

Sermon Given by

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### Exodus 7:8-10:29 - "The hardened heart"

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Picture the scene: utter devastation. The land is completely bare. There's no green anywhere. The fields are full of rotting animals, carcasses piled high one on top of another. In the houses people are crying out from the searing pain of boils erupting on the surface of their skin. The economy is on its knees- people haven't gone out to work for weeks. The rivers are polluted, the water undrinkable. You can't see the sun. Everywhere is utter darkness.

This is not a description of the world after nuclear holocaust. This is Egypt at the end of the second millennium B.C. after the ravages of the plagues that we've just been hearing about.

Now, the plagues rise lots of very interesting questions, like how did they happen? What mechanisms did God use to produce them? The biggest question, though, has to be, 'Why'? Why did God bring about such complete devastation on a part of his creation? Why did he bring such misery to thousands if not millions of people?

This is the question we're going to be looking at over the next twenty minutes or so. We're going to see that God sent the plagues:

1. to rescue his people
2. so that his name would be proclaimed in all the earth
3. to demonstrate his power to Pharaoh

First then, God sent the plagues to rescue his people.

#### To rescue his people

You see, the episode of the plagues doesn't just come out of the blue, as though God suddenly had an idea to give the Egyptians a horrible time. The Israelites, God's people, were in Egypt. But they were being terribly oppressed by the Egyptians. They were reduced to slave status, building cities for Pharaoh and working in the fields, doing everything the Egyptians didn't want to do. The Israelites were miserable, and God promised to save his people back in chapter 3:

*3:7f.: The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey..."*

But there was one man standing in the way of all this: Pharaoh. And God knew this. So he sent to plagues to make sure that his people could escape:

*3:19: But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him. So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go.*

Now you might expect that God might have some particular reason for saving the Israelites if he's going to all this effort. You might expect them to be particularly clever, or particularly beautiful, or particularly faithful. The last time God's people are actually mentioned is in chapter 6, Moses has just told them about the great rescue, but...:

*6:9: ... they did not listen to him because of their discouragement and cruel bondage.*

Hardly a rousing endorsement of their faith! The Israelites hardly deserved their salvation.

But God was determined to save them anyway. God *gave* them their salvation.

God loves the Israelites like a mother loves their child. Now if your children are anything like most children, sometimes they may behave well, and sometimes not so well. In fact, they may behave badly more often than they behave well. But you love them all the same. Your love for them doesn't depend on how well they behave. You love them because they're your children.

And it's the same with God's love for his people Israel. Just look at the extraordinary lengths he went to to get them released from the Egyptians. He changes the course of nature just to benefit them. He set the whole course of events to make sure that his people would be set free by Pharaoh. First he turns the Nile into blood so that no one can drink the water, then he sends millions of frogs into the Egyptians' land.

In many of the plagues he even makes sure that the land of Goshen where the Israelites were living, was unaffected by the plagues. So, in the second half of chapter 8, he makes sure that Goshen is free of flies when they come. At the beginning of chapter 9 he makes sure that the Israelites' animals don't die, even though the Egyptians' animals are suffering from a plague on their animals. In the second half of chapter 9, when the hail comes, God makes sure that the land of Goshen is completely free of hail.

God *really* cares for his people. He would do anything to get them free from the Egyptians. And he does so *simply* because they are his children.

Now if you're a Christian here this morning, this should be a great encouragement to you. Do you know the care that God has for his people? Do you know the lengths he will go to to keep you his child? Even if you think there's nothing that God could possibly like in you, he still loves you and cares for you. And he does so simply because you are his child.

I can point to many many instances in my life where God has clearly ordered events to help me to get to know him better, and has saved me from going down paths that would have

been harmful to me, even though I didn't know it. God has been at work in all the details of my life, and he's at work in the details of your life too, working things out for your good.

God sent the plagues to rescue his people.

If you're not a Christian here this morning, you may well be sitting wondering what all this has to do with you. The point is that God doesn't just want to stop at giving his people comfort. He wants all people everywhere to find out about him. This is my second point. God sent the plagues on Egypt...

