**BCM Bible Study: Sept. 30/October 1, 2020**

**Exodus 7:8-10:29: The Plagues**

Review last week’s challenge: “Sit alone or with a friend somewhere outside. Spend 3 minutes thanking God for the gifts he has given you. Next, spend 3 minutes reflecting on times when God felt particularly close to you. Close with at least 3 minutes of silence.” What was this experience like for you?

Intro: Today we will be going over the first nine Egyptian plagues and the sign of the staff that precedes them. We will look at the 10th plague next week in connection with the institution of Passover. Our goal is not to take unique meaning from each of the plagues. Instead, we will look at major themes of the story. The plagues are presented in 3 cycles of 3 (see the chart in the Extra Notes), so we will read them that way, focus on each section, and synthesize at the end. Warning – we will be reading a lot today!

Cycle 1: **Read Exodus 7:8-8:19**

* What are your observations for this section?
* Is it surprising to you that the magicians can reproduce some of the plagues? What does this tell you about the nature of the battle between God and Pharaoh? (It is a supernatural battle!)
* The Nile was personified and worshipped as an Egyptian god. Why was this a fitting place for God to perform the first two plagues?
  + **Read Ephesians 6:12.** Do you think often about supernatural powers at work in our world? How might these dark powers express themselves?
  + “Counterfeit power, although real power, is not lasting power.” (Peter Enns) What “counterfeit powers” are discouraging to you? How does the story of the plagues give us hope in the face of these powers?
* The third plague (and all of the rest) couldn’t be reproduced by the magicians. What is different about the third plague? (It is the first plague not involving the Nile)
  + “Their magic and secret arts are empowered by the Nile, but with the third plague, the magicians are out of their element.” (Peter Enns) What is God communicating about himself by performing this plague outside of the Egyptians’ realm of spiritual power?
* In all of the plagues, we should notice a significant theme – creation reversal. The Egyptians believed in a cosmic order called Ma’at. The Israelites believed that it was Yahweh who created by bringing order to chaos. In these plagues, God is going to communicate his power over creation by reversing creation order, letting chaos reign, and sometimes restoring order. Where do you see this happening in the first three plagues?

Cycle 2: **Read Exodus 8:20-9:12**

* What are your observations for this section?
* In all of these plagues (and all the remaining except the locusts), a distinction is made between Israelites (who lived in Goshen) and Egyptians. Why is this significant?
* Every plague so far has mentioned Pharaoh’s hard heart, but the statement in plague 6 is different – how is it different? For now, simply note this. We will return to this theme.
* What are the creation reversals in this section? How to the plagues seem to be increasing in intensity? (plague 5 includes death, plague 6 directly impacts people)

Cycle 3: **Read Exodus 9:13-10:29**

* What are your observations for this section?
* The theme we noted in the sixth plague comes into full focus in these sections. Where do you see the tension between God hardening Pharaoh’s heart and Pharaoh hardening his own heart?
  + Look again at 9:15-17 and 10:1-3. How do you see the tension at play in these verses? Why does God say he is doing these things through Pharaoh?
  + In what way do these events serve as a reminder for us as they did for Israel?
  + Many struggle with why God treats Pharaoh the way he does. I have found some peace in the idea that Pharaoh was wicked and had already turned his back on God, but I don’t think this answer is completely fair to the text. It is tempting to debate God’s sovereignty and free will, but the Scriptures do not help us alleviate that tension. At the end of the day, sometimes we must concede that we don’t know.
* What are the creation reversals in this section?
  + In what way does plague 9 bring us back to the very beginning of creation?

