehicle through which God will definitively declare that He has no rivals is the Ten Plagues. He will also use the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, but the Ten Plagues will send a clear message about the supremacy of God over the entire Egyptian culture.

Hopefully you remember from last week that the Egyptians attributed much of their national success to their gods who were connected to the natural elements. Egypt, like most other nations, was poly-theistic in their worldview. In other words, they believed that the universe was controlled by another world that involved multiple gods who controlled various aspects of nature. Somewhere in middle school you probably studied Greek mythology and the connection between mortals and the immortal realm. Egypt was similar in its understanding of the universe.

Many of the Ten Plagues deal with an Egyptian god directly, but not all are so closely connected. The Ten Plagues have to be seen in their total picture – sending a message to Pharaoh and Egypt that there is one true God, and He must be obeyed. Each plague builds on the others in order to bring Egypt and Pharaoh to their knees in humble submission and obedience. God is going to deliver His people through judgment by means of the plagues.

## Plague #1: The Nile

The first plague of the ten strikes at the heart of the Egyptian way of life and their culture through the effects on the Nile River. Most of Egypt derived its life or sustenance from the Nile or its tributaries. It provided precious and needed water for the country, and it was central to Egypt's understanding of their greatness.

The people of Egypt worshiped the Nile as a god, Hapi, and there is some evidence that the Nile was even called by his name. Every year the Nile would flood, and when it overflowed its banks, it would deposit rich silt on either side of the river, allowing for a rich soil in which crops could be grown. Without the Nile, the people of Egypt would have starved to death. Further, the annual cycle of the flooding became the basis for the Egyptian calendar. Hapi was associated with water, life, and fertility, and he was considered a caring god who helped to maintain order in the universe. Therefore, what is about to happen to Nile is an attack at the very heart of Egypt and their understanding of their gods.

But we also need to remember the role of the Nile in Exodus 1-2. After the midwives refused to kill the male babies of the Israelites, Pharaoh instructed Egyptian citizens to throw every Israelite male baby into the Nile (Ex. 1:22). By using the Nile River as the vehicle of death, Pharaoh was playing on the spiritual sentiments of his people to enact targeted genocide. As well, do not forget that Moses was hidden in a basket in the Nile, and that his name means "I drew him out of the water" (Ex. 2:10). So attacking the Nile is not only about the gods of the Egyptians; it is also about retribution for terrible atrocities. The plague affecting the Nile has meaning at multiple levels.

Our text begins with another reference to Pharaoh's hard heart (Ex. 7:14). Even though he had witnessed the first sign – the swallowing of his snakes – he still refused to listen to what the Lord had told him to do. Verse 14 makes this point very clear: "he refuses to let the people go." Therefore, Moses and Aaron confront him as he is going down to the Nile River in the morning.

God gives them very clear instructions as to what they are to say to Pharaoh. This is the first of many times we will hear these words or similar ones:

*And 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 so far, you have not obeyed (Exodus 7:16).*

Moses clearly identifies the conflict. "I AM" has told Pharaoh to let His people go, but he has not obeyed. And then come the consequences:

*Thus says the LORD, "By this you shall know that I am the LORD: behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood. 18 The fish in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile" (Exodus 7:17–18).*

God is going to strike the Nile so that for seven days (Ex. 7:25) the precious, life-giving river will be absolutely useless and even disgusting. And it will not just be the main river; the plague will be

comprehensive – “over their rivers, their canals and their ponds . . . all their pools of water . . . even in vessels of wood and vessels of stone” (Ex. 7:19-20). Water from the Nile will be contaminated no matter where it is stored.

Verse 20 indicates that while Moses and Aaron were in Pharaoh’s presence, they struck the Nile and it “turned into blood.” What does this mean? I don’t think that the Nile literally became blood. Often the Bible uses this term to refer to a sign of judgment which has the appearance of blood. For example, Joel 2:31 says that on the Day of the Lord the “moon shall be turned to blood,” and Revelation 6:12 says that the “moon became like blood.” Judgment is the theme here.

Further, the other plagues involve natural elements, and it seems this could be a natural phenomenon as well. The Nile could have turned a bloody hue from an unusual over-abundance of red sediment in the water during the flood stage. Further, the sediment could have combined with other foreign bacteria to disturb the oxygen balance in the water and killing the fish.<sup>1</sup> The fact that it could be a natural phenomenon doesn’t take away from the legitimacy of the plague or its miraculous nature. The real point here is that these natural disasters happen at Moses’ (and therefore God’s) command. It seems that is why there is such a point made that Moses performed this sign in the presence of Pharaoh and his servants.

Verse 22 indicates that the magicians of Pharaoh were able to reproduce this sign by means of their “secret arts,” and the result was the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.

*So Pharaoh’s heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.<sup>23</sup> Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart (Exodus 7:22–23).*

Therefore, in order for water to be secured, the people had to dig for ground water. The Nile water was entirely contaminated for seven full days.

God has levied his first blow against the Egyptians. Their worship of the Nile, their use of the Nile to kill Hebrew children, and their dependence on the Nile for the life of their nation all converge in the plague. Their love for the Nile has now been directly challenged. And without giving the entire story away, don’t miss the significance that eventually Pharaoh and his army will be drowned in the Red Sea. Their love and worship of water will be used against them in stunning ways. Deliverance through judgment has begun.

## **Plague #2: Frogs**

Chapter 8 records the second plague, and it is meant to build on the first. God issues another warning to Pharaoh:

*Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Let my people go, that they may serve me. 2 But if you refuse to let them go, behold, I will plague all your country with frogs. 3 The Nile shall swarm with frogs . . . (Exodus 8:1–3).*

---

<sup>1</sup> Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary – Exodus, (New York, New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 39.

It is important to notice the connection between the Nile and frogs. As you can imagine, the Nile was home to a vast number of frogs, and they were also considered to personify a god. The Egyptian goddess Heqet was connected to life and fertility, especially childbirth. Women who gave birth wore amulets of Heqet, and it is believed that her priestesses were trained in midwifery.<sup>2</sup> Some commentaries see this as yet another statement in light of the command for the midwives to kill Israelite children. Further, in Egyptian mythology, she was also thought to be the wife of the god Khnum, who was considered the Lord of created things.<sup>3</sup>

The God of the Hebrews controls the symbol of fertility, and this God is going to make the Egyptians despise how many frogs they have in their land. The wording in Exodus 8 is meant to highlight this:

*The Nile shall swarm with frogs that shall come up into your house and into your bedroom and on your bed and into the houses of your servants and your people, and into your ovens and your kneading bowls. <sup>4</sup> The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your servants. (Exodus 8:3–4.)*

The frogs are everywhere! At Moses' and Aaron's command, an army of frogs covered the land of Egypt (Ex. 8:7). Even though Pharaoh's magicians are able to replicate the plague, they could not stop the frogs. And this will be a theme throughout the remaining plagues. The plagues start and stop at the command of God.

Verses 8-15 record the first of many feigned statements of repentance on Pharaoh's part. He asks Moses and Aaron to plead with the Lord to make the plague stop. Verse nine is even a bit comical. Moses in effect asks Pharaoh when he would like the frogs to stop their invasion. And after Moses learns that Pharaoh wants the frogs stopped tomorrow, he returns to the theme of the Ten Plagues: "Be it as you say, so that you may know that there is no one like the LORD our God" (Ex. 8:10).

Moses prayed to God about the frogs (v 12), and the frogs began to die. Verses 13-14 tell us what transpired:

*And the LORD did according to the word of Moses. The frogs died out in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. <sup>14</sup> And they gathered them together in heaps, and the land stank (Exodus 8:13–14).*

I can only imagine how awful this must have been, especially since the frogs were everywhere. The smell and the contamination must have been enormous. The fertility god had been overwhelming and devastating. God had turned their god against them once again.

And once Pharaoh found some level of relief from the negative circumstances, he changed his mind again.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heket>

<sup>3</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khnum>

*But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the LORD had said (Exodus 8:15).*

Even though God had struck a blow to the two of the most important gods in Egypt, and even though there was a clear connection between the former evils, Pharaoh was not willing to obey the God of the Hebrews.

### **Plague #3: Gnats**

The third plague came without warning and without a meeting with Pharaoh. Plagues six and nine will follow this same pattern – a sudden devastation and without an announcement. The plague of gnats has the least amount of material of all the plagues, and it, along with the plague of flies, did not target any specific Egyptian deity. However, the Egyptian worldview valued ecological harmony, and they viewed order from chaos as a vital part of the cosmic order. The God of the Hebrews continues to make it clear that He is the one who controls the natural elements. He can start and stop disasters at will. This will be plainly evident in this plague.

According to verses 16-17, Aaron struck the ground, and the gnats swarmed all over the land. The Hebrew word for gnat could also refer to mosquitos or lice. But does it really matter? Whether it's a mosquito, lice or gnats, something flying around your face, in your ears, up your nose, or crawling down your neck is annoying, regardless.

The difference between this plague and the others is seen when the magicians try to recreate the plague. They were not able to do so. And their testimony to Pharaoh is telling: "This is the finger of God" (v 19). The box is getting tighter around the ruler of Egypt. Even his own magicians are telling him that the God of the Hebrews is behind this.

But Pharaoh's response is not any different than the last time. "But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said" (v 19). And with that, the first cycle of the Plagues was completed. God had clearly identified His supremacy over the Egyptian gods, and He had shown Pharaoh that God could start and stop a plague wherever He desired. Egypt was experiencing judgment.

### **Plague #4: Flies**

The second cycle begins with the plague of the flies, and this plague does not target a particular god of the Egyptians. There are other purposes here.

