

The Fifth Plague: Death of Livestock

Exodus 9:1-7

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus, chapter 9. We have studied the first four plagues now. After tonight we'll be halfway home. And this is perhaps a good time to pause and review some of the great things that we have seen, and some trends that have already become evident. First of all, as you look at the plagues, you need to remember that the plagues manifest God's redemptive work of destruction. When He comes about redeeming His people, it means the tearing down of the strongholds of Satan. And the Lord's work of redemption includes not only purchasing His people at a price, but also destroying the forces that are made against them. And when you reflect upon the drama of redemption itself, part of that drama of redemption is God's conquest of the powers of darkness. In Exodus, 7 through 11, especially as we read about what God does in the plagues, we see Him bringing plagues against the enemies of His people. That in and of itself is part of His act of redemption. It's a destruction work, but it is part of the act of redemption. The towers of God's enemies must be torn down if His people are to be safe and free. And so alongside of His positive work of rescuing his own people, there is a negative work of shattering the resistance to His rule.

This is something that you see not only in the Old Testament, but also, and we might say especially, in the New Testament. Christ's work on our behalf in the New Testament is often pictured in terms of the destroying of those forces which are arrayed against His people. In Matthew, chapter 12, verses 28 and 29, and I Peter 3:22. In fact, when John Calvin is making a comment on John, chapter 16, verse 33, where Jesus says "I have overcome the world," Calvin says that Jesus means that He has overcome every spiritual force aligned against His people. He has disarmed the spiritual forces of wickedness, and led captivity captive, and so we are now more than conquerors because Christ has vanquished all that would oppose God's elect: Death, life, angels and demons. And so we see this in the plague narratives themselves, God tearing down that which is opposed to His people. That's one thing we see.

Secondly, however, and this may be the most important theme we have seen so far, the plagues serve to manifest the Lordship of God. At the very outset of the

plagues, we are told what God's purpose is in the great contest that is going to ensue between Him and Pharaoh. In Exodus 7, verse 5 the Lord says very emphatically to Moses, the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord. Now, of course, it is repeated over and over that God wants people to know that He is the Lord. But in this great contest, God plans at the end for the Egyptians to know very well who the Lord, the God of the Hebrews is, and just how awesome in might He is. That perhaps is one of the greatest themes that you find in the stories of the plagues.

Third, let's notice a few patterns that we've already seen in the plagues so far, a few trends perhaps. In the first three plagues, the magicians reproduced the sign. Or we might say it this way. In the first two plagues and in the snake incident, the magicians reproduced the sign. In the third plague, the magicians admit defeat, and they admit the divine origin of the sign which Moses has done. Aaron's staff is used in the first three plagues and in the encounter with the magicians and the snake. It's never used again as far as we know. Pharaoh's heart is hardened after the snake encounter and also in each of the first three plagues. It won't be the last time that that is said about Pharaoh. Over and over in this passage, we see it repeated that Pharaoh's heart is hardened. All these things we have seen so far in the study of the plagues.

Tonight we approach the fifth plague. You will find it in Exodus, chapter 9, verses 1 through 7, so let's hear God's Word. This is His Word for you. Hear it expectantly.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and speak to him. Thus says the Lord. The God of the Hebrews. Let my people go that they may serve Me. For if you refuse to let them go and continue to hold them, behold the hand of the Lord will come with a very severe pestilence on your livestock which are in the fields, on the horses, on the donkeys, on the camels, on the herds and on the flocks. But the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing will die of all that belongs to the sons of Israel." And the Lord set a definite time saying, tomorrow the Lord will do this thing in the land. So the Lord did this thing on the morrow, and all the livestock of Egypt died, but of the livestock of the sons of Israel, not one died. And Pharaoh sent and behold, there was not even one of the livestock of Israel dead. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, he did not let the people go.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired Word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Lord, we seek your illumination, Your wisdom, You mind, and we ask that You would reveal Yourself especially to us in Your Word. Teach us the lessons that You would have us to learn. Teach us to humble ourselves before your sovereignty, and to trust in You even in times of difficulty. Grant us a greater

appreciation of Your operations of providence on behalf of Your people and more. All these things we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

In this plague tonight, the fifth of the plagues, we learn many things, but at least we learn this: God rules, and reigns and makes distinctions. That may be undemocratic, but it's good news for those who love and serve the Lord in a fallen world in the midst of much opposition. God rules, and reigns and makes distinctions. I'd like to look at this passage with you in two parts tonight.

