

THE BREAKING OF A HARD HEART

Exodus 7:8–11:10

Dr. George O. Wood

This morning we share from Exodus 7:8–11:10, the account of the plagues which come upon Egypt. This whole section begins with a preliminary report of Moses' second encounter before Pharaoh; his first encounter described earlier had been one of complete failure. They had been out-bested and out-negotiated by Pharaoh, been humiliated in his court. Following, that times get worse for the children of Israel. The complaint is made against Moses, Moses takes his discouragement to God, blames God for the evil that is come. He says to the Lord, "I resign." The Lord refuses his resignation and sends him back to Pharaoh. In this reencounter with Pharaoh, the Lord specifically indicates to Moses that Pharaoh will present a demand for a miracle. Thus Moses must prove himself. Literally it might read, "When Pharaoh says to you, produce your spectacle."

What happens when a person rejects the moral demands of God? The moral demands of God are clear in regard to the proper response Egypt should have had toward Israel. It is a violation of conscience to enslave others, to treat others as Pharaoh treated these Hebrews. When the moral demands of God are rejected, then persons turn for signs as a clue to what is real and miraculous. But if a person's moral disposition is set against God, even the miraculous signs are not sufficient to persuade.

Thus if you're looking, for example, in your own life for a miracle to happen in order that by that miracle you might know that God is real, let me say to you that the greatest miracle has already happened. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. It takes no further miracle for you to believe.

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Even though Pharaoh is given the miraculous sign of Moses' rod becoming a serpent, he looks around for other alternatives, refuses the miracle, and his magicians by secret arts accomplish a duplication of the rod becoming a serpent. Conjecture has gone on whether or not they were using tricks-of-hand of magicians, or whether they were involved in demonic demonstration, whether they were using influence of evil spirits. Probably the later suggestion, they were under demonic impact; Satan has limited power to work miracles. That should be the proper understanding for the fact that Moses' rod gobbles up their serpents, indicating that it was something more than a slight-of-hand. Yet when Pharaoh's magicians fail, when those alternatives break because of a greater power demonstrated through Moses' rod, yet Pharaoh's hardness of heart prevails and he refuses that first sign, that first spectacle which confronts him in his own court.

Following the rejection of the spectacle, the miracle of Moses' rod becoming a serpent, the judgments against Egypt commence and the ten judgments are spoken of in 7:14 through the end of chapter 11.

Some introductory remarks about the judgments. Egypt was one of the most polytheistic nations of the ancient world. They had a belief in many gods. They attributed the forces of nature, animals, various kinds of influences, to direct impact of the gods. Thus when the Lord executes His judgment upon Egypt, His judgment from the scriptural standpoint is seen as not only falling upon Egypt but it is seen as falling upon their theology. Later, in Numbers 33:4, the writer of Scripture reflects on their "gods," upon whom the Lord had executed judgment. We'll look in detail at the plagues and show how many of them reflect a judgment of God against a trust of Egypt and its gods.

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I'd also like to say by way of introduction to the plagues that the plagues are far more than chance occurrence of freak natural events coinciding with Moses' demands. Some interpreters have mistakenly suggested that Moses just happened to get lucky! As for the first plague, the normal silting of the Nile on occasion turns the waters red; *this was a fortuitous circumstance which allowed Moses to make the claim before Pharaoh*. Flies sometimes accumulate in the land; *it was fortunate that when Moses said his word the flies were there*. Then for the ninth plague, *it was fortunate a sandstorm came along at the precise moment that Moses announced the fact that there was going to be darkness and the sandstorm blotted out the sun for a while*. There are certain characteristics to the plagues, which set them apart from natural occurrences. Some principles are given to us; the principle of intensification for example. The fact that what is being revealed in the plagues is far more than anything in the natural Egypt experiences. True, from time to time they might experience frogs or flies or darkness. But there is intensification in these plagues that goes way beyond any natural occurrence. There is also the element of prediction. Moses in advance declares what is going to happen. And his word continually comes to pass. There is the element of discrimination that sets apart the plagues from natural occurrences. Later in the plagues, Israel is exempt from influence whereas the plagues come upon Egypt. There is an orderliness in the plagues.

The first plagues are nuisance plagues. Frogs to step on. Difficulty in finding water. Flies that are swarming. Gnats that are biting. But as the plagues increase in their severity, they more and more become strokes. And that is one of the words used for the plague—a “stroke,” a blow from God that rains upon the land. It's also characteristic of a plague to have a moral purpose. The plagues are not simply done to produce wonder and awe. They're meant to incite moral change.

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As we look at the first nine plagues, we see that they may be divided into three different divisions: the first three, then plagues four through six, then seven through nine. Some characteristics of the three divisions is that at the beginning of each of the three divisions Moses appears before Pharaoh in the morning and announces to him the plague that is coming. Also each of the plagues in the three sets—the first, the fourth and the seventh—begin as an announcement by Moses. Each plague which closes each of the three sets break out unannounced, that is, the plague of gnats, the plague of boils, the plague of darkness. They simply occur without any prior announcement of Moses. They break upon the land. Most of the plagues come with an announcement. While many are announced, some may come unannounced and come in great severity.

As we begin looking at the individual plagues, I'll simply use for each of the plagues a fivefold way of looking at it: the rationale for why God used that plague; discussion briefly of the nature of the plague; the extent of the plague; the response to the plague; and maybe try to trace as well some prophetic type of insight that the plague may give us about things that are yet to happen.

I. The first plague is the turning of water into blood, verses 14–24 of chapter 7.

A. The rationale of the plague might be the fact that one of the greatest gods in Egypt was the god of the underworld. The Nile was regarded as his bloodstream. The Egyptians had a hymn to the Nile as a god, in which they called the Nile the bringer of food, rich in provisions, creator of all good, lord of majesty. The success or failure of their agriculture depended upon the Nile. It was the Nile that had given them their great fruitfulness as a people. God therefore, when the smites their waters, is not only acting against them; He was acting against their belief in a god whose bloodstream was the Nile.

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B. In terms of the nature of the plague, the water was turned to blood. We may understand that as literal blood, or as in Joel 2:31 when Joel prophesies that in the later days the moon would be turned to blood. By this perhaps Joel is referring to a change in color which has the appearance of blood.

C. The extent of the plague is great. It is on particularly the Nile but it is upon the waters and rivers, canals, pools and even vessels. Vessels of stone and vessels of wood. So much is the influence of the plague in its pollution of the waters of Egypt, that the fundamental thing which formed the Egyptian diet—fish—could not live in the waters, and the stench of dead fish began to smell in the land. There was evidently well water that was not touched, because we read that Egyptians were digging, attempting to find water. Thus the suggestion may be made that all of the waters which are visible to the eye were smitten, but the waters which flowed underground—the fountains and the wells—had not been stricken with the plague. Some water evidently was left in the land.

D. In response to the plague, the Pharaoh called in the magicians, who, as with the serpents, also are able to duplicate the whole spectacle of turning water into blood. Interestingly enough, they are not able to do the reverse. They are not able to turn the blood into water. You'd think when Pharaoh called them in he would have got them to get that done. Yet of all the plagues which can be duplicated by the magicians, not a one is an act of reversal. Only an act of repetition. That suggests to us, by the way, that there is miraculous power in demonic like things, in occult things.

As a child who had some exposure on the mission field in Tibet to demonic-like incidences and to answers to demonic type of prayers, one can certainly understand that this is the case. In fact, the Lord Himself indicates that there would come false prophets and in the end time there would

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be lying wonders that would break out upon the earth. It should not surprise us that in the realm of the miraculous here can be counterfeit and imitation of God's work.

As a response to the plague people dig around for water. But Pharaoh, upon seeing that the plague has been duplicated by his magicians, hardens his heart.

E. In terms of the prophetic element of the first plague, one may see from Revelation 16 the last sequence of the plagues which will break out in the end time age. That in the second and third bowls of God's wrath, which are themselves great plagues, God will turn all the sea and all the freshwater into blood. The reason is stated: "For men have shed the blood of saints and prophets and thou hast given them blood to drink. It is their due." A same sort of typification may be made of Egypt, that they had lived off the blood of others, off the work and life support of others. Now God had poetically turned the situation around and had given them blood to drink. So we may yet look for an intensification of this plague in a future age, an age yet to break out upon the earth where not simply the Nile and the waters of Egypt are affected, but all the waters—fresh and sea—of the world.

