

The First Plague: The Nile Turned to Blood

Exodus 7:14-15

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

March 11, 2001

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus, Chapter 7. Tonight we're going to be looking at verses 14 through 25, in preparation for that you may allow your eyes to run back to verses 8 through 14 where we were the last time we were together. Exodus, chapter 7, verses 8 through 13 are critical for our understanding of what follows because they provide for us a preview of what's going to happen in the plague stories over the next several chapters and verses. The serpent confrontation in verses 8 through 13 foreshadows the Lord's humiliation of Egypt through the plagues and the Red Sea. The incidents involving the serpents and the crossing of the Red Sea provide us the two boundaries on either end of this section of the book of Exodus, and they reinforce a theme that we see over and over again. In verses 8 through 13, the encounter between Pharaoh and the magicians of Egypt illustrate the whole point of the Exodus' struggle. These hostilities are not primarily between Moses and Pharaoh or between Israel and Egypt. It's certainly not just between Moses and the Egyptian magicians. The serpent contest portrays a heavenly combat, a battle between the God of the Hebrews and the deities of Egypt. And so what we have here is a picture of the one true God who is truly sovereign in His operations over the universe and His will makes come to pass everything in heaven and on earth, challenging this usurper, in this case Pharaoh and the deities of Egypt.

Two or three things stood out to us as we looked at Chapter 7, verses 8 through 13. First of all God purposes to reveal His sovereignty to the Egyptians. Now we're going to see three ways in which this theme of God making Himself known functions. In verses 8 through 10, we saw God revealing His sovereignty to the Egyptians. Then, we saw Pharaoh's attempts at refuting, at rebutting and challenging the Lord, and we saw that those attempts were futile, once again emphasizing the sovereignty of God despite the claims of Pharaoh to be divine.

And then in verse 13, even after the sight of a miracle, a miracle with an obvious message, Pharaoh doesn't change his heart, doesn't change his mind, doesn't turn back. That is a scene which we will unfortunately see repeated over and over and over again in the Exodus story. It shows us just how dead, just how hard the depraved heart is. It reminds us again that it takes the operation of the

divine Holy Spirit to raise such a heart to spiritual awareness and to spiritual life. Now with that as introduction, let's look at Exodus, chapter 7, beginning in verses 14, the first plague.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is stubborn. He refuses to let the people go. 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 will say to him, 'The Lord 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. 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 shall be turned to blood. And 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." Then the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over the rivers, over their streams, and over their pools and over all their reservoirs of water that they may become blood. And there shall 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. And 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. But the magicians of Egypt did the same thing 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 the water of the Nile. And seven days passed after the Lord had struck the Nile.

Amen, this ends this reading of God's Holy and Inspired Word. May He add His blessing to it.

Our Lord and our God, open our eyes. Speak to us. When we see Your judgments visited in the world, we would not be deaf with our ears or hard with our hearts. Cause our hearts to be soft to Your words, help us to see Your warnings and the flee to You. Help us to praise you as we see Your providence in the world, and Your sovereignty displayed. We ask that we would understand what this Word has to say for us about You, about Your purposes, and about our ultimate victory and assurance. These things we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

I want to look at the passage before us tonight in three parts. In verses 14 through 19, I want you to see the task assigned by God to Moses and Aaron. In verses 20 and 21, I want you to see the task carried out, and then in verses 22

through 25, I want you to see the result of that task. Now I'm not going to give you a great deal of background all at once about the various plagues. We'll try and do that as we go along, so as not to spend all our time doing background work. There's plenty to say about each of these plagues.

