

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 7:14-25

To understand more about the first plague, the water in the Nile that turns to blood.

Read the Text:

“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)

Study the Text:

A Showdown at the Nile

Verse 14 begins the section concerning the first plague that Moses will perform before Pharaoh in Egypt. After the battle of the dragons or sea creatures from the staffs of both Aaron and the court magicians, “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened” and would not relent to Moses’ request. This provokes the LORD to begin acting against Egypt through Moses in a series of plagues beginning with a showdown of sorts at the Nile. Below is a breakdown of some of the key details in this portion of the story.

HARD HEART

The LORD tells Moses, “Pharaoh’s heart is hardened, he refuses to let the people go” (Ex. 7:14). Predictably, the heart of Pharaoh has not changed. The LORD has told Moses repeatedly at this point that Pharaoh would not listen and that his heart would remain hardened, a subject of which we have already spent considerable time discussing. However, it is important to note that the Hebrew here for “hardened” is a different word, כָּבֵד (kābēd), and it means something like “heavy or dull.” In other words, in addition to the Lord strengthening or “hardening” Pharaoh’s heart to do what he has already set out to do (Ex. 5:1-2, 7:3), Pharaoh’s heart is also becoming more dull with each mighty act of God through Moses. Again, this is akin to the language of Romans 1:21: “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” With every passing plague, the heart of Pharaoh will only grow more numb.

THE NILE

The location of the first plague is on the shores of the river Nile. While it was not common in this time for people to bathe in the river (most people couldn't swim), it has already been shown that at least royal members of Pharaoh's house are privy to such actions (Ex. 2:5). That Moses is to meet Pharaoh "as he is going out to the water" likely indicates that, unlike some depictions of this story with Pharaoh in a boat, Pharaoh was probably in the water himself bathing when Moses came to him.

THE STAFF

Moses is commanded by God to "take in your hand the staff that you turned into a serpent" and perform the first plague. It is important to note, at this point, the further evidence that Moses' staff is a different staff than Aaron's. Here, the "serpent" referenced with regard to Moses' staff is the נַחַשׁ (*nachash*), similar to the serpent of Moses' staff in Exodus 4:1-5, and not the תַּנִּינִי (*tanniyn*) creature of the previous section with regard to Aaron's staff. That each staff produced different creatures indicates that both Moses and Aaron had their own staff with which they carried out the miracles of the LORD.

Plague #1:

Verse 16 reiterates the command to Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people go, after which God issues the first plague. Moses is to put out his staff over the Nile, and the water will miraculously turn to blood. Moreover, the water-become-blood will no longer be a sustainable environment for the fish in it, which will in turn cause all of the fish to die. This will further make the water smell putrid as the fish die and decompose.

One detail that is often lost on the modern reader, however, is that it is not simply the Nile that suffers this fate. All of the water of Egypt is affected, including "their rivers, their canals, and their ponds, and all their pools of water," including "the vessels of wood and in vessels of stone" (Ex. 7:19). The results of this would have been catastrophic. The Nile was not simply a scenic view in Egypt, nor a place for royalty to enjoy a morning bath. The Nile provided all of the drinking water for the kingdom. To lose such a supply as this would be crippling to the kingdom and would have almost certainly created a frenzied panic in the common people. The pressure from Egyptians for Pharaoh to relent would have only increased as time went by.

Moses and Aaron did exactly what the LORD commanded them (Ex. 7:20). The results were exactly what the LORD said would happen: "There was blood throughout all the land of Egypt" (Ex. 7:21). Again, however, in the same way that Aaron's staff miracle was replicated, the "magician's of Egypt did the same by their secret arts" (Ex. 7:22). Two things are striking about this. One, they were again able to conjure an unnatural act, no doubt by witchcraft or dark arts. The reality of witchcraft cannot be overstated in the Bible. This was not a sleight of hand trick; the text indicates that they turned water to blood. But more importantly, second, while they were able to replicate the plague, they more crucially could not undo it. Their ability to replicate this power only left Egypt in worse condition than it was before they performed their magic. While it might seem like they had matched wits with Moses and Aaron, they would have better proven their power by undoing the plague that had fallen on the Egyptian water supply, and yet they could not.

The response to this is exactly as the LORD said: "Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD said" (Ex. 7:22). Here, unlike verse 14, Pharaoh's heart is once again rendered as קָרַח (*hāzaq*), or "strengthened, resolved." This mighty act does nothing but increase Pharaoh's resolve to act brutally towards the Hebrew slaves. The people, however, are not as unmoved. They "dug along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile" (Ex. 7:24). This continued for "seven full days" (Ex. 7:25).

THE POINT OF PLAGUES

Pharaoh's hardened heart and unwillingness to relent may come as a surprise to the modern reader, but for Moses and Aaron, they knew what to expect. God had been preparing them for this. The plagues, then, are not to be seen as tools of convincing. Moses and Aaron are not necessarily trying to change Pharaoh's mind; they are simply being obedient to the LORD. They knew, from the outset, that Pharaoh would remain stayed in his thinking and hardened in his heart. No amount of supernatural miracles would change that. These plagues are meant not to change the mind of Pharaoh but to display the power of the LORD to not only Egypt, but for every generation that followed (Rom. 9:17).

What About Now?

One takeaway is the absolute power of the LORD over the world. The symbolism of the staff *over* the Nile is just that: *symbolism*. It was not only the water of the Nile that was affected, but *all of the water* in Egypt. God's power is not dependent on a staff touching or being near the body of water if affects; it is God doing the work anyways, not the staff. Another takeaway is the reality that no miracles of God have the power to change a hard heart by themselves. God must be the one who humbles a person, and He does so through a message, not a miracle. Moses and Aaron understood this and were simply acting out of obedience to God, not in an effort to convince Pharaoh to change. Finally, a third takeaway is that while Satanic power might be able to in some ways "copy" the miracles of God, it cannot undo them. The magicians of Egypt matched the miracle with their own secret arts, but could do nothing to actually *help* the Egyptian water supply. They actually made things worse. Only God can do and undo His mighty works.

Study Questions**Day One**

1. Read Exodus 7:14-15. What did the LORD say to Moses? What did He instruct him to do in light of Pharaoh's continual hardness of heart?

2. Read Exodus 7:16. In your own words, write down what Moses was to say to Pharaoh.

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 7:17-18. What was Moses to do with his staff? What would be the effect of such an act?

2. Read Exodus 7:19. What was Moses to say to Aaron? What bodies of water would be affected by this plague?

Day Three

3. Read Exodus 7:20-21. Did Moses and Aaron obey God? What did they do? What was the result of their actions?

4. Read Exodus 7:22-23. How did the court magicians respond? How did Pharaoh respond?

Day Four

1. Read Exodus 7:24. How did the rest of the Egyptians respond? What did they do? Why?

2. Read Exodus 7:25. How long did this plague last?

Discuss the Text!

Week 15 Discussion: Obedience Counts More

One detail that becomes clear throughout the early portions of Exodus is that Pharaoh has no real interest in being persuaded to change his mind concerning the Hebrew people. His hardness of heart is predicted by God and reinforced by Him throughout the narrative. It presents Moses and Aaron, not as salesman on behalf of God trying to convince Pharaoh to act differently, but as obedient servants of God simply doing what they are asked to do. Talk as a group about the importance of obedience and how sometimes God calls us to do things that will not succeed by human standards, and how that doesn't make obedience any less important.

1. Icebreaker: Has God ever called you to do something that you knew would fail in human terms?
2. Do you ever question God's plans when they seem like they might not work out the way you want them to?
3. Is obedience easier when it will result in success? Why or why not?
4. Do you desire to "win people for God" or "obey God?"
5. What's the hardest thing God has ever asked you to do? Share with the group what made it so difficult.
6. Which is more appealing to you: a successful church or an obedient one? Why?

Takeaways:

1. The LORD tells Moses and Aaron to hold a staff over the Nile and turn the water to blood, which kills the fish, and infects all of the drinking water in all of Egypt.
2. The court magicians are able to replicate the plague, but not undo it.
3. Pharaoh's heart remains hardened despite the harrowing results of the plague on his kingdom.