God of Creation

* One of our major themes for Exodus is that God is revealing his name to Israel and the world. That is, he is showing everyone who he is and what he is like. What message do you think God is trying to convey through the events in this section?
* Why is creation a fitting means for God to convey this message?
  + God frequently turns creation upside down to fulfill his purposes and show his might. Peter Enns says it this way: “God arms himself with creation to bring creation itself to its ultimate goal. Our salvation is a *part* of that goal.” **Read Romans 8:8:18-23**.
* Creation reversals accompanied the cross. **Read Matthew 27:45-54**. What connections to do see to Exodus?
  + **Read Romans 8:11** and **2 Cor. 5:17.** How do these passages connect salvation and creation? How does the resurrection connect to this theme?
  + The God who controls the elements is the God who can change our hearts. He is the creator and Lord of all. How does reading God’s actions during the plagues give you hope in places where you feel stuck?

Challenge

It is tempting to pick apart the plague passage to find points of application. But at the end of the day, the best response may simply be awe and wonder at God’s might and how he uses it for our benefit. Take some time to praise God this week. Here are some suggestions:

1. Write your testimony with a focus on how God has intervened in your life, rescued you, and given you good things. Share this with someone.
2. Praise God for the wonders of creation. It is helpful to do this outside and I suggest writing this down or praying out loud to help your focus.
3. Praise God for the blessings in your life. Make a list. If people are on the list, reach out to them to express your gratitude for their influence on your life.

Extra Notes:

* We need not explain away any of these plagues. Yes – there are natural explanations that could be offered to explain them, but the Bible is clearly putting God forth as the Lord of creation.
* Aaron’s snake “swallows” the magicians snake. The word – “swallow” – is used in only one other place in Exodus – when the sea “swallows” the Egyptian army.
* The word used for the magicians’ snake is *tannin*, a word used in the Old Testament to represent chaos. God as Creator means that he gives order to chaos. As God’s snake swallows *tannin*, he overcomes Pharaoh, the anti-creation force in this story.
* It is fitting that the first plague takes place on the Nile, the very force Pharaoh used to try to kill the Israelites in ch. 1.
* Was all the water in Egypt turned to blood? Probably not because the magicians are able to duplicate it. It’s likely that the phrasing is equivalent to our vernacular: “there was blood all over the place.”
* Frogs seem like an almost comical plague, but their rotting bodies would have created a tremendous public health issue! Moreover, the Egyptian goddess of childbirth (Heqet) is depicted as having the head of a frog. Since the Nile is the source of fertility of the land, this plague sends a clear message.
* No Egyptian god is clearly alluded to in plagues 3, 4 and 6.
* The dust becomes gnats in the third plague seems to be connected to the dust in Gen. 3:19 that signifies death – “to dust you will return.” These gnats are a sharp reminder that the God who forms live out of dust can bring death from the dust.
* Plagues 4-7 involve no staff, only a spoken word. This is reminiscent of God speaking creation into being.
* Some of Moses’ interactions with Pharaoh are puzzling. For instance, why, in the account of the flies, does Moses seem to concede to Pharaoh and give reasons other than “God said so.” Some think Moses is being clever or diplomatic, thinking the account should be read – “We wouldn’t *possibly* want to offend *you*.” I tend to think that Moses is simply not the strong character we see post-Red Sea. Moses is still learning!
* The plague of boils may include a nod to the kiln that the Israelites used to made bricks. Also, it is notable that like Israelite religion, in Egyptian religion skin disease meant ritual impurity, which precludes one from participating in worship. This statement by God is especially potent in light of the fact that Israel was not impacted by this plague and that fact that the magicians couldn’t stand before Moses, who represents God to them.
* The hailstorm seems to be a challenge to the Egyptian god Seth who is manifested as wind and storms. This plague also using theophanic language – aka. God is not just judging, he is present! Moreover, the word for vegetation in Ex. 9:22 is also found in Gen. 1:11-12.
* Why are there crops to be destroyed after the hail? See 9:31-32.
* The east wind that brings the locusts will also part the Red Sea. It is also remarkable that they die in the Rea Sea
* Plagues 7-9 carry with them a tone of judgement because hail, locusts and darkness are all referred to in the Old Testament as signs of judgment.
* The final plague would have brought Re, the sun god, to mind. Pharaohs were often referred to as sons of Re.