II. The second plague that breaks out upon Egypt is the plate of frogs.

A. This was a rather unusual plague, one that you might not invent if you were sending the plagues (7:25 through 8:15). The rationale becomes simple as you look at the background of Egypt's religion. To Egyptians, frogs represented fruitfulness, blessing, and assurance of harvest. You see the Nile annually flooded, usually around mid September. By mid-December the Nile had receded again and in the course of its recession it had left many pools of water throughout the land. It was the flooding of the Nile that made the land fertile. The receding water left many pools. Frog chorus filled the air. The croaking of the frogs. To the farmers it was music. It symbolized that the gods who controlled the Nile had once again made the land fertile and

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completed their work. The frog itself was regarded as a “theophany” or “god appearance” of their goddess. It was regarded as a sacred animal. Frogs were not to be intentionally killed. If a frog were accidentally killed, it could bring severe judgment, even the punishment perhaps of death.

B. As to the nature of the plague, one writer has given us this description of what it must have been like for the frogs to come: “Like a blanket of filth the slimy wet monstrosities covered the land until men sickened at the continuing squashing crunch they were forced to walk upon. If a man’s feet slipped on the greasy mess of the crushed bodies he fell into an indescribable mess of putrid uncleanness. When he sought to cleanse himself, the water was so solid with frogs he got no cleansing at all”

C. Exodus tells us the extent of the plague. They came into their homes, into their bedrooms, even the king’s bed had frogs in it. They came into the ovens and even the kneading bowls. You get out your cooking utensils and there’s frogs. One can clearly see that this is a nuisance type of plague. Nobody’s being hurt—just frogs!

D. As a response to the plague the magicians are called upon, and incredibly, once more duplicate as they had duplicated the rods to a serpent and the water into blood. So they are able to bring forth frogs. But again, they are unable to dispel the frogs.

Pharaoh, in Exodus 8:8, upon seeing the plague of the frogs, gives his first promise of release and tells Moses to entreat the Lord to take away the frogs and he will let the people go. Moses, in a very hard negotiating position, says to Pharaoh, “I will entreat the Lord. When is it you want the frogs to go? You state the time and it will be done.” Pharaoh, surprisingly, does not say, “Get them out as quick as you can.” He says, “Tomorrow.” Perhaps he wanted the frogs to go away in that time span by themselves so he would be able to say it was a natural thing and they went

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away of their own accord. But he has one more day of the plague of frogs through his own hardness. Moses took him literally. Pharaoh, in the negotiations, failed to bargain for one thing: That in taking away the frogs the Lord would remove them completely. Pharaoh simply wanted the frogs to quit jumping around in the beds and kneading bowls and the like. The aftereffect of the plague shows a slip-up in Pharaoh's negotiation, in that the frogs had to be gathered in heaps throughout the land and they stank. Once more Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go.

E. In terms of a prophetic insight to this particular plague, we find no reference in Scripture to a future plague of frogs breaking out upon the land, although it is striking in Revelation 16:12–16 that in the end of the age three froggish foul spirits—Satan, the antichrist, and his false prophet—croaked for Armageddon. And it is their croaking which elicits the final battle of the nations.

III. The third plague was the gnats, Exodus 8:16–19.

A. Some translations use the word “lice.” Again it is a plague of nuisance. The rationale: We don't necessarily associate it with any Egyptian gods. The rationale appears to be simply one of bringing discomfort to the people. The gnats themselves belong to a group of insects which included flees, lice, and mosquitoes. We know that from such small, pesky insects the wealthier Egyptians tried to get relief by having servants wave ostrich plumes in front of them in order to chase the insects away.

B. The plague was identified as insects that were small but pierced the skin and set up itching, and penetrating the ears and nostrils. One could compare it to a modern tick.

C. The extent of the plague appears to be through all the land of Egypt, both on animals and on man. Moses strikes the dust. The phrase is used in 8:17 that “all the dust” of Egypt became gnats. One should read “all the dust” as hyperbole here.

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D. The response to the plague is for the first time the magicians are thwarted. They are unable to do what has been done by Moses. They respond, “This is the finger of God” (verse 19, NIV).

Well, they might call the plague of gnats the finger of God. It’s not yet the heavy hand of God. It was only His finger. In it they saw the sign that the power behind Moses was a power that was greater than the power they had resident in them. Yet Pharaoh’s heart is hardened and he will not listen to his magicians when they declare to him, “This is the finger of God.”

E. In terms of prophetic insight for this particular plague, in the New Testament we find the phrase “finger of God” used in the Gospels. It’s used when Jesus is casting out demons. He’s charged by the Pharisees of being in league with Satan. Jesus indicates to them that if He cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come. Jesus is saying if in something so small as the casting out of demons you should be recognizing the finger of God, it is the heavy hand of God that is recognized in His resurrection. His great and manifold power. In this sign you see God at work. That phrase “finger of God” is lifted from the Exodus by Jesus in regard to their unbelief in His own miracles.

IV. The fourth plague is the plague of flies.

A. The rationale again appears to be one simply of discomfort. It is certainly a logical aftereffect of all the dead frogs that are gathered in heaps throughout the land.

B. The nature of the plague is such that swarms of flies break out upon the land. We do not have in America too much feeling for what flies can do.

I can remember as a kid in northwest China flies so infested the particular city we were living in that the governor made an edict that each person every day must kill the equivalent of at least one jar of flies. I remember as a kid carrying a glass jar around. It was great as a kid because you

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could count how many you were getting. Killing enough flies to fill the quota of a glass jar. Flies are pesky and filthy.

C. The extent of the plague is all of Egypt except now for the first time Israel is exempt from them. The land of Goshen where Israel dwells has not experienced the plague.

D. The response to the plague is such that this time Pharaoh gives his second promise of release. He gives it after backing down from his insistence that Israel, if they're going to worship God, worship God in the land of Egypt. Moses will not negotiate this point. He simply indicates that Israel must worship three-days' journey out in the wilderness. When Pharaoh relents in order to get the plague off his back, Moses warns Pharaoh not to deal falsely. But as soon as the plague of flies is lifted Pharaoh, again hardens his heart.

E. One note by way of prophetic element is this: As God's judgments intensify, His people, His servants become exempt from the judgments which are poured out. Even in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 the witness of the New Testament is so clear. "For God has not destined us for wrath but to obtain salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord."

V. The fifth plague that breaks out is upon domesticated animals.

A. The rationale for the plague becomes clear when one sees again some of the worship practices of ancient Egypt, particularly concerning cows and bulls. Numerous cows and bulls are regarded as sacred animals.

In fact, in an excavation dating all the way back to November 13, 1856, an archeologist found an underground avenue measuring some 320 feet. Later excavations revealed the total length of the tunnel in excess of 1120 feet. Using only torch lights, the archeologist and a few of his workmen discovered 64 large burial chambers arranged along an avenue. In the center of each burial room was a huge red or black sarcophagus, a stone coffin approximately 12 feet long, 9 feet high and 6

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feet wide, each weighing 60 tons. In each of these a sacred bull had been buried. We eat our bulls at McDonalds. The Egyptians worshipped them and buried them in stone coffins. The striking of the bulls is not only a plague against Egypt, but a stroke against the god of Egypt.

B. The nature of the plague is that it comes upon cattle, horses, donkey, camels, herds and flocks.

C. The extent of the plague is that all the cattle of the Egyptians died (Exodus 9:6). That phrase “all the cattle” again perhaps should be understood as the phrase “all the dust” of 8:17, a hyperbole. We know that there are yet cattle that will be destroyed by the hail, a later plague. Or it simply may mean that all the cattle that died were Egyptian cattle. None of the cattle were Hebrew cattle. In fact, the domesticated animals of Israel were spared in this plague.

D. The response of Pharaoh is such that he sent a search team to find out if indeed Israel had been spared or the land of Goshen had been spared. When he finds out they had been spared from this plague, he takes the reverse reaction we might expect of a normal person. Instead of recanting he again hardens his heart.

E. In regard to prophecy of the ten plagues, I’ve already indicated seven are announced in advance, including this one. God generally forewarns before he acts in judgment.

VI. The sixth plague that comes is the most severe of the plagues yet that has broken out upon mankind. It is the plague of boils, Exodus 9:8–12.