I. Moses is assigned the task - turn the Nile to blood.

It's interesting, of course, that the first plague begins with the observation that the Lord gives to Moses that Pharaoh's heart is hard or stubborn or heavy. You see this in verse 14. In verses 14 through 19, the first section that we are going to study where the task is assigned, we see God instruct Moses and Aaron to do this miracle of transforming the water of the Nile. And we see a couple of themes emerge. You will know that I am the Lord, and they will worship. God, in other words, reveals two specific purposes in this section. That He would be known, and that His people would be free to worship. And in this passage, it begins with an observation about Pharaoh himself. His heart, we are told in verse 14, is stubborn, it's hard, it's heavy. This is a specific word borrowed perhaps even from the Egyptian background which indicates something about the heart of Pharaoh which may be a little surprising to you. You might think of this as saying that Pharaoh's heart is hardened in the sense of being recalcitrant. And that may well be true. But we know from Egyptian after life belief that when God says that Pharaoh's heart was heavy, He is making a moral judgment about Pharaoh's character and state. Listen to what John Currid says: "The Egyptians believed that when someone died, the person went to judgment in the underworld. The individual's heart, which was thought to be the very essence of the person, was weighed on the scales of truth. On the one hand, sat the feather of truth and righteousness. On the other side of the scale, lay the heart of the deceased. If the heart was heavy or weighty with misdeeds, the person was considered unjust and was condemned and thrown to the devourers to be eaten. If the heart was pure and light, the deceased would go into the Egyptian after life. God is telling us in verse 14, that as the Lord of heaven of earth, He had judged Pharaoh, the god of Egypt, to be unrighteous. God is even showing His sovereignty in His judgment on Pharaoh's heart, on Pharaoh's soul, on Pharaoh's character.

In verse 15, we are told that Moses is to meet Pharaoh in the morning on the banks of the Nile. We don't know exactly why Pharaoh was there. It's a little surprising to find Pharaoh at the banks of the Nile, but perhaps there was some sort of morning ritual connected with the religion that circled around the Nile. The Nile was considered divine, and perhaps Pharaoh was out participating in this ritual. But the fact that Moses meets Pharaoh there is extremely important. Remember that once upon a time the daughter of Pharaoh had met Moses on the banks of the Nile, and her actions would forever change the future of the life of Moses. Now, Moses meets Pharaoh on the banks of the Nile, and his actions will not only forever change the life of Pharaoh, but of Pharaoh's household. The language here deliberately mirrors the language of chapter 2, when Pharaoh's

daughter meets Moses and discovers him and draws him out of the water on the banks of the Nile.

Notice again in verse 15, Moses is to carry his staff, his symbol of the power of God, the symbol that he is a prophet of the Lord Most High. In verse 16, Moses is told to pre-explain the purpose of his sign to Pharaoh. Look at what we read there. "You shall say to him, to Pharaoh that is, 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.'" Pharaoh is not called upon to guess the significance of this first plague. Pharaoh is told outright the reason that I'm showing this to you is that you have not listened to My word. And so I'm going to tell you ahead of time, before I do what I'm about to do, why I'm going to do it. I'm doing it so that you will bow the knee, you'll recognize My authority, and you'll let My people go for the purpose of worshipping Me.

Very rarely in the Old Testament does God give a sign which He does not pre-explain and post-explain. In other words, biblical signs almost always function to confirm God's Word. They are not separate from God's word, they are not ways of revelation which circumvent God's Word, they are ways in which God reveals Himself in order to confirm His word. That's very important, because we live in a day and age where many well-meaning Christians are very much obsessed with signs, but they don't understand how signs relate to the word of God. Signs are not a way that can ultimately be distinguished from the work of God's revealing Himself in the word. He always reveals Himself by the word. He sometimes gives signs to confirm that word. And we see that in this passage. Even before the sign is given, Moses is explaining by the word what the sign means, and why it is given. And then He'll come back to him again and explain after the sign has been done what it means.

Notice also in verse 16, that God reiterates the great theme of the Exodus story. His purpose in liberating His people, is so that they may worship Him. Notice the language, "Let My people go that they may serve Me in the wilderness." This doesn't mean so that they can go to water. This means so that they can engage in the worship of God in the wilderness. *To serve* in this passage is *to worship*. "Let My people go that they may serve Me." This points to the fact that our purpose in life is to worship God, our chief end is to worship God, and it points out that there is a greater thing going on in the Exodus than just the liberation of Israel out of bondage. They are not saved to do as they pleased, but they are saved to become a worshipping people, a worshipping community. A community that is wholly and solely devoted to God.