### **so that his name would be proclaimed in all the earth**

First, he wants the Egyptians to know that he is the LORD. This is what he says in chapter 7 verse 5:

*7:5: "And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it."*

But God's ambitions don't just stop with the Egyptians. In chapter 9 verse 16, God says this to Pharaoh through Moses:

*9:16: "... I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."*

'... that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'

God is the creator of the *whole* earth, and he wants *all* people to know about him.

But why the plagues? How do they help people find out about God?

If God had let the Israelites go by changing the mind of Pharaoh just like that, or by letting him die in his sleep, no one would have heard about it, it would have been an utter non-event. It would hardly have got beyond the obituaries section of the near-east dailies the following morning. As it was nothing could have been more sensational. You can just see it:

*Egyptian king humiliated in plagues sent by Hebrew God;*

*Egyptian economy in death-throes: Hebrew God responsible.*

God sent the plagues, so that all people everywhere could hear about him.

And if you're not a Christian here this morning, that includes you. God wanted the events we've just been reading about to be written down in a book, so that we can read about it. He wants you to hear how he is greater than any earthly authority or power. Will you listen to him? Will you recognise who he is?

This has implications for all of us Christians sitting here this morning. God wants his name to be known in all the world. And one of the ways this will happen is if we speak and act among the people around us in such a way that people find out about God. Now often evangelism

can be a tricky, and we don't know where to start. We can feel daunted, overwhelmed by the task. But all evangelism is, is telling people what God has done. Telling people about the wonders he has performed. It's not about us. It's all about our amazing God. And we have much more than plagues to talk about: God has sent his own Son, Jesus, into the world to die instead of us. Jesus didn't just conquer Pharaoh, but he conquered death itself, the thing that makes a complete mockery of life. And he's promised to give us eternal life, a world without crying or mourning or pain. What better news could there be?

But wants people to hear about him, why didn't he just wipe the Egyptians off the face of the earth, in one massive firestorm? That would certainly have reached the front pages. But, even though Pharaoh done nothing to deserve it, God is very patient with him. He gives him ten miraculous signs, no less. Why is he so patient?

In fact, God gives us the answer straight up in chapter 9 and verse 15:

*9:15f.: "For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."*

Did you spot it? We've seen that God sent the plagues so that God's name might be proclaimed in all the earth. But God also sent the plagues...

### **To demonstrate his power to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians**

God wants to show the Egyptians, and Pharaoh specifically, his power.

This is a great blessing for Pharaoh: how many people have said: 'I'll believe in God if I see a miracle'. Or, 'If only God would make himself plain.' Well Pharaoh not only gets ten miraculous demonstrations of God's power in short order, but he also gets a message direct from God's messenger explaining why he's seen the signs. What more could you want?! Well, how does Pharaoh respond?

Now, admittedly, Pharaoh has started from a position of not knowing who God is at all. Back in chapter 5 verse 2, when Moses first made his request to him to let the Israelites go, this was his response:

*5:2: Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and will not let Israel go.*

'I do not know the Lord and will not let Israel go.'

But does seeing the miracles have any effect? Well, some. After just the second plague, the plague of frogs, Pharaoh even seems tacitly to accept the existence of God:

*8:8: 'Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Pray to the LORD to take the frogs away from me and my people, and I will let your people go to offer sacrifices to the LORD.'"*

By the eighth plague, of thunder and hail, Pharaoh appears to admit his rebellion against God:

*9:27: 'Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron, "This time I have sinned," he said to them. "The LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. 28 Pray to the LORD, for we have had enough of thunder and hail. I will let you go; you don't have to stay any longer.'*

Things are looking good for Pharaoh. It looks like he might change his mind and let the Israelites go, and in the process he will have come to know the sovereign God of the universe.

But this would be to tell only half the story. Admittedly, while the plague of frogs was continuing, Pharaoh is all up for praying to God to get his people free from the scourge. But afterwards is a different story:

*8:15: 'But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said.'*

In the plague of hail things looked better- Pharaoh had even gone as far as admitting his sin and guilt. But Moses is less sure. This is his response after Pharaoh's request to pray to ask God to remove the hail:

*9:29: Moses replied, "When I have gone out of the city, I will spread out my hands in prayer to the Lord. The thunder will stop and there will be no more hail, so you may know that the earth is the LORD's. But I know that you and your officials still do not fear the LORD God."*

The proof of the pudding is, as they say, in the eating. And in 9:35 we see that Moses' was correct in his assessment:

*9:35: 'So Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not let the Israelites go, just as the LORD had said through Moses.'*

The point is that Pharaoh didn't *want* to believe in God. We can have all the evidence, but no matter how much evidence we are given, we will not believe in God if we deep down don't *want* to believe in him. If we're very happy running our lives the way we want, then we will always be able to find a reason why the evidence we have been given is not enough.