A. The rationale of the plague again could be related to worship practices of the Egyptians. The Egyptians were well aware, as ancient peoples were, of the possibility of infectious diseases and sores. They had a lion-headed goddess, which was supposed to have the power to create and to end epidemics. A special priesthood, in fact, was devoted to this particular god who was felt to have the power to create and end epidemics. This god is a false god of Egypt is judged by this plague.

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B. In terms of the nature of the plague, as dust once brought forth the gnats, now ashes from a kiln bring forth sores upon man and beast. There's a poetic justice to this. It is from the very place where the Hebrews had to fire up their bricks for their forced slavery in Egypt. In that place Moses reaches for the ashes of their work and flings them into the air that upon Egypt, man and beast, might come boils.

C. Again Israel is spared in this plague, which races throughout all of Egypt.

D. As a response to this sixth plague, the magicians cannot now even stand before Moses. The third plague, the plague of the gnats, they'd not been able to duplicate. But now they could not even stand in Moses' presence.

The Lord had told Moses that He would harden Pharaoh's heart. Now for the first time in the plague the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is specifically attributed to the Lord himself. In the first five plagues it is noted that either Pharaoh hardened his own heart or simply "His heart was hardened." But now for the first time in the plagues the attribution of hardening is given to God rather than to Pharaoh.

E. In terms of the prophetic impact of this plague, we read in the Book of Revelation of the seven last bowls of God's wrath poured out upon the world. Indeed the first of the last seven plagues in Revelation 16 is that God pours out on the earth sores, foul and evil sores upon the men and women who bore the mark of the beast and worshipped his image. So there will yet be an intensification of this plague upon the earth.

VII. The seventh plague is the plague of hail, Exodus 9:13–35.

A. The rationale is again related to the gods of Egypt. It is a blow against the sky gods who were responsible, the Egyptians thought, for the weather and for favorable crop conditions.

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B. There was special severity for this plague. However, it was unlike the other plagues in the sense that God this time allows the Egyptians to take precautionary measures against it, so they may bring in from the fields their workers and their animals. However most of the Egyptians probably, and certainly not Pharaoh, did not take advantage of the opportunity given.

C. The extent of the plague is such that it strikes down in the field both man, beast, plants and trees. We have to cope with the fact that the innocent are suffering because their owners have not called them in front the field. This is a perpetual problem. Why do the innocent suffer? I'd simply relate that there may not always be good answers for this.

One thing is true. If you as a man, the head of the family, are waking in disobedience to your God, inevitably the innocent people in your family suffer as a result of your disobedience.

Children suffer because of the disobedience of parents in regard to God's moral requirements.

The innocent, like the babes of Bethlehem who were massacred by Herod, sometimes suffer.

D. The response to the plague is that Pharaoh again is willing to relent. He had been willing after the second plague (frogs) and the fourth (flies) but now again he is willing to let them go. In 9:27 he tells Moses, "I have sinned. The Lord is in the right. I'm in the wrong." When Moses hears that confession he recognizes that it's not really a genuine confession at all. He says back to Pharaoh in verse 30, "But I know that you and your officials still do not fear the LORD God" (NIV). The confession of sin is simply a shallow confession. It is not mingled by Pharaoh with a fundamental fear of the Lord. In Pharaoh is the absence of the statement "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 1:7).

E. In terms of the prophetic implication of this plague, the seventh plague, we read of the trumpet judgments in the Book of Revelation that there comes upon the earth hail mixed with fire and blood, destroying a third of the world's vegetation. Interestingly enough, in the plagues

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of Revelation the animals are never seen as being destroyed. It is vegetation and man being effected.

VIII. The eighth plague, in Exodus 10:1–20, is the plague of locusts.

A. The rationale appears very strong. God is seen as having the upper hand. Very specifically in 10:1–3, He through the coming plagues is telling Pharaoh and telling the Egyptians that He is going to make sport of them. It may strike us as somewhat unusual that the word should be in the mouth of God that He is going to make sport of someone. Yet I think if we understand the feeling of God toward Pharaoh, we will appreciate what it means for the Lord to have this feeling toward him. I think God feels toward Pharaoh like you would feel toward a pimp who had enslaved your daughter. Or like you would feel towards a narcotic supplier who had supplied your son. The insolence of the pimp or the narcotics supplier, the insolence of “I can get away with it,” or “Nobody will get me,” or “You can’t do this to me.” The insolence is met by the laughter of God toward the one who supposed that he can keep God’s children enslaved and God’s purposes thwarted. And as Psalm 2:1–6 so clearly declares, “The Lord has him in derision, the Lord laughs.”

