

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 9:1-7

To understand more about the fifth plague, the death of the Egyptian livestock.

Read the Text:

“Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, “Let my people go, that they may serve me. 2 For if you refuse to let them go and still hold them, 3 behold, the hand of the LORD will fall with a very severe plague upon your livestock that are in the field, the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks. 4 But the LORD will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing of all that belongs to the people of Israel shall die.”” 5 And the LORD set a time, saying, “Tomorrow the LORD will do this thing in the land.” 6 And the next day the LORD did this thing. All the livestock of the Egyptians died, but not one of the livestock of the people of Israel died. 7 And Pharaoh sent, and behold, not one of the livestock of Israel was dead. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go.” (Exodus 9:1-7, ESV)

Study the Text:

Plague #5: Death of Egyptian Livestock

After the most recent plague, the fourth plague of flies, which was the first of the plagues that necessitated the people of God being separated from the rest of the Egyptians in order to avoid the effects of it, the next plague is (as expected) even worse than the previous ones; the death of all Egyptian livestock. Below is a breakdown of some of the key details in this passage.

GO IN

Unlike the first and fourth plagues wherein Moses was instructed to go to Pharaoh as He was bathing outdoors in the water, verse 1 indicates that Moses was to “go in to Pharaoh,” which means “to go inside to Pharaoh,” probably a reference to the courts of Pharaoh, presumably the same location as the second and eighth plagues. While this small detail doesn’t necessarily impact the nature of this particular passage, it does matter. Specific details such as this one enliven the story. The Exodus story isn’t built on a repeating pattern of the same things every single day for all ten plagues, similar to a myth or legend. These subtle changes reflect real life. The rhythm of life in Egypt more or less continued even in amidst the plagues. Pharaoh continued to bathe in the Nile and he continued to gather in his court with his court officials even though things were getting worse. The story of Exodus is not just a story, it *really happened*.

A SEVERE PLAGUE

One small but important detail in this passage is the way in which God refers to Himself in His message to Pharaoh: “The LORD, the God of the Hebrews” (Ex. 9:1). It is important because it sets up who God says will do this fifth plague: “Behold, the hand of the LORD will fall with a very severe plague” (Ex. 9:3). For the first time the LORD says that He Himself will perform the plague. Of course, we know as the reader that He has been responsible for all of the plagues and the pre-plague miracles, but to Pharaoh and the Egyptian audience, they thought that Moses and Aaron were the ones doing the plagues (other than the court magicians who after the third plague attributed it to “the finger of God” [Ex. 8:19]). Now, however, the message is explicitly clear; the LORD is one who will do this plague. And notice that this plague will be

“severe” (Heb. כָּבֵד). As if the previous plagues have not already been troublesome, this is the first time it is described as especially heavy or burdensome, indicating that the toll it will take will be even greater than what has already been experienced.

ANOTHER DISTINCTION

Like the fourth plague, which required God to separate the Hebrew people in Gershon away from the Egyptians in order to avoid the fallout, the fifth plague features yet another separation, this time not with people but with livestock. Verse 4 says, “But the LORD will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing of all that belongs to the people of Israel shall die.” Because this plague would take the lives of all livestock, the LORD separated the livestock which belonged to the people of Israel in order to preserve it. This is even verified by Pharaoh when he sent people to go and check in on the Israelites (Ex. 9:7).

One detail that requires further commentary is the fact that “all the livestock of the Egyptians” apparently died in Exodus 9:6, and yet there remains Egyptian livestock during the seventh plague (Ex. 9:19-21) as well as during the tenth and final plague as well (Ex. 12:29). So how do we account for this apparent contradiction? The term “all” here in Hebrew is kol (Heb. כֹּל), and it can also mean “all sorts of” or “from all over.” Old Testament scholar Douglas Stuart suggests a better translation of this verse would be something like “all sorts of Egyptian livestock died” or “Egyptian livestock died all over the place.”¹ So it isn’t that there is a contradiction in the text, but that a clearer understanding of the Hebrew emerges upon closer inspection. All kinds of livestock died, but not every single one of them.

