

**Introduction:**

- A. People are seldom ready for God until they're sick and tired of their slavery. Most people—adults, at least—who put their faith in Christ do so because they grew sick and tired of life under another master. It is God's mercy to make us miserable enough to cry out to him.
- B. So it was with Israel in Egypt. Before God could bring them to the homeland he'd promised them, they had to *want* to go. So God raised up Pharaohs who enslaved and oppressed them—*"oppressed so hard they could not stand"*—and then they cried out to him for relief. God sent Moses, readied at the burning bush, with a non-negotiable message for Pharaoh: *"Let my people go that they may worship me in the wilderness."* And thus began the second-most epic contest in the Bible. As you heard last week, when Moses went to Pharaoh with that message Pharaoh just made life even more miserable for the Israelites and they blamed Moses. But God was prying them loose from the only home they'd ever known and he was positioned to so devastate Pharaoh and Egypt that the whole earth would know that God is the LORD, the I AM.
- C. But Pharaoh had no intention of letting Israel go. He needed their slave labor, but more—he believed he was their master. He was the only lord they were going to worship. And all the dark powers of Satan conspired with Pharaoh to keep it that way.
- D. Today we'll reflect on the first nine of the ten plagues by which God brought Egypt down. Open your Bibles to **Ex. 7-10**. This story is for us. We need this Scripture, because it tells us that **nothing can stand in God's way when he wants to set us free to worship him.** God will crush any enemy that stands between you and him. The LORD will allow no other gods before him.

- E. Just a little background on these plagues. Both the plagues themselves and the way they are described in writing are wonders of divine craft. The first nine plagues are clustered in groups of three and each group of three has both repeating and escalating patterns. They apparently occurred somewhat irregularly over a period of months, culminating in the tenth plague still remembered each spring by the Jews. There is debate whether these were natural disasters on steroids—phenomena that occurred naturally in Egypt, but brought to extremes and perfectly timed by God—or if they were flat-out supra-natural miracles. In any case, one author pointed out these miraculous features:
1. They intensify from the bloody Nile to epic destruction and death that touched every household in Egypt.
  2. Moses, under the word of the LORD, determined exactly when each would start and end. They are actually double wonders, starting and stopping at Moses' command.
  3. None of the Egyptians attributed any of these plagues to natural disasters. "This is the finger of God," is what they said.
  4. They devastated Egypt without harming the Israelites living in their own region of Goshen.
  5. They were particularly calculated to utterly discredit the gods and Pharaoh of Egypt.
  6. They leave no doubt that the LORD, the I AM, is God alone over all the earth *and* that nothing can keep him from the people he loves. [from Joseph Free, in Ryken, p.239]

Behind this story is this principle:

**I. WE ARE ALL SLAVES UNTIL WE ARE FREE TO WORSHIP GOD**

- A. Again and again, the LORD messages Pharaoh, "Let my people go that they may worship me." As a people, they couldn't worship God in Egypt because there Pharaoh

*owned* them. They could pray if they wanted, I suppose, but Pharaoh reigned over them all. They couldn't offer sacrifices for atonement to God. They couldn't rest or give to God, because they belonged to another king.

- B. For us, it isn't about geography but the principle remains. We cannot worship and serve God if we belong to some other ruler. If sin enslaves us, if Satan has unfettered access to us, if death is our destiny, then the LORD is not our God, and we are not free to worship him as he requires.
- C. Furthermore, we cannot free ourselves. One option that never comes up in this story is revolt or escape. **This is a salvation story.** Israel did the only thing they could do, and they didn't even do it well. But they "*cried out to the LORD*" and he heard their cry and came down to deliver them, through his agent and intercessor, Moses. Now, we cry out to God from our slavery and his answer, his Rescuer and Redeemer, is the Greater Moses, Jesus Christ, who died to defeat death, whose blood cleanses us from all sin, and whose resurrection vaults us into everlasting life.