B. The nature of the plague that comes upon Egypt is swarms of locusts. The average weight of a locust is about two grams. The locust eats the equivalent of his weight daily. One square mile swarm of locusts might contain a hundred to two hundred million locusts. The largest recorded swarm was about four hundred square miles—wing tip to wing tip settled upon crops. For the fourth time, Pharaoh is ready to concede. This time letting the children of Israel go only if they will take only men with them. Moses refuses.

C. The plague comes upon all of Egypt. This time in this particular plague, the eighth plague, it is not noted that Israel or that the land of Goshen was exempt from the plagues. Perhaps there’s a

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reason for this. Israel won't be taking any produce out of Egypt. They'll only be taking animals. God's going to supply them manna in the wilderness.

D. Finally Pharaoh concedes. In order that this plague might be lifted in chapter 10, he indicates that again he has sinned and he pleads with Moses to lift it. But his confession is insincere and the Lord is described as hardening Pharaoh's heart.

E. In regards to the prophetic implications of this plague, we read in the fifth trumpet judgment of Revelation 9:1–11 that in the end time there will be a plague of demonic-like personages pictured as locusts which break out upon the earth and which torture every person that does not have God's seal. But these demonic-like beings are not allowed to harm vegetation, only man. So what happens in the Exodus is a prefigurement of an event yet to come.

IV. The ninth plague arrives.

A. The ninth and tenth plagues strike at the great gods of Egypt. The ninth plague, the plague of darkness, strikes against the god of Egypt, the sun god. The tenth plague strikes against Pharaoh himself as he's regarded as divine. The sun god was considered one of the greatest blessings in ancient Egypt. He was responsible, the Egyptians thought, for providing warmth in sun day after day without fail. Egyptians expressed great joy over this deity.

B. As God struck with the darkness, so thick that it could be felt, the darkness came upon the land for three days. Someone suggested that a darkness that could be felt would go well with the kind of darkness generated by a fierce sandstorm from the desert. We leave the manner of the plague to God and cannot know at this point whether it was simply a darkness without a storm or whether it was a sandstorm that imposed the darkness.

C. Israel again is spared although all of Egypt is affected.

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D. Pharaoh for the sixth time relents. But this time he relents on the condition that Moses leaves his flocks behind. Moses refuses. He says not a hoof shall be left behind. Again the Lord hardens Pharaoh's heart. This time is the third time that God has hardened his heart—after the sixth plague and eighth plague.

E. As to prophecy, this plague of darkness is seen again as occurring in the end of the age. In the bowls of God's wrath, God pours out through the instrumentality of an angel His bowl upon the throne of the beast, that is the antichrist, and its kingdom was in darkness. "Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pain and their sores, but they refused to repent" (Revelation 16:10–11). I think that's the key phrase. Even in the end time when God outpours His great plagues, yet men did not repent. That is to say, that in seeing all of God's great wonders if a person is morally preconditioned in his heart to say no to God, he will refuse to be convinced regardless of any miracles that God does. That is why, for example, that God is able to speak to the rich man who is in hell and say to him that his brothers would not believe even if someone were to come back from the dead.

X. Finally, the tenth plague.

We will look at it in more detail next week in regard to the Passover. Here we see God indicating through Moses that there will come the death of the first born upon all the firstborn of Egypt.

We'll see in chapter 12 and following how God makes provision even for the Egyptians to escape the impact of this particular plague. Verses 1–3 of chapter 11 probably would flow better in the narrative if we understand them as a private revelation the Lord had made to Moses before his final appearance to Pharaoh. In a sequence therefore, verses 1–3, would cover a period of time which immediately precedes verse 24 of chapter 10. Moses has his last appearance with Pharaoh. That appearance will go on through chapter 11 when Moses and Pharaoh will depart

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from one another in fierce anger, Pharaoh threatening Moses life if he ever sees him again. And Moses saying as he departs in anger, “I will never see you again.”