First of all, in verses 1 through 5 you see this word of announcement and warning about the coming of the fifth plague. Then in verses 6 and 7 where the blow, the plague itself is carried out against Egypt but not against the children of Israel. Let's look at the first section first.

I. God is sovereign and will be known as such.

In verses 1 through 5 we see this word of announcement that God gives to Moses that he is to pronounce to Pharaoh. It stretches through the whole of those verses, and it serves as a warning, another warning to Pharaoh. In all of the plagues, there is not a warning. But in some of the plagues God gives a prior warning to Pharaoh to give him as it were the opportunity to repent, to turn back and to accept what God has called upon him to do. That is, to free the people, and to grant them the privilege of worshipping and serving their God. So let's look through these verses together. Moses is teaching us here that God is sovereign, and wills that He would be known as such. His plan, He's already told us in the Exodus, is that His people would know that He is the Lord, the sovereign one of heaven and earth, and that Egypt would know that He is the Lord. And we see that carried out here in verses 1 through 5.

First of all, notice the name which God uses for Himself. "Tell Pharaoh this, the Lord, the God of the Hebrews." We see here another revelation of God's divine name. God tells Moses to remind Pharaoh who it is speaking to Him, the Lord, the God of the Hebrews. This is the first time since the first plague that God has used that title, "God of the Hebrews." So it's as if God is coming back to Pharaoh again and saying, "Now by the way, since you said that you didn't know who the Lord was, let me tell you one more time. The God who has done these blows against your land, and is preparing to do a fifth if you do not repent," and, of course, He doesn't tell him this now, " and is ready to do five more if you do not relent, is the God of the Hebrews. Since you didn't know who I was, since you didn't know My name, had never heard of Me, let me tell you one more time, I am the Lord, the God of the Hebrews."

Notice also in verse 1, that Moses is told to use that great prophetic phrase, "Thus says the Lord." That phrase begins here with Moses in the narrative surrounding the plagues, and it will be picked up by almost all of the prophets

henceforth throughout the Old Testament as an introduction of a divine revelation. When a prophet gives you a "thus says the Lord," he's telling you these words don't come from me, they're not my approximation of what I think God might want to say at this time. They are what God has told me to say to you. And that formula is used first here by Moses.

Notice also, if you'll look again at verse 1, that God specifies and reiterates again to Pharaoh His purpose for freeing His people. He says that He frees them in order that "they might serve Me, that they might serve and worship me." The purpose of God's redeeming His people out of bondage is so that they might serve Him. And that, of course, is another of the themes. We could have mentioned that tonight as we were reviewing. It's one of the great themes of the stories of the Exodus, that we are saved to worship.

Then if you look at verses 2 and 3, you'll see the specific threat of judgment that God tells Moses to give to Pharaoh. God threatens a severe judgment against the livestock of Egypt. I've been reading a good bit over the last two weeks about the hoof and mouth disease that has attacked Britain, and some of the consequences of that. And I couldn't help but think of that, as we came up upon this plague. You know, some of the commentators even think this may have been some kind of hoof and mouth disease, though most of them think of it as some sort of anthrax. At any rate, whatever it was, God threatens a very severe judgment against the livestock of Egypt. And I'd like you to note at least two things about this.

First of all, notice that whereas before, God's actions with the rod have been spoken of as the 'Finger of God' against Egypt. Now we're told that the 'Hand of the Lord will be against Egypt.' Now that's an interesting phrase. It's interesting because over and over in Egyptian literature, when it wants to talk about Pharaoh exalting himself against the nations which he has conquered, it speaks of the strong hand of Pharaoh was against his foes. Now, as it were, once again, God directly confronts and challenges the sovereignty and authority of Pharaoh by saying, "My hand will be against you, Pharaoh. Your hand may be against your foes, and you may have conquered nations, but My hand is now against you." It's a symbol of the power of God.

Notice also, that this plague may well have been another attack on the religion and superstition of Egypt. We know, for instance, that bull cults were especially popular in Egypt throughout most of its ancient period. They viewed the bull as a fertility figure, and bulls and other animals were sometimes the embodiment of certain Egyptian gods. So this may once again be a challenge to the religious system of Egypt, showing that God, the Lord, the God of the Hebrews is the true God, and that the gods that they serve are false gods who He is able to dominate and conquer and rule over.