A SET TIME

There’s also a timeframe set upon this plague. Moses does not warn Pharaoh of a plague that will come to pass at some undefined point; the plague will happen at a specific time. The LORD “set a time” (Ex. 9:5). In addition to the location of Pharaoh upon receiving the news of yet another plague, the fifth plague and the second plague also have a timeframe in common. In the second plague, Moses allowed the Pharaoh to dictate a timeframe for when the plague would cease. One would think that Pharaoh would have learned his lesson and that the timeframe given by God concerning the fifth plague would have been enough to convince him. However, Pharaoh’s heart has only grown harder since then.

THE EVIDENCE DOESN’T MATTER

The evidence that God will act in an even more brutal manner against Pharaoh and Egypt is more convincing in the fifth plague than in any other previous plague. God has given a specific time frame. He has made separation between the Hebrew livestock and the Egyptian livestock. He has even come out and explicitly said that it will not Moses nor Aaron who do this, but God Himself. Yet, “the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go” (Ex. 9:7).

What About Now?

One takeaway is the precision with which God operates in terms of judgment. God’s judgment is not a scatter-shot affair; He operates with pinpoint accuracy. He separates the people in the fourth plague in order to ensure that His intended target is the only target. He separates the animals here in the fifth plague for the same reason. God’s judgment comes for the purposes of justice and His justice is perfect. Another takeaway is the compounding effect of a hardened heart. The more a person hardens their heart, the more God will

¹ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2 of The New American Commentary, eds. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 224.

“give them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done” (Rom. 1:28). In a situation where the evidence presented *should be* persuasive, a person with a hard heart will only remain obstinate. Finally, an important reminder emerges from this text: God opposes injustice and evil and will punish those who perpetuate it. While God acts in the moment here in Exodus, He is “enduring with much patience” those who do evil in order to “make known the riches of his glory” for those who will believe (Rom. 9:22-23). While it may seem that God is letting evil people off the hook, they will one day face justice (Rom. 12:19).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 9:1. What did the LORD tell Moses to say to Pharaoh?

2. Read Exodus 9:2-3. What were to be the consequences if Pharaoh rejected God’s demands?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 9:4. What else would the LORD do in order to protect the livestock of the people of Israel?

2. Read Exodus 9:5. What else did the LORD do to prepare Pharaoh for what was to come? What other plague does this remind you of? (Hint: See above notes)

Day Three

3. Read Exodus 9:6. What happened the next day?

4. According to the note, what does the word “all” likely indicate? How does this change the way you understand verse 6?

Day Four

1. Read Exodus 9:7. What did Pharaoh do after the Egyptian livestock died? Did this change his mind concerning letting the people of Israel go?

2. Read Romans 1:18-32. Make note of the downward spiral of rejecting truth, and the ways in which God progressively allows this to happen.
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Discuss the Text!

Week 19 Discussion: Ripple Effects

In the fifth plague, it isn't only the Egyptian people who suffer, but their livestock as well. "All kinds of" Egyptian livestock die in this plague. This would have been a detrimental blow to the Egyptian livelihood. The livestock provided food, money, and manual labor. They also were a part of God's creation and had no real part in the stubborn rejection of Pharaoh towards God's demands. They were, in some sense, innocent. Sin works this way. It isn't just the one who commits a sin that faces the consequences; often the ripple effects of sin touch other people (and things) too. Think of a smooth and serene pond with a surface like glass. Now imagine throwing a rock out into the middle of it, and try to visualize the ripple effects of waves that would emanate outward from the point of impact. Our actions work this way as well, and those outward moving rings touch more and more people. Talk as a group about the ways in which your actions impact not only you, but other people too, especially with the church in mind.

1. Icebreaker: What are some other examples of "ripple effects" in the world?
2. What are some "ripple effect" examples of sin?
3. What are some "ripple effect" examples of acts of kindness?
4. Have you ever been "innocently" impacted by someone else's sin?
5. Have you ever been "innocently" impacted by someone else's acts of kindness? In other words, has someone's act of kindness that was not intended for you still blessed you? Share with the group.
6. Is the church at large impacted by one individual's sin? How so?

Takeaways:

1. The fifth plague is a "severe" plague that is explicitly carried out by the LORD Himself.
2. The LORD separates the livestock of the Hebrews to protect them before striking the livestock of the Egyptians.
3. Pharaoh's heart remains hardened regardless of the increasing intensity of the plagues.