We examined all of that background of plagues that we might look at some particular applications.

XI. What may we learn from the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart?

That is the central theme – the hardening of his heart. Let me share these things with you that strike me as personal applications from the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.

A. The first thing that comes to us is the fact nothing catches God by surprise. When the Lord first called Moses in Exodus 4:21 He very clearly tells him that He will harden Pharaoh’s heart. In 7:3 when Moses is told to go into Pharaoh a second time, the Lord repeats that phrase, “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart.” Thus Pharaoh’s hardness, the whole barrier which he throws up to God, is not unknown to God. The future is not a mystery to God. God who is in the eternal now, who sees every moment from the perspective of the present, is not surprised by the future. Nothing catches Him by surprise.

B. We may say a second thing about the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. An important thing that sometimes we may miss. God’s hardening occurs only after our own hearts are hardened. God never hardens our heart except our hearts are hardened. How does this demonstrate itself in regard to Pharaoh? It’s obvious as you very carefully look at the text of Exodus and Romans 9 where it’s referred to again. Pharaoh’s heart began to be hardened when he broke God’s moral law. He betrayed the very people who benefited his country four hundred years before, when through Joseph and the children of Israel Egypt had enjoyed prosperity in time of famine. He had violated the law of God, the moral law, had hardened his heart, and therefore he continued to harden his heart as the plagues were outpoured. When Moses’ rod became a serpent he hardened

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his heart. When the first plague came, the blood, he hardened his heart. When the second plague came, the frogs, he hardened his heart. The third plague, he hardened his heart. God is not described as hardening his heart. He is hardening his heart. The fourth plague of flies he hardens his heart. The fifth plague, domesticated animals, he hardens his heart. It's not until the sixth plague, the plague of boils, that for the first time it is used, God hardened Pharaoh's heart. He has steadily hardened his own heart before it is ever described of God's activity in the hardening of his heart.

Lest we think of Pharaoh as the only one who ever hardened his heart, we look at the experience of Israel as well. For it as a nation came to harden its heart against God. Jeremiah in 7:25–26 laments to Judah the southern kingdom, “From the day your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day. Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear but hardened their neck.” David laments in Psalm 95:8–10, “Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah...where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did. For forty years I was angry with that generation” (NIV). According to Romans 9–11, Israel was cast off from God's purposes in redemption only to be restored back into the tree at a later age at the end time. Before that hardening which God brought upon Israel, Israel hardened its own heart consistently throughout its history. Even in regard to Christ, Jesus in Mark 3:5 is in a synagogue and there's a man there with a withered hand on a Sabbath Day. There are those daring him to do a work of healing on the Sabbath. Jesus looked around with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart. It is their hardness of heart that brings from Christ the warning that they will commit the blasphemy against the Spirit and will be persuaded of nothing. They even will not be persuaded of His resurrection from the dead.

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Jesus indicates that the hardness of heart is not only a hardness toward God, but can be a hardness toward the people. Thus in Matthew 19:8 Jesus declares of the Pharisees, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you a certificate of divorce.” Jesus attributes the breakup of human relationships to hardness of heart.

C. God’s hardening, thirdly, reveals God saying to a rebellious person, “Thy will be done.” It’s the reverse of the Lord’s Prayer where we say to God, “God, Thy will be done.” It’s hardening of heart so saying to us, “You have wanted your will—then thy will be done.” So to Pharaoh, God says, “Thy will be done.” Thus in the sixth plague, the plague of boils, for the first time Pharaoh’s heart is directly hardened by the Lord. In Israel we see the same phenomenon occurring. In Jeremiah 19:15 the Lord says of Jerusalem, “I am bringing upon this city and all of its towns all the evil I have pronounced against it because they have hardened their neck refusing to hear My words.” John 12 says of Jesus and His generation, “Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfill the words of Isaiah the prophet: ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’” (NIV). They could not believe. Why? Because they had deadened their heart against God. “As Isaiah says elsewhere, ‘He has blinded their eyes and deadened [or, ‘hardened’] their heart’” (NIV).

D. How does one get a hardened heart? By continuing to say no. By continuing to harden it against God. There comes a point in time in which God imposes His will and says, “You have hardened your heart. Now I’m going to let that heart be hardened for eternity. I’ll ratify your choice. I’ll stamp my mark upon it. You will never be loosened again.”

