

The Ten Plagues

By Brad Allison on 7/27/2003

Scripture Reference *Exodus 7-10*

This well-known account of the ten plagues brings us face to face with one of the major topics of the book of Exodus, as well as the entire Bible. It is the topic of the judgment of God. People have different responses to this idea. Several years ago, *U.S. News and World Report* had a lengthy article on the subject of hell. They quoted one pastor as saying the following: "My congregation would be stunned to hear a sermon on hell." Her parishioners, she says, are "upper-middle-class, well-educated critical thinkers" who view God as "compassionate and loving, not someone who's going to push them into eternal damnation." (March 25, 1991, p. 60). Others take the opposite approach and use the idea of God's judgment as something of a club to get people to straighten out their lives and live the way they're supposed to. When the disease of AIDS was first discovered several years ago, there was a very hot debate among Christians about whether this should be seen as a judgment from God. It became clear that many Christians wanted to use this doctrine of God's judgment as something of an "I told you so" statement. "I was right; you were wrong; and now God's going to get you."

There's another response to the judgment of God that I would imagine is more prevalent among those in this room today. That response is to believe in God's judgment but never to think about it. It's a little like that television special I saw several years ago that featured all the tiny critters that inhabit our bed sheets. Each night you share your bed with countless numbers of little things like dust mites and tiny critters that eat, among other things, the dead skin that regularly fluffs off your body. That's the kind of information that even if you know, you choose not to think about it as you get into bed at night. Many believe in the judgment of God but find it too uncomfortable to think much about it. So they simply don't think about it.

As we consider God's judgment today as seen in these ten plagues, I want to propose to you that God's purpose in revealing this truth to us is a good purpose. He doesn't tell us this because he enjoys making us quake in our boots. God tells us in our passage the purpose of his judgments: "Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the Lord" (10:1-2). The judgments of God should produce in us a deep sense that God is God, and that this would be good news to us. He says that we will want to tell our sons and grandsons about these acts of God's judgment. We pass along to our sons and grandsons the good family stories that encourage and bless. God says that such is the case with his judgment. So if I do my job today, we should expect a deeper realization that God is God and that we come to see the judgment of God as good news to be passed on. As we look at God's judgment, I want us to consider the nature of his judgment, the inadequacy of his judgment to lead to repentance, and finally the mercy of his judgment.

I. The Nature of God's Judgment

Students of the Bible have long noticed some patterns within the ten plagues. For example, the plagues themselves are somewhat natural in their flow. What I mean by that is that there is a sense in which each one follows after the previous one as a natural consequence. For example, the first plague is the turning of the Nile into blood. As a result, the amphibious frogs that are able to leave it and survive do so. The result is frogs everywhere, the second plague. But the frogs are now removed from their natural habitat, and they soon die because of that. Gnats and flies proliferate around their dying carcasses, the third and

fourth plagues. In the face of such an ecological disaster, disease develops. The fifth and sixth plagues trace the consequences of this poor health environment as the livestock die and the people are afflicted with boils.

This is not meant to suggest that there was nothing of God's supernatural power at work in these events, because clearly there was. For example, he was able to end each plague precisely when he wanted to, and in several of the plagues the Israelites were spared their effects. But still, there is something about these plagues that lacks the "wow factor." If a Hollywood writer were writing the script for this, he would almost certainly do it differently. Moses appears before Pharaoh and has the power of the God who can do anything he wants. Don't you think maybe it would have been a little more persuasive for Moses to have performed a judgment scene like the one in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Do you remember that scene where the ark is opened and everyone who looks at it begins to melt down to their bones? A Hollywood script would have brought Moses into Pharaoh's presence with the demand that Pharaoh let the people go. If he refused, Moses could have begun pointing his finger at the members of Pharaoh's court and they could have melted down to their bones right before Pharaoh. After doing a few of these, Moses could turn to point to Pharaoh with the words, "Let my people go, or you're next." Why did God not do it that way? The answer to that can be seen in the second characteristic of these plagues.

Not only are the plagues natural, but they are also a reversal of creation. What I mean by that is that these plagues begin to roll back the process of creation that is recorded in Genesis 1. When man sins, everything begins to disintegrate and to revert back to chaos. One commentator words it like this: "It is a picture of creation gone berserk. The world is reverting to a state of chaos" (Fretheim, p. 110). Genesis 1:2 describes what the earth was like before creation. "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep." Do you remember what the ninth plague was? It was the plague of darkness, the exact situation that existed prior to creation. So these plagues portray for us creation gone berserk. Instead of the beautiful harmony that existed after God completed his work of creation, now the weather turns against the plants and animals as the hail destroys them both. God's judgment through these plagues is to allow everything to begin sliding back into chaos.

It's not hard to see the application of this to our own lives. The result of sin is disintegration and a slide back into chaos. When you sin, you unleash the forces of chaos in your life. Let me give a couple of illustrations.

Illustration: Several years ago, a story was reported about a tenant farmer who had worked hard for many years to improve the quality of the land he farmed. On one occasion during the renewal of his lease, the owner informed him that he was going to sell the farm to his son who was getting married. The tenant had been saving money to buy the farm for himself, and he made several generous offers in an attempt to reverse the owner's decision. But it was all in vain. As the day drew near for the tenant farmer to vacate the land he had worked for so many years, anger and bitterness got the best of him. So he gathered seeds from some of the most pesky and noxious weeds he could find, and then spent many hours scattering them on the clean, fertile soil of the farm. He also collected as much trash and rocks as he could find and scattered them as well. The very next morning the owner informed him that plans for his son's wedding had fallen through, and therefore he would be happy to renew the lease. In the same way, all of our sinful actions lead to a similar result: our own harm.