Once again Moses is told to present himself to Pharaoh as he is going out to the water (Ex. 8:20). Once again Pharaoh is told to let the people go and is given a warning (v 21-22). But now God makes a distinction between the Egyptians and the Israelites:

*But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth. 23 Thus I will put a division between my people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall happen. (Exodus 8:22–23).*

This is the first time God has separated Israel ("my people") from the plagues that affected all of Egypt ("your people"). Except for the plague of locusts, all of the remaining plagues will be

directed at Egypt while Israel will be protected. We will see two ultimate examples of this in the death of the firstborn and the parting of the Red Sea. God protects His people and punishes Egypt.

But we also see a new development with Pharaoh in verses 25-32. Pharaoh begins to try to find ways to appease God's wrath without embracing full obedience. First he tries to convince Moses and Aaron to sacrifice to their God, while remaining in the land of Egypt (v 25). Then he tells them that the people can go but that they cannot go very far (v 28). It may have been that he was planning on chasing them down and bringing them back like he eventually did at the Red Sea. Finally, Moses warned Pharaoh not to "cheat again" by not letting the people go (v 29).

Once again Moses prayed to the Lord and once again the plague was removed (v 30). And once again Pharaoh hardened his heart. The Hebrew here reflects a bit of exasperation – "Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go" (v 32). Half-hearted obedience was just a "slow walk" toward outward rebellion. Despite the Nile becoming putrid, the land smelling like dead frogs, annoying gnats everywhere, and flies that selectively ruined Egypt while sparing Israel, Pharaoh's heart was still hard.

### **"No Other Gods Before Me"**

The lesson that God wants to teach Egypt and Israel is the same. He wants both to know that He is the Lord and there is no other. In Israel's case this lesson through the plagues resulted in their deliverance. For Egypt it led to judgment, and for Pharaoh it led to death. The God of the universe has no rivals, and He must be obeyed because He is God. He is full of love and mercy and grace and redemption. But He exclusively is full of all these good things. And any attempt to get these things from anything else is not only foolish; it is dangerous.

Human beings set up false gods or idols in an attempt to control their lives. They set up these counterfeit Gods in order to give themselves what they want, but loving, trusting and obeying these false gods never works. The false gods become self-destructive. Listen to what Psalm 115 says about this:

*Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. <sup>4</sup> Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. <sup>5</sup> They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. <sup>6</sup> They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. <sup>7</sup> They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. <sup>8</sup> Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them (Psalm 115:3–8).*

The idol of your heart always turns on you. What you thought you were controlling begins controlling you. Your gods become the means of your own destruction. This is what happened to Egypt, and it is what will happen to any of us when we pursue counterfeit gods.

You probably don't think of yourself as an idol worshipper, but that is because your definition is too narrow. Tim Keller, in his excellent book Counterfeit Gods, helps us to expand our understanding of idolatry.

*"What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. A*

*counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living . . . An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, "If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure. There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is worship."*<sup>4</sup>

So the fundamental issue in play with idolatry, regardless of the object, is whether the "thing" that we love, trust, and obey is truly worthy of affection. And the biblical answer is that nothing is worthy of love, trust, and obedience except God.

People who are consumed by their idols, like Pharaoh, ruin their lives, despite the obvious truth in front of them. A person can be consumed with a career, making money, achievement, saving "face," social standing, the perfect family, a romantic relationship, beauty, intelligence, sex, power, control, or happiness.<sup>5</sup> But these counterfeit gods "drive us into the ground as we try to appease them."<sup>6</sup> False gods are destructive.

It sounds hopeless, but it isn't. The book of Exodus is designed to show you the glorious power of the true God – the God who hears, the God who delivers. This book, and especially the section on the Ten Plagues, shows us that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the one, true God. He is supreme above all rivals. And if you trust Him, believe in Him, you'll be spared from judgment. Disobey Him and follow your own path, and your counterfeit gods will turn on you.

You see, the beauty of the message of the Bible is that your creator has made deliverance possible. God delivered His people through the blood of His Son, Jesus, on the cross. His death became the means by which reconciliation, forgiveness, and deliverance is possible. He rescues people from their slavery to their false gods.

But in order for someone to be delivered, he or she must come to the conclusion that God is right: "I am a sinner. I cannot save myself. By faith I need to put my trust in Christ." In other words, the first step toward freedom is realizing that God is God and running to Him for mercy.

*"The living God, who revealed himself both at Mount Sinai and on the Cross, is the only Lord who, if you find him, can truly fulfill you and, if you fail him, can truly forgive you."*<sup>7</sup>

© College Park Church

**Permissions:** You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. [www.yourchurch.com](http://www.yourchurch.com)

---

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Keller, Counterfeit Gods – The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters, (New York, New York: Dutton Publishing), xvii-xviii.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Keller, xxiii.

<sup>7</sup> Keller, xxiv.