At the heart of these plagues is the LORD crushing the gods of Egypt. *Illus.:* A few months ago Susan and I walked through the Art Institute of Chicago. There are galleries there full of ancient Egyptian art. I saw two large quotes on the walls above the displays of Egyptian idols. Both were from Herodotus, the Greek historian of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. One said, "*[The Egyptians] were the first who assigned altars and images and temples to the gods, and who engraved figures on stone.*" And another said, "*Of all people, [the Egyptians] are the most exceedingly pious.*" I've read that they had over 80 different gods who they believed controlled every major aspect of life—especially everything to do with the Nile (their national lifeblood), the land, and the sky.

Egypt's devotion to these gods was no mere primitive superstition. This was a dreadful and powerful satanic kingdom.

These gods were demonic. They had real power. **Num 33:4** says that through the plagues, *“the LORD had brought judgment on their gods.”* God does not judge figments of national imagination.

Do you remember now Pharaoh’s headdress always had the cobra on it? A serpent guarded of the king! I read that “when a Pharaoh first ascended the throne of Egypt, he would take the royal crown and say, ‘O Great One, O Magician, O Fiery Snake! Let there be terror me like the terror of thee... Let me rule, a leader of the living. Let me be powerful, a leader of spirits.’” As Leland Ryken put it, *“With these words, Pharaoh offered his soul to the devil.”* We say, now and forever, “Jesus Christ is Lord!” [p.207]

In **Ex. 7** Moses and Aaron appear before Pharaoh and he demanded they do a miracle. Sort of like showing their credentials. As God had instructed, Aaron threw down the staff and it became a snake. Then the sorcerers of Egypt threw down their staffs and they all became snakes. Illus.: Some of you have watched the animated movie, *The Prince of Egypt*. They only part I remember is this scene and the song of the sorcerers. The call on the power of a score of Egyptian deities and then they intone:

*So you think you've got friends in high places  
With the power to put us on the run  
Well, forgive us these smiles on our faces  
You'll know what power is when we are done  
Son...  
You're playing with the big boys now  
Playing with the big boys now  
Ev'ry spell and gesture  
Tells you who's the best, you're  
Playing with the big boys now.*

*“But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs,”* says **Ex. 7:14**. It was a kind of pre-plague, a sign of things to come. These magicians would also turn water to blood and bring up the frogs. But what they *couldn’t* do was turn blood to water, or make the frogs go away. Satan can multiply chaos but he can never create good.

*“Yet Pharaoh’s heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the LORD had said.”* **It was on!** The lopsided contest of wills. And it is still on.

## II. DARK POWERS, SATANIC AND HUMAN, CONSPIRE TO OWN US, BODY AND SOUL

- A. Pharaoh is the great enemy of God here. He is the face of arrogant evil. The defining phrase of his life is, *“Pharaoh’s heart grew hard.”* Forget about pyramids or armies or crops. This is all you need to know about this fool. **Pharaoh was Satan’s man.** His heart was wicked, ruthless, and utterly committed to his own power. In time, the text says that *God* hardened Pharaoh’s heart. As Anne said last week, I think God hardened his heart the way heat hardens a brick. It had all the makings of stone in the first place.
- B. When w read that eventually God hardened Pharaoh’s heart we have this niggling suspicion that if God had given him a chance he might have had a change of heart. That’s the thing. God gave him ten chances; twenty actually. Four times Pharaoh asked Moses to pray for him. Twice he admitted he had sinned. But here is Exhibit A that *confession* does not equal *repentance*. Neither God’s judgment nor his patience would have ever induced Pharaoh to humble himself before the LORD.
- C. We have all lived under a stone-hearted ruler, Satan, who has no intention of giving us over to the God who loves us. He has brought all this world’s systems together like some great prison farm to keep us within his borders. Our own sins disqualify us from God’s kingdom and Satan’s incessant accusations constantly condemn us. The dungeons of death assure our everlasting bondage to him.
- D. Furthermore, his demonic powers, usually unrecognized, are at work everywhere. One of the key aspects of Jesus’ work was to cast out demons. And **Eph 6:12** reminds us that, *“our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”*

**But they are no match for the LORD!** Do you remember the first time Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, *This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Let my people go... Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go.”* James Weldon Johnson wrote of the way the African-American preachers preached this:

*Poor Old Pharaoh,  
He knows all the **knowledge** of Egypt,  
Yet never knew—  
He never knew  
The one and the living God.  
Poor Old Pharaoh,  
He’s got all the **power** of Egypt,  
And he’s going to try  
To test his strength  
With the might of the great Jehovah,  
With the might of the Lord God of Hosts,  
The Lord mighty in battle.  
And God, sitting high up in his heaven,  
Laughed at poor Old Pharaoh.* [“Let My People Go”]

### **III. GOD WILL PLAGUE ALL WHO OPPOSE HIM TILL WE ARE FREE TO WORSHIP HIM**

- A. We see in this story how God methodically demolishes and discredits the kingdom of darkness. Most, if not all, of these plagues are direct attacks on Egyptian gods. Bloodying the Nile, for example, as though God had stabbed the waters that swallowed the Hebrew babies. Or those frogs. The frog-headed goddess Heqet was believed to be the giver of life. Yet here were piles of dead frogs, stinking to high heaven. And those gnats—or possibly mosquitoes—think of the torment! And this was the first plague the magicians could not mimic.
1. In the midst of these three, in **Ex. 8:10** when Moses agrees to stop the plague of frogs, he says, “so that you may know there is no one like the LORD our God.”

No one like the I AM. Eternal, utterly self-sufficient, the one and only true God.

2. The next three plagues—the flies, the death of the livestock, and the soot that spread boils—carried another message. Do you recall that Jesus called Satan Beelzebub? That means “lord of the flies.” Several Egyptian gods were depicted as bulls or cows. And that soot from a furnace? Some think it was one of the furnaces where Israel baked the bricks so the boils were a kind of divine payback. A key here is that none of these plagues touched the Israelites. In **Ex 8:22-23** the LORD says, *“But on that day I will deal differently with the land of Goshen, where my people live; no swarms of flies will be there, **so that you will know that I, the Lord, am in this land.** I will make a distinction between my people and your people.”* **“I, the LORD, am in this land.”** Meaning *I reign here, not your gods.* That is true here as well. God reigns here—not our governments nor our economy nor decadent culture. The LORD is in this land!
3. Plagues 7, 8 and 9 are the most devastating—hail, locusts, and darkness. All to a level far more than any Egyptian had ever seen. The hail which destroyed all their crops was alive with fire. The locusts licked the bones of Egypt clean. And the darkness, *“darkness that could be felt,”* stretched for three black days—a debilitating attack on the mighty sun god, Ra. And in the midst of this, in **Ex. 9:14**, God says that he would send the “full force” of these plagues *“so you may know that there is no one like me **in all the earth.**”* In all your history and lore, in all the stories carved into the walls of your temples, none of your gods, no matter how mighty, has ever done what the LORD has done! And the story of how he brought you to your knees, O Pharaoh, O Egypt, will spread all over the

world. You, who bragged of your might, will become the enduring example of God's crushing victory over his enemies.

- B. God will not rest till all the world knows that he is the LORD, the I AM.
- C. This is the story of our lives—the story we tell our children. In **Ex. 10:1-2**, God said to Moses, *“Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these signs of mine among them that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the Lord.”*
1. This is who we are—the people whom the LORD loves and delivered out of terrible bondage. We are not a people characterized first by our might or our arts or our economy. **We are the people the LORD saved by his might!**
  2. All this was so that we might freely worship and serve the LORD. (The Heb. word means both.) We are at our fullest and freest when we serve him.
  3. The LORD's name is shown to be even more glorious through the salvation he gives us in Christ. Satan's head is crushed and we, through our faith in Christ, are set free. **Col 2:13-15** says, *“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”*
  4. And the Lord's final triumph is assured, because: *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,<sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,*

*in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is  
Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Phil. 2:9-11*  
One day, *“the kingdoms of this world will become the  
kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign  
forever and ever.*

## **Conclusion**

Every testimony of salvation mirrors this story of God’s might. There is nothing so powerful that it can keep you from coming to God’s mercy. No power is more powerful than the LORD! Nothing can hinder you from salvation but the lethal arrogance of your own hard heart.

And there is nothing you face as a believer that is too hard for the LORD. *“Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world.”* Sin does beset us, and wins too often, but it is not more powerful than the Lord at work in you.

Let me conclude with a story I’ve written about. [pp.136-137, *Pastoral Graces*]