In verse 17, God speaks by Moses to Pharaoh, and He tells him that He is going to strike the Nile. Why do the plagues begin with the river? Why does God begin with the Nile? Well, we know from a lot of sources from this period of time in Egyptian life, that the ancient Egyptians looked upon the Nile as the primary source of their existence. We have quotes from Greek historians and others who

will say things like this. "All know that Egypt is the Nile, and the Nile is Egypt." The Egyptians saw the Nile as the source of all their prosperity; and of all the richness of their soil and their growing capacities and, in fact, they even thought the Nile to be divine. And so the plagues begin with the Nile, and as they do so, we see the Lord striking at the very heart of Egypt's existence. It's that place that Egypt would feel it most keenly.

Furthermore, in verse 17 another theme is reiterated. Not only is Israel being liberated by God in order to worship, but we are also told that in this particular sign God says, "You shall know that I am the Lord." Now I mention in this passage that we see that knowledge of the Lord functioning in three ways. First of all, God wants His own people to know that He is the Lord. You remember the last time that Moses met with the people of God, the people of God didn't believe Moses, which is to say they didn't believe what God had said to Moses. They didn't believe what God had promised. It was important for the children of Israel to know that their God was the Lord. And so one of God's purposes in the Exodus is that His own people would know that He is the Lord. But that's not all.

In this passage, this phrase is directed at Pharaoh and His people. God desires that the Egyptians would know that He is the Lord. And the psalms reflecting on passages like this Psalm 78 and elsewhere, tell us that it's not only the children of Israel who need to know that the Lord is the Lord, and it's not only Pharaoh and the Egyptians who will come to know that He is Lord, but it's all the nations will come to know that He is the Lord as He displays His power in the Exodus. And so God has in view convincing His people, revealing Himself as Lord to the Egyptians, and showing Himself as Lord to the nations.

Now in verse 18, we are told that the result of the outstretched hand, the outstretched staff of Aaron is going to be death in the Nile. Whatever it means that the river would turn to blood, it is clear that it is going to be a supernatural event. Many commentators like to spend a lot of time saying, "Well this is the result of the snows melting in Ethiopia, and coming down river and causing all this mud and gook to be — well, there are all sorts of crazy, naturalistic explanations of this offered by commentators. But it is very clear that even an occasional liberal commentator once in a while will admit that it's absolutely clear in this passage that whatever is happening is happening supernaturally. This is not the result of the confluence of seasons and the melting of snows and such, but this is the plan of God. And so whatever specifically is happening here, it is clearly the hand of God in judgment.

But let me point your attention to verse 19 and remind you of this. The outstretched hand, the outstretched staff, the waters turned to blood portend another judgment as well. You remember how we said that the contest between Pharaoh and his magicians and Moses portended another contest. When the staff of Moses swallowed up the staffs of Pharaoh's magicians, we said it looked forward to a time when the Egyptians would be swallowed up as the staff of God

was stretched over the Red Sea. Once again, in the very first plague, we see a portent of something to come in God's judgment against Egypt. And of course that is this. The next time there will be a judgment of blood in the water, it will be at the Red Sea, and it will be the armies of Egypt filling the Red Sea with death. So God is showing a picture of things to come as Pharaoh is stubborn, as he will not turn back, so God will bring death to Egypt. The whole point here is that God is sovereign over Pharaoh, God is sovereign over the Nile, God is sovereign over all creation, and God is sovereign over Egypt. So the plagues are both judgments and signs. They are punishments and ways in which God is revealing the fact that He is Lord. You will know that I am the Lord, and they will be set free to worship. This is what we see in verses 14 to 19. The task is a sign, this miracle of transforming water, and the pre-explanation that is to go along with it. That brings us to verses 20 and 21.

II. Moses carries out the task assigned by God.

Here we see the task carried out. The waters of Egypt are turned to blood. Just as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron do. They obey precisely. The sign is done in the sight of Pharaoh and his court servants, and everything happens just like the Lord said it would happen. And once again, why is that fact recorded? Because, the fact that everything happens just like the Lord said it would happen, shows the sovereignty of God. He's not only able to do a great miracle, He's able to tell you what's going to happen before He does it, and what's going to happen as a consequence of it. This is the testimony of God's sovereignty. The result, of course, of Moses and Aaron's actions is an ecological disaster of epic proportions. It affected not only the Nile, but water throughout Egypt.