When we go to verse 4, for the second time in the plague stories, we are

explicitly told that God participates in divine discrimination. Now hold that idea because we're going to come back to it when we get to verses 6 and 7, but let me just pass verse 4 by making this comment. God here promises once again to make a distinction between Israel and Egypt. All of this is part of God's showing that He is in control, He is in charge. When He sends a natural calamity or a supernatural calamity, He can determine who it falls on. He doesn't have to save anyone, and it affects everyone. If He wants to make a distinction, He can make a distinction.

And then in verse 5, you'll see again God pre-announcing the timing of the plague. This is another testimony to His sovereignty. The Lord shows His sovereignty in this passage through the kind of judgment that is threatened. It's against the livestock of the land, against the bulls, and against the cattle and very well perhaps against the religious superstitions of Egypt. And so He shows you sovereignty through the kind of judgment that He threatens. He also shows His sovereignty by this reference to this hand. His Hand will be against Pharaoh. He shows His sovereignty through making a distinction between Israel and Egypt. I can bring a plague, and it will make the plague fall on Egypt and not on Israel. And finally, He shows His sovereignty through the timing of this particular plague. God is manifesting that He is a God to be reckoned with. Our God is as terrible as an army with banners, and He will be known as such, and He will not be trifled with.

That was a lesson that God intended Egypt to learn, but it was also a lesson that He intended His people to learn. Remember, that when these things are written down, Israel has already passed through this trial. So why would God write these things down, but that He primarily wants His people to know what kind of a God He is. That He is a sovereign God. That He is in control. That there are no circumstances over which He does not rule. There are no events that He is not able to effect. He is the sovereign God; He is awesome in might.

And that's a truth that all believers in all ages need to know, not the least of whom are Christians of the era of the New Covenant. We, too, need to know that God is awesome and sovereign. That's one of the great applications that Moses intends for us to learn in this passage, that our God is sovereign. But that is something that is easy to say in good times and hard to say in times where we are absolutely baffled by what God is doing. Just this past week, I had the privilege of speaking to the Philadelphia Conference on Reformation Theology, and the theme throughout the week was God's sovereignty and His mercy. And, after this dear woman had heard all the various speakers, she came up to me and engaged in a conversation and asked me a question. She said, "Do I understand you're saying that God is in control of absolutely everything?" Yes. Then, God is the God who ordains pain in our life. Yes, He is. She says to me, "How can I trust to heal me the God who has hurt me?" Now that's a profound question, my friends. But it is precisely this point that we are to learn here. Whatever questions we are left with, our God is sovereign. You don't solve that

question by scaling Him down off the throne. "Oh well, He wasn't in charge of that bit of life. He was in charge of the good bits, but He couldn't help that other bit." No, this God is in control of everything, and He makes distinctions. Sometimes He makes distinctions that spare His people from pain. Other times He makes distinctions that allow them to go through that pain, and yet to do so for their benefit. But He is the sovereign God of heaven and earth.

I can't remember the passage exactly but there is a passage in the chronicles of Narnia, when Jill is approaching the only stream in Narnia, wanting a drink. And when she gets there, Aslan, the great lion, is guarding the river. And she is frightened by it. And she's trying to find out whether she's safe or not. And she says to Aslan, "Do you eat little girls?" And his response is, "Little girl, I've consumed kingdoms, and peoples and worlds." And she continues to try and negotiate with him to make sure it's safe, and he won't give her any comfort. And finally she says, "Well, I'll have to go find another stream." And he says, "Little girl, there is no other stream." My friends, there is no other God. You're not going to be able to go and find another god that's safer, another god who's more manageable, another god who is more domesticated. There is no other God. He is the sovereign God of heaven and earth; and the only thing that you can reckon with in the midst of trouble, is that He is good. He is sovereign; you may not understand what He's doing, but He is good. And God intends for us to learn His sovereignty. What an awesome God to, as it were, trifle with Egypt as He is doing.

II. God engages in divine discrimination.

Now look at the second part of this passage, verses 6 and 7. The blow is carried out here. The fifth plague is sent against Egypt, and we see here God engaging in divine discrimination, if I can pick up that phrase again. Everything we're told in verse 6, everything happens just as the Lord said it would. And I'd like you to note two things about that.