If you're not a Christian here this morning, may I ask why you don't believe in God? Is it because you think there isn't enough evidence? Perhaps you think the Bible is unreliable, or

that there isn't credible evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. Now I can give you evidence that the Bible is reliable, lots of it. Or I can give you evidence that the most plausible explanation for the facts concerning Jesus' reappearance is that Jesus did actually bodily rise from the dead. And I can point you to a number of books on the subject.

But I can also tell you that evidence on its own will never be enough to convince you. You'll never have enough evidence. Look at Pharaoh. You couldn't get more explicit, supernatural, evidence that God exists. And the evidence even came with its own interpreter, Moses and Aaron, telling Pharaoh what each sign meant. No, you will only believe if deep down you are open to there being a God, an all-powerful God, who created the universe, and who created you and me. Pharaoh was not open to the existence of this kind of God. And so he couldn't see what was staring him in the face.

Now some of you may be out there thinking: it's not really fair of God to hold Pharaoh responsible for rejecting him. After all he did promise to Moses back in 4:21 that he would harden Pharaoh's heart. So, you might be thinking, the fact that Pharaoh goes on to harden his heart is hardly surprising.

This is a difficult area, and I certainly don't have all the answers, or indeed as much time as it would take to deal comprehensively with this subject. We can start by noting that Pharaoh's hardening appears to be a gradual process: first Pharaoh hardens his own heart, and only from the sixth plague onwards, the plague of boils, is God said to be hardening Pharaoh's heart. It seems, then, that God is confirming Pharaoh in the path that he has already taken.

That said, though, if indeed God is who he says he is, the sovereign all-powerful creator of the universe, we would expect him to be in control of everything that goes on in his universe. That's what it means to have complete power.

God is sovereign, then, in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. He knew it was going to happen, and he knew that he would do it. He knew, because he had a purpose. Through this episode he wanted to teach us who are reading God's word now. Specifically, he wanted to show everyone that it is foolish to think, that you can stand up to God, and win.

You see, there is a slavery that is far worse than the slavery experienced by Israel in Egypt. This is the slavery with which Pharaoh was bound, the slavery of sin. This is the slavery which says, 'I know how to run my life. I know what's good for me. I know how to spend my money. I know how to spend my time.' It says, 'Who is the Lord, that I should obey him. Who is the Lord that I should read his word and find out his will for my life? Who is the Lord that I should pray to him and express my dependence on him? Who is the Lord that I should thank him? Who is the Lord that I should put him before all other things in my life?'

I wonder, do you recognise yourself in Pharaoh? Do you recognise the voice of the slavery of sin? Because from birth we are bound, inextricably, every one of us, to this slavery. We are by nature slaves! We can't stop ourselves. We disobey God. All the time. Every minute, every hour of every day.

What can we do? Who will rescue us?

## Conclusion

If we're Christians here this evening, God has rescued us in Jesus. Great though God's rescue of the Israelites was by means of the plagues, God has performed an even greater rescue to save us from our slavery to sin. This time God did it not with plagues, by sending Jesus to die instead of us on a Roman cross.

Jesus didn't deserve this. Unlike Pharaoh, unlike us, Jesus always obeyed his Father. He always trusted that He knew best for his life. He trusted his Father's word. He always put his Father first in his life, and denied himself. He lived the life that we never could, but he died the death that *we* should have died.

But Jesus didn't just die for his people, those who follow him. He also promises, for anyone who asks, to change us from the inside. He promises to put his own Spirit inside us. He promises to take our cold, hard, hearts, hearts like Pharaoh's, and slowly replace them with new ones giving us new desires, to please our Father, and not ourselves. And after we die he promises to take his people to live with him forever.

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)