It is also interesting, isn't it, that in contrast to Pharaoh's magicians, Moses and Aaron don't do incantations, they don't do any rituals, they simply do what God tells them without any drama, without any fanfare, and it happens. When the magicians attempt to duplicate, they do it with all their wailings and weepings and rituals and incantations and secret arts. But this is itself an evidence of the power of God at work in Moses and Aaron. As God brings judgment on the Nile, we see here a picture that Egyptian polytheism is futile in the face of the sovereign God of Israel. The Nile was worshipped as a god, and its water was the lifeblood of Egypt. The fish from the Nile was an important food even though some upper classes of Egyptian society didn't think that it was good to eat fish. They thought it was an unclean thing. But this blow was devastating against Egypt, and it's showing God's sovereignty over Egypt.

III. The result of Moses' obedience.

And then in verses 22 through 25, we see the result of the task that Moses and

Aaron had been given. The sign is, ironically, duplicated by the magicians. You may be asking, "Why would you duplicate that sign?" I don't have a good answer for you. But they duplicate this sign, and Pharaoh, nevertheless, remains cynical. Pharaoh's blind heart is evidenced and confirmed in this third section of the passage we are looking at today. The Egyptian magicians then, in response to the sign of Moses, make matters worse. They duplicate the feat. They didn't have the power apparently to reverse what Moses and Aaron had done, and so they go out and they duplicate it. And there's a sense of ironic judgment about the success of these magicians. They merely succeeded in adding to the plague against their own people. They were unable to reverse the judgment of God, but they end of intensifying it.

And, of course, notice as well that they do it by their spells. We are told specifically they did the same with their secret arts. So what's the difference between what the magicians did and what Moses and Aaron did? Well, it's very simple. The difference didn't lie so much in the results as it did in the methods which produced the results. The Egyptians produced their results with secret arts, with spells, with occult practices. Moses and Aaron, however, obtain their results by obeying God and relying on Him alone. And in this we see the difference. What Moses and Aaron have done is simply a manifestation of the power of God.

Then we see how Pharaoh reacts. It's absolutely stunning, verse 23. "Pharaoh returns to his palace, he shows absolutely no concern, and he thinks it was all a trick. I mean, after all, his magicians had been able to duplicate it. It's all a farce, it's all a trick. His people are without water, they're trying to dig new wells because they can't find clean, pure water to drink. Egypt is in havoc for seven days, and Pharaoh is absolutely unconcerned. This will not be the last time that we see a picture of a heart which is blind to the truth of God.

But this plague not only reveals us the heart of Pharaoh and shows us the sovereignty of God in His dealings with Egypt, it also foreshadows the future. We have already mentioned that this plague foreshadows a future judgment at the Red Sea. But we can also say that the plagues in general foreshadow the judgment that is going to come against all the followers of Satan, against all unbelievers in the end times. In the book of Revelation, in a passage that you're going to hear not too long from now on Wednesday night. Revelation, chapter 16, goes back and mirrors the language of Exodus, chapter 7, and applies it to the final pouring out of the bowls of wrath against the wicked. In the book of Exodus, we not only have a display of God's sovereignty in redeeming His people out of Egypt, but we have a picture of God's final judgment against all those who resist His will. The choices are very simple. You accept His revelation, you acknowledge Him as Lord, He makes you to be His People, and He becomes your God. Or, like Pharaoh, you respond by going into your house with no concern, rejecting Him, and the final judgments of God are visited upon you.

Those are the only two options for us in this passage or anywhere else in Scripture. Bow the knee, and accept the Lord Jesus Christ, or be judged in God's just judgment. That's the message of Exodus 7, verses 14 through 25. The first in the plague cycle, and we'll see God repeatedly and cumulatively demonstrate His sovereignty over the gods of Egypt and over the resistance of Pharaoh for the sake of the redemption of His People, and for the sake of the revelation of His great Name. Let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father, Your Word is straightforward, but there are many who because of their own cynicisms are hardened of heart. They resist it. They doubt it. They disagree with it. We pray, O Lord, that You would break down that cynicism, that You would open their eyes to see that Christ is the only way to be spared the judgment that is to come. We ask, O Lord, that as we read Your Word, our hearts would be made tender and willing, would hear and obey and believe. This we ask in Jesus name, Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, **subscriptions are free**. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).