

Our focus this week is on the dramatic narrative of the ten plagues of Egypt, found between Exodus Chapter 7 and 12. This is an iconic moment in the Hebrew scriptures: God liberates his people Israel, and judges Pharaoh's Egypt for many years of brutality and exploitation. Each plague challenges different aspects of Egyptian society, dismantling its economy and system of religion a piece at a time. It is interesting to note how God has changed tack compared to the awful judgement of The Flood in Genesis; rather than bringing justice in one fell swoop, God judges the Egyptians with laser-like focus, going out of his way to 'make a distinction between my people and your people' (8:23). He makes clear in Chapter 7 Verse 5 that His approach is designed not only to bring judgement on the Egyptians, but also to make Himself known so that even 'the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord' as well as the Israelites. In one sense, the plagues are a hugely dramatic conceit God uses to reveal His true nature, following up on the revelation of His name to Moses at the burning bush in Chapter 3; His desire is both to bring justice into the world and to make Himself more fully known. God demonstrates that he is the One True God, the creator of the world, through his plagues, which echo the creation narrative found in Genesis: He shows himself again to be commander of the light and the darkness, the waters, all living creatures and, in the final plague, the author of life and death itself. Indeed, God goes out of his way to distinguish Himself from the other gods of Egypt: the snake in Chapter 7 swallows up the others; the plague on the livestock in Chapter 9 is a rebuke to the numerous animal deities worshipped by the Egyptians; the darkness in Chapter 10 was an insult to the Egyptian sun-god Ra. The point of all this is to show conclusively that YAHWEH is more than just a common deity or idol; indeed, Moses in Chapter 8 makes it clear that these things are taking place so that Pharaoh may know that 'there is no-one like the Lord our God' (8:10). It seems to me that now is a time for us to proclaim the greatness of our God. Even as the world around us seems to slip into chaos, not unlike the many plagues of Egypt, we hold fast to the truth that our God is in control – He is the Alpha and the Omega and we are His people.

Egypt is not the first corrupt society portrayed in the Bible, and neither is it the last. Whilst the corruption is clearly rife throughout this society, the narrative focuses on the central character of Pharaoh, who stands for the Egyptian people and their oppressive regime. Before we dismiss Pharaoh as a super-villain, along the same lines of Herod, we must acknowledge that the figure of Pharaoh is a representation of the hard hearts of every human being who has rejected God in favour of their own selfish desires; he is an archetype that we see again and again in the scriptures, not least

in the Christmas story, and also in our modern history textbooks. He is lustful for power, ruthless, greedy, and stubborn. In short, he is a fallen human being. We are told over and over again in these chapters that Pharaoh 'hardens his heart'; he regularly goes against his promises and refuses to recognise the reality of who God is. The hardness of his heart is a clear example of what happens when sin takes hold in a person's life. His blindness to the truth about the identity of God is staggering; even his own advisors and 'magicians', in the end, acknowledge that these plagues are unmistakable evidence that 'this is the finger of God' (8:19), and yet he still refuses to listen or adjust his behaviour. Pharaoh even reaches the point in Chapter 9 where he seems to realise 'this time I have sinned' (9:27) but when it comes to the point where he must 'repent' or change his behaviour, his heart returns to its hardened state and he once again chooses to try and keep control. Whilst he is clearly an exceptionally corrupt individual, the point here is that when hearts are hardened through sin, the eyes become blind to who God is and who we are. We find ourselves lurching for control, angry, jealous, manipulative: the truth about sin is that it isn't just about bad deeds, it's an imprisoning force that makes us blind to our own shackles. The irony of this text is that Pharaoh is the one in chains, enthralled to sin, trapped in his arrogance and greed, unable to see the 'finger of God' in his midst, even as the hail falls and the sky darkens all around him. It's tempting for us to express disbelief about the depth of Pharaoh's denial, but we ought to also be careful to recognise that sin has the power to blind all our eyes to our own weakness, or to other injustices in society; like the Israelites, we all need to be set free from the bondage of sin, and that seeing that something is true is not the same thing as softening our hearts, repenting, and changing our behaviours. We must all have the courage to see aspects of Pharaoh in ourselves.

In the Exodus story, the culmination of the ten plagues is the Passover feast, a ritual which prophetically sets the stage for God's overall salvation plan for the world – a lamb, without blemish (12:5), must be prepared, its blood shed and smeared on the door posts of houses so that those that believe might not taste death. The Passover Lamb isn't a sacrifice in Exodus but rather a commemorative feast that serves to mark the day that the Lord saved his people from their oppressors. It's a lamb that represents redemption and deliverance. As a bread man, I cannot help but notice the emphasis placed on the bread made 'without yeast' that the Israelites are commanded to eat during the feast and for the following seven days. Yeast was symbolic of sin; the eating of the unleavened bread was a call to purity and an indication that God was calling his people out of slavery so that they may live pure lives. Indeed, this call to a higher ethic of behaviour

is defined more fully later in the giving of the Law of Moses, and more fully still in the person and teaching of Jesus. I love also the detail about eating the Passover meal in haste; the Israelites are commanded to be prepared, ready to follow the Lord wherever He will lead – a summons that applies to us today.

And for what purpose is God delivering his people? You would think the answer is self-explanatory: freedom is better than slavery. But it is clear in the text that the people are to be set free 'so that they may worship' (8:1) their God. The whole point of the deliverance is that God's people can return to the place of worship, because it is only in that place that they can again find themselves in right relationship with God. It does not matter that the place is a wilderness: God wishes to meet with his people, and he liberates them so that they can enter into a place of worship. This, friends, should be our response and intention, too. God has not liberated us from sin so that we can just carry on without Him, or establish our own kingdoms; rather, he calls us out of bondage so that we may live pure lives, without yeast, and that we might truly worship Him, wherever we find ourselves in the wildernesses of the world.

The lamb, of course, prefigures and points to Jesus. John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the 'Lamb of God' and the means by which all of us can find our way out of a place of slavery to a place of freedom. Indeed, the whole of Jesus' ministry and ultimately his death and resurrection reflect and bring to completion the plague story in Exodus: rather than changing the waters of the Nile to blood, Jesus turns water into wine; rather than bringing plagues of boils and sores upon his enemies, he heals the leper and the lame; rather than bringing darkness and hailstorms, he calms the sea and opens the eyes of the blind. And he embodies and fulfils the promise of the greatest and most terrible of the plagues: he is both the first born son and the lamb without blemish, and he lays down his life so that we might live, be delivered from our bondage and move through the waters of baptism into the promised land of redemption and true worship. In this sense, He is clearly one 'greater than Moses', a fulfilment of all that has gone before Him. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 5, 'Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed', and in response we should 'keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.'

Friends, the story of the ten plagues of Egypt is so much more than just a story of a miraculous escape, or an illustration of the power of God over the kingdoms of this world. It's a story that speaks of God's salvation plan: that

through Jesus, His Passover Lamb, God will break the chains of sin and death, and part the seas of darkness in this world. And there is an invitation contained within the story for you and for me. We need only soften our hearts, recognise our blindness, and, in faith, paint the doorways of our lives with the redeeming power of his precious blood, and feed ourselves only with the bread of sincerity and truth.

And death will pass over us; we will not feel its final sting, but rather join the liberated, worshipping multitude in the new creation.