First of all, notice that Pharaoh's sin, Pharaoh's hardness of heart, Pharaoh's refusal to obey the God of heaven and earth, results in the destruction of animal life in Egypt. It is because of Pharaoh's sin that the livestock of Egypt are judged. And this reminds us that sin impacts the animal creation as well. The fall does not only impact humanity, the fall has a cosmic impact on the whole of creation. You remember Paul talking about that in Romans, chapter 8. Turn there with me. In Romans 8, verses 19 through 22 we read, "For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the Sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it in hope that creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now." The fall of Adam has impacted the created order, the redemption of the Sons of God will impact

the whole of the created order. The scope of the fall is cosmic, the scope of redemption is cosmic. And we see that even here, as Pharaoh sins, his livestock suffers.

Secondly, notice here in verse 6 that the Lord makes the distinction that He had promised. This reminds us of His perpetual, special providence over His people. If we were to look back to Exodus, chapter 8, verses 22 and 23 for the first time there, we would see God making a distinction, setting apart His people and the land of Goshen to the land of Egypt. We'll see God do it again in chapter 9, verse 26 in the midst of the seventh plague. We'll see God do it again in chapter 10, verse 23, in the midst of the ninth plague. And we'll see, of course, God do it again in chapter 11, verse 7 in that final, horrific plague with regard to the death of the first born. God sets a distinction between those who are His, and those who are not. The Lord always makes a distinction. He always makes a distinction in His providential dealings with His people, and those who are not. Now, He doesn't always make the distinction in the same way. In some of the cases were told explicitly that the children of Israel did not undergo the same plague that the children of Egypt were undergoing. Now we're not told that in the other cases. It's possible that God made a distinction every time. He emphasizes it in certain of the plagues, but there are other times where God makes the distinction even though He sends His children through the same trial.

Think of the story of Joseph. God made a distinction between Joseph and his brothers, and Joseph and his captors, but it didn't mean that Joseph was spared the trial. Joseph was sent into captivity; his brothers' meant it for destruction. God meant it for good. God made a distinction. But you know, it still hurt Joseph the same amount at the time. He could look back and see God's hand and God's wisdom and God's purpose, but at the time, it hurt just as much as if his brothers' plan was the plan of God.

Think again of the imprisonment of Paul. Those who hated Paul and wanted him silenced, desired him to be imprisoned and led away to be brought before the court in Rome so he would be destroyed and disposed of. God intended that so that Paul would witness the gospel to the emperor, that he would speak the word of truth to kings. Same actions, different intentions. Different results, different consequences. God always makes a distinction.

We think of the fire that occurred in the compound of William Carey's missionary quarters in India. Everything was lost. Eighteen years of work on a Sanskrit lexicon and guide to grammar. All his presses, hundreds of scripture tracts, all lost. But that which looked like the greatest discouragement which he had experienced up until that time in India, God had planned to cause a greater support for the work of missions in India than had ever existed amongst the churches back in England. And God used that very event that looked like it was the hand of Satan against William Carey to bring about good for that work of mission. Over and over we see this pattern. God makes the distinction in His

special providence. It doesn't mean that He works the same way every time, but he always has something in store for good. God works all things for good for those who love Him. He doesn't say all things are good for those who love the Lord. He says, He works all things for good. He always has a distinction and a special providence.

Let me just mention again in this passage that God is clearly the great actor here. In this drama, God is the active protagonist. It's not Moses, it's not Aaron, and it's certainly not Pharaoh. And look how the Lord Himself is emphasized. Look at verse 3, 4, verse 5 twice, and verse 6. "The Lord will come with a severe pestilence. The Lord will make a distinction. The Lord will set a definite time. The Lord will do this thing. The Lord did this thing." Who's in charge here? It's not Moses, it's not Aaron, it's not Pharaoh. This story is about the Lord. And meanwhile, Pharaoh, what do you hear about him? He's immobilized, and he's hardened. It's interesting, isn't it, that the only thing that Pharaoh does here is send out his own men to see if what God said would happen with regard to the children of Israel had happened. When they come back and say, "Yep, it happened." He's hardened.

Now with that evidence, any rational creation would have responded to with a very different attitude. But here in the hardness of his own moral depravity, Pharaoh's heart is made heavy. Both Pharaoh's immobility and inactivity in this passage, and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, are signs of God's sovereignty over him and judgment over him. The god of Egypt is being judged and God the Lord is being made known. The Lord, He is God. That's the God we love. He's not manageable, He's not tamable, He's not domesticated, and He is incapable of being domesticated. But, and this is your only salvation, He is *for* you if you trust in Christ. By His mercy, may you be in Christ. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, You are the awesome God; You are the King above all gods, the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. May the earth know that You are the Lord, and may the knowledge of the Lord cover the earth like the waters cover the sea. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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