Illustration: On Wednesday morning of this week, my wife called me at the office to tell me that our washing machine had overflowed and left water all over the laundry room floor and the garage below. By the time she called me, she had already stopped the water and

cleaned up the mess. She only wanted to call to share with me the burden she felt in the midst of this mini-crisis. Sensitive guy that I am, I responded to her something like this: "In the future, if there's nothing I can do about a situation like that, please don't call me about it." As soon as I said it, I realized how incredibly selfish I was being, and asked for her forgiveness. She readily and completely gave it. Selfish remarks like the one I made will unleash the force of chaos in our marriage. And if my wife had been unwilling to forgive me, that would unleash the force of bitter chaos in her life.

We could give many more examples of this. But in general the principle is that if you live for anything other than God, a process of disintegration will begin to take place in your life. If you live for a house or any kind of possession, it will destroy you. Your relationships will suffer and in the end all your possessions will be destroyed and you'll wake up to find yourself a lonely fool. The nature of judgment is to unleash the force of chaos and to ruin everything.

II. The Inadequacy of God's Judgment to Lead to Repentance

The amazing thing about Pharaoh is that he realized this was happening and he still refused to let the people go. Pharaoh's servants had come to him and said, "Let the men go, that they may serve the Lord their God. Do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?" (10:7). He did see the ruin caused by these plagues. The judgment of God was very real to him. It even led him to words that sound very orthodox to us. "I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you. Now therefore, forgive my sin, please, only this once, and plead with the Lord your God only to remove this death from me" (10:16-17). But it becomes clear that his repentance was only partial and shallow. It was partial in that he told Moses that he could go and worship God, but only if he took the men. We see its temporary nature in the fact that he told Moses he could go and then changed his mind. His was the repentance of the alcoholic who gets caught and is more sorry for the effects of his sin than for his sin itself. Just as the alcoholic promises never to drink again, Pharaoh says, "forgive my sin *only this once*" because once is all that will be needed. He won't be sinning again.

Believing in the judgment of God is not wrong in itself, but it is wrong by itself. It provides no power to bring real and lasting change. If you try to obey God out of fear of God's judgment, it won't work. Fear is not an adequate motive by itself because it doesn't bring us into any kind of relationship with God. If your motive for living a good life is that you believe a person reaps what he sows, and it goes no further than that, then you have no relationship with God. It's like paying your taxes because you fear the IRS.

I hope you understand that so far I've given you no good news. I've told you that sin unleashes the forces of chaos and disintegration into your life, and I've told you that knowing that will give you no power whatsoever to stop sinning. Where, then, does the power come from? The answer to that brings us to our next point, where we are going to learn that real power to repent and live an obedient life comes only through a relationship with God. This relationship comes through knowing the mercy of God.

III. The Mercy of God's Judgment

The mercy of God can be seen in these acts of judgment in two ways. First, they are a warning of the ultimate judgment that is to come when we choose to live our lives with something other than God being most important to us. These judgments are meant to be something like the previews you see at the movie theater, just giving you a glimpse of the entire movie. Cataclysmic judgments like these are merciful warnings from God while there is

still time to come to Jesus for deliverance.

Illustration: I received news this week that my father has been diagnosed with a form of cancer for which the treatment is both mild and effective. When his doctor gave him the news, my father did not say, “You are such a cruel doctor, telling me that this cancer will kill me if left untreated. I can’t believe in a doctor who would tell me such unkind and cruel things.” No, he saw his doctor’s words for what they were: kind words that pointed my father to the solution. Such is the judgment of God.

But there’s an even greater way in which we see the mercy of God here. Did you notice the similarities between some of these plagues and the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus? Here’s how Matthew records the death of Jesus. “Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour... And the earth shook, and the rocks were split” (Matt. 27:45, 51). The ninth plague was darkness, and the theme in all the plagues is creation gone berserk—things like the earth shaking and rocks splitting. Jesus is undergoing the same judgment as Pharaoh, and the same judgment deserved by all sinners, including you and me.

Every statement in the Scriptures about the judgment of God applies to Jesus when he hung on the cross. God has loved us so much that he would rather visit these awful judgments upon his Son than to live without you and me. He has become sin in our place and has been judged in our place, and it is only when we see this and rest in it that we will have power to obey God.

CONCLUSION:

I want to close with three quick applications. First, God is the judge, and not you and I. That means that we ought never step into that divine role. Second, we ought to believe that even for the forgiven sinner our sin introduces a process of disintegration into our lives. But we need to remember that there is no power in this belief to change us.

Finally, since God’s judgment is satisfied in Christ, let us enjoy our freedom from condemnation. There is no eternal and ultimate judgment remaining for the child of God because Jesus has taken it upon himself. It is believing this that gives us the power to live changed lives. God tells us to observe this sacrament of the Lord’s Supper perpetually, until he returns. He doesn’t tell us to get together and quiver at the thought of his judgments. He tells us to rejoice in his kindness seen right here. Let me remind you that there are two cups in view with the Lord’s Supper. Jesus prayed about the first one when he said, “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matt. 26:39). He was speaking of the cup of God’s judgment. Jesus drank from that cup that we might drink from the cup of his blessing. That’s the one we share now, given to us by the kindness of God. As we take these elements, I want to invite you to meditate on the kindness of God to you, knowing that it is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance.