

## Freedom From, Freedom To – Rescue From the Plagues

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Exodus 7:7-24

Last week we heard how Pharaoh became the lord of death. Last week we saw how Pharaoh declared war on the Lord of life. The Lord was building life in his people. Israel was experiencing the blessing of life as God intended it in Genesis 1. Israel was becoming fruitful and multiplying and filling the land, Pharaoh tries to snuff that out. He throws the baby boys into the Nile River. The lord of death declares war on the Lord of Life. So Pharaoh starts the war, but now, this week, the Lord returns fire. God will bring 10 plagues upon Egypt, he will defeat pharaoh, and, as we will see, he will do it in a way that sends a message.

Read Exodus 7:7-24 So the battle begins. On the one side is Pharaoh. The Lord of Death. Ruler of the Egyptian kingdoms. Conqueror of nations. Commander of armies. On the other side is the army of the Lord, which so far consists of two old men: An 80 year old shepherd with a fear of public speaking and his 83 year old brother, both of them so old that they need a walking staff to get into Pharaoh's courtroom. It doesn't look like a fair fight. But over the course of 7 chapters the Lord will unleash 10 plagues upon Egypt and those plagues will show that the Lord of Life does not need an army. The Lord of life can defeat the powers of death through a couple of old guys armed with canes.

The conflict begins with that scene where Aaron's staff turns into a snake. That snake proceeds to eat the snakes of the Egyptian magicians. It's a prelude to the plagues and a foreshadowing of who will win this war. And the fact that it involves snakes is significant. You are not experts in ancient Egyptian culture and religion, but I'm pretty sure most of you know who king Tut is, right? The boy king with the fabulous golden treasures. Can you picture King Tut's headdress? That's the most famous part of his treasures – the golden mask of his face wearing a headdress. The headdress has those flat side panels with those alternating blue and gold bars. Can you picture it? Do you remember what's on the top of the headdress, right in the middle of Tutankhamen's forehead? That's right, a snake. Specifically, a rearing cobra. That snake is called a Uraeus. It was a symbol of the Egyptian gods. Pharaohs wore the Uraeus on their crowns as a symbol of 'sovereignty, royalty, and divine authority.' That's an important detail. It tells us that this encounter was much more than 'my snake is stronger than your snake.' When Moses' snake devours those other snakes, it's a direct rebuke to the rule of pharaoh and to the Egyptian gods. This isn't just a magic trick, it's the Lord saying, "There may be only a couple of old men leaning on staffs in your throne room, but they are my people and I will win a victory through them!" That's the most basic message of the plagues. God shows that He is stronger than Pharaoh and his Egyptian gods.

But there's another, deeper way to understand the plagues. The plagues show us the consequences of sin. The plagues show us what sin does to our lives. How is that so? When the Lord sends the ten plagues, he puts creation into reverse. Now this is not easy, but stick with me because the rewards of getting this are worth the effort. Remember that Pharaoh has set himself against God's purpose in creation. The Hebrews were fruitful and were multiplying. They were experiencing God's creational blessings. Pharaoh tries to extinguish that blessing by throwing the babies into the Nile. Pharaoh chooses death instead of life. When Pharaoh kills the babies he tries to reverse God's creational intent. In the plagues, God gives Pharaoh what he wants. "OK

Pharaoh, you want to live by death? You want to put creation in reverse, I'll show you what that looks like. I will give all of Egypt a display of what that looks like." In the plagues God lets all of creation go into reverse. Creation has a direction. It's meant to move from chaos and darkness to order and blessing. In the plagues God reverses that: from blessing back to chaos.

Go back in your brain for a moment to Genesis 1, and remember how God created there. Creation comes out of water: It begins "formless and empty" and "darkness was over the face of the deep." You get a picture of dark brooding sea. Out of this chaos God creates blessing and order. God creates light to push aside the darkness. He creates land among the waters. He creates the heavens. He creates plants, flying things and cattle, and, to finish it all off, he creates people. All these different things are created "in their vast array." Remember that line from the end of the creation story? That language suggests order. Everything is good and beautiful and in its proper place. So creation begins with chaos and darkness, and it moves towards in blessing and order.

In the plagues, the Lord lets the vast array break down. Each of these areas go back towards chaos. Instead of life giving rain the heavens release pounding hail. Instead of staying in their river habitat, the frogs infest the land. The flying things rebel, flies fill the land. The animals are stricken; all the livestock in Egypt die. The trees and the plants go into reverse; locusts come and devour until "nothing green remained on any tree or plant in all the land of Egypt." Even the light goes in reverse. Instead of 'let there be light,' God says, 'let there be darkness' and darkness comes over the land. And finally, when Pharaoh still refuses to listen and continues his policies of death, just as creation ends with the creation of human life, the plagues end with the angel of death taking the life of the firstborn - a terrible, heartbreaking end. Do you see the pattern? It's creation in reverse, moving from blessing to chaos. It's God giving Egypt over to pharaoh's culture of death.

Actually, if you want to see the whole pattern of creation in reverse, you've got to take the story one more step. How does Pharaoh finally meet his end? Where does he end up? At the bottom of the Red Sea, right? Pharaoh ends up in the waters. Pharaoh ends up in the deep. It's like he sent him back to the very start of creation, down into the waters over the face of the deep. This isn't just God showing his power over Pharaoh, this is a victory with a message, and the message is the wages of sin are death. When you rebel against God's ways, when you violate God's orders, you will find that creation itself will rise up and you will find yourself trapped by your own sin. You will find your life moving from blessing to chaos. In that sense the plagues are not just something in the past; they are very much with us. A 20 year old goes off to college eager to grab his freedom. Away from his parent's scrutiny, he's going to spread his wings. He parties. A lot. Woohoo! I'm free! First it's just weekends, but then it's during the week too. He starts missing some of his morning classes. He gets behind. Fails a test. Misses an assignment. He feels like a failure. And so to cheer himself up he goes to another party! Now he's in a full-on tailspin. He flunks out and comes home with a lot of bills and even more shame. It's the plague dynamic. You set yourself against God's ways, God's creational intent, and you find yourself trapped in a plague. It's like creation in reverse. You move from blessing and to chaos.

Many of you have picked up that book *The Land Between*, by Jeff Manion that we offered to people who wanted to enrich their exodus study. In that book Jeff tells the story, a true story I'm guessing, of John and Brenda. John and Brenda are a young couple with three children establishing their family. John has a good job. They are blessed. But they quickly fall into the habit of making their life about consumption. They accumulate toys, they follow their friends on ever more expensive vacations, they upgrade their home, and they upgrade their car. Money goes

out the door as fast as it comes in! Then the recession hits and John doesn't lose his job, but his income is cut by 30%. And so John and Brenda find themselves at the kitchen table till midnight: Calculators in front of them, the table covered with bills, their hands on their heads, trying to figure out what they are going to do! They feel trapped by their situation. When you seek the good life in something outside of God's creational intent, you find yourself trapped in a plague. It's like creation in reverse. You move from blessing to chaos. It's a familiar pattern. It's a kind of moral-spiritual entropy. We've all experienced it someplace in our lives. We do something foolish, we say something foolish and we find chaos descending on us. Are we doomed to live this pattern, trapped by our foolishness until the day we are lowered into the depths of the grave? No. Because years later there was another exodus. Only this time God absorbs the curse of the plagues into himself. He does it in Jesus. In this Exodus, Jesus goes through the plagues for us. Jesus goes to the cross - this place where all the sin and guilt of humanity is gathered up in one place - and takes on himself the plague that should have been ours. Instead of our sin bringing darkness upon us, he's the one who finds himself surrounded by darkness from noon until three on the cross. Instead of the plague of the firstborn falling on us, it's God the Father who watches his Son die in pain. Instead of us getting cast into the depths, Jesus is the one who gets cast down into the depths of hell for us. And, to complete the symmetry, Jesus becomes the Passover lamb, whose sacrifice sets us free. Do you see the parallel? Jesus relives the Exodus and takes on himself the plague our sins deserved, so that we can go free.

Don't get me wrong. It's not like we escape all our trouble. Our sin still makes this a complicated and messy world. Jesus' sacrifice doesn't take away the fact of our trouble, but it gives us a way through, it gives us a place of grace where we can stand. You might feel like the waters are closing in, but because of Jesus, there's a path through your Red Sea. There is no sin you can commit that Jesus can't pay for. There's no storm that Jesus can't get you through.

I told the story of John and Brenda a little earlier, the two people whose casual love of consumption put them in a plague of debt. When we left them they were sitting at the table with the pile of bills, their heads in their hands. That wasn't the end of the story. Jeff Manion tells the rest of the story in his book. That night they make a commitment together, they will cut back drastically, they will change their priorities, and more importantly, they will re-center themselves on Jesus. They will find their joy in him and not their stuff. They sell the boat. They drop the health club membership. They give up the yearly cottage rentals. No more camp for the kids. Instead of fancy nights out, they learn the pleasures of an evening on a picnic blanket beside a river in a local park eating ham sandwiches and carrot sticks. They do this together, hand in hand, prayerfully, humbly before the face of God. They make it. Years later they look back on their life of spending as a kind of captivity, a kind of plague. Manion writes, "They had allowed themselves to be sucked into a rut of earn more, want more, spend more." But now they had learned "a deeper trust in God and an ability to respond in obedience." They'd found a kind of freedom. God had brought them through their sea of red ink - their Red Sea. They were being rescued from the insidious lie, "you are what you own." The journey is not easy. The darkness can get pretty thick. But in Jesus there is always a way through.

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