Have you hardened your heart toward the Lord? As you look at the New Testament, you find some people that hardened their heart toward the Lord. It’s important we look at that. It’ll help us understand something of God’s grace.

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You must remember the disciples also hardened their heart toward Him; Mark 16:14 says, “He upbraided them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they believed not those that saw Him after He was risen.” To that hardness of heart on the part of the disciples the Lord gave grace. It gave them the appearance of himself and if they had refuted that experience and gone on in hardness and continued to disbelieve no doubt God would have imposed that permanent hardness upon them. But God, to the initial hardness of the disciples’ hearts, gave them grace instead of judgment.

Did Paul harden his heart toward the Lord? I think this is why he understands grace so well. He understands that he himself was in the position that Pharaoh was in, that God could have ratified forever his eternal no to God. Paul says of his testimony, “I shut up many of the saints in prison. When they were put to death I cast my vote against them. I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme. In raging fury against them I persecuted them even to the foreign cities” (Acts 26:10–11). But he goes on to say, “The grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 1:14). Why does he understand God’s grace so well? Because he didn’t deserve it. He had hardened his heart. What he deserved in regard to his murdering of the believers, was God hardening his heart for eternity so that he could never say yes to God; but in God’s great grace He had mercy upon him. Even as God through the first five plagues had mercy upon Pharaoh to give him the opportunity to will from his heart to believe, so Paul recognized that God had had mercy upon him.

It is when we understand something about the nature of the biblical teaching of hardening that we get an appreciation of God’s grace. God does not *have* to save us. God *wants* to save us. Without God, we are in a position of being immediately susceptible to His judgment being imposed on us. The fact that He does not ratify us in our sin and doom us to eternal judgment is

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the fact that He has grace upon us. His grace comes and gives us opportunity through Jesus Christ our Lord to become unhardened.

What about Romans 9:18 that says, “God has mercy on whoever he will and he hardens the heart of whomever he will.” The response to that is obvious from the plagues. He hardens Pharaoh’s heart after the five. That hardening of the heart occurs only after the “whosoever” has been given. For God our savior desires that all men be saved (2 Timothy 2:4) and He is not willing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance (2 Peter 3:9). Therefore the hardening of any heart is not the activity of God simply from the beginning of creation imposing someone to eternal damnation. The hardening of heart comes with the cooperation of our will, which desires that our heart be hardened toward God.

E. That leads to a final fundamental question. In regard to hardness will we make an end to hardness or will hardness make an end to us? Proverbs 28:14 says, “Blessed is the man who fears the Lord always. But the who hardens his heart will fall into calamity.” And 29:1, “He who is often reprov’d and yet hardens his neck will suddenly be broken beyond healing.” And Romans 2:5, “By your hard and unrepentant heart you are storing wrath up for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.” And Hebrews 3:12, “Take care brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil and unbelieving heart leading you to fall away from the living God.” A great opportunity therefore is given. “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). And “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

Closing Prayer

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We recognize, our Lord, once more through the account of Scripture that our hearts must be softened towards You if we are to receive Your blessing and Your grace. If our hearts are not tender toward You, then we will neither believe in You if there are great miracles of wrath and judgment. Nor if there are great miracles of mercy as in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. For where there is hardness there is resistance to You. If the hardness continues You can only ratify that hardness for eternity. Lord, we hear the word of Your Scripture, today, “lest here be in any of you a hardened heart. Believe that you may enter into your rest.” Take from us, Lord, that hardening of heart, that slow callousness which comes to us in life where we become satisfied with our things, our idols, our rebellions, and our disobediences, and gradually toughen ourselves against You or perhaps toughen ourselves against someone else so that finally our hardness forces a breaking off of that love. Let this message be to us as it was intended for Pharaoh, a warning and an opportunity. May while it is yet day the opportunity come to us to respond to You in tenderness of heart and toward one another. Create in us, O Lord, a clean heart and right spirit. Let us live tenderly in Your presence. Keep us from the sin of obstinacy and rebellion to Your call upon our life and to Your will for us in everyday affairs. We ask these things, Lord, in Your name. Amen.