

The Plague of Blood

14 Then the LORD said to Moses, “Pharaoh’s heart is unyielding; he refuses to let the people go. 15 Go to Pharaoh in the morning as he goes out to the river. Confront him on the bank of the Nile, and take in your hand the staff that was changed into a snake. 16 Then say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness. But until now you have not listened. 17 This is what the LORD says: By this you will know that I am the LORD: With the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood. 18 The fish in the Nile will die, and the river will stink; the Egyptians will not be able to drink its water.’” 19 The LORD said to Moses, “Tell Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over the streams and canals, over the ponds and all the reservoirs—and they will turn to blood.’ Blood will be everywhere in Egypt, even in vessels of wood and stone.” 20 Moses and Aaron did just as the LORD had commanded. He raised his staff in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was changed into blood. 21 The fish in the Nile died, and the river smelled so bad that the Egyptians could not drink its water. Blood was everywhere in Egypt. 22 But the Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts, and Pharaoh’s heart became hard; he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said. 23 Instead, he turned and went into his palace, and did not take even this to heart. 24 And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile to get drinking water, because they could not drink the water of the river.

We know that the Exodus happened in the spring of 1446 BC, and although Egyptian chronology changes from year to year as new archaeological discoveries are made, almost all scholars agree that the Pharaoh in that year was Thutmose III. This is how I remember the date of the Exodus and the name of the Pharaoh, or King of Egypt. The year was 1446, and the Pharaoh: Thutmose III. Here’s the rhyme:

*“In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, the Pharaoh’s name was Thutmose II.
In fourteen forty-six BC, the Pharaoh’s name was Thutmose III.”^a*

The family of Israel had been in Egypt for more than four hundred years. They had grown from a pretty big family of seventy to a nation of two million. But they were no longer guests in Egypt as they had been in the beginning. Sometime in the three centuries between the death of Joseph and the birth of Moses, we think that another nation had invaded Egypt and seized power for a while. At least, that’s what Egyptian records say. When Egypt drove those conquerors out, they became paranoid and mistrustful of any foreigners, and they enslaved the Israelites. That slavery

^a I composed this to help teach these things in Catechism class shortly after coming to New Ulm.

had gone on now for two, maybe three generations. God heard the agony and the cries of his people, and he called Moses to go to Egypt to tell Pharaoh: “Let my people go.”

You know the story of the Burning Bush. You may remember that Moses resisted this call, but God gave Moses signs to perform. The first sign was turning his staff into a snake. The second was thrusting his hand into his cloak and pulling it out, covered in leprosy, and then thrusting it back in and it would be clean once again. The third sign was to take water from the Nile, pour it out on the ground, and it would become blood (Exodus 4). Moses and Aaron performed these things before the Israelites (Ex. 4:30). Israel was convinced; they believed God. Pharaoh was another matter.

Moses went to Pharaoh. There was no need to seek an audience in the court; Moses just waited out by the river, since Pharaoh and his people worshiped the Nile as a god. Each trip to the river could have been an act of worship for them, although we can't read the hearts of individual Egyptians. In front of the Israelites, Moses had simply poured some Nile water into the sand, and it became blood. Here, he had Aaron strike the Nile with his staff, which was an attack on a god of Egypt. The people ate its fish and drank its water and used its papyrus reeds for everyday articles: paper, pens, and cheap tools.

God had promised that the Nile would turn to blood, and it did. The fish died, the river stank so bad that no one could drink it. All of these things happened. It's sometimes suggested that this could have been an outbreak of algae that turns sea water or river water red, and in large concentrations has an unpleasant odor. But this sign wasn't unpleasant. The water didn't just turn “as red as blood,” it became blood.

The miracle affected everything. The Nile, its tributary streams and the many branches of the delta, the canals, the ponds, and the buckets and pails. All of those things became blood. Now, if this was the case even of the reservoirs, where did the Egyptian magicians get water to perform the same signs by their secret arts and magic tricks? The answer is either that they dug alongside the banks for unspoiled water, which God permitted the Egyptians to do, or that they cheated in some way, or they had seawater brought in, or some other deception. Everything that they did was a deception in some way or another, but God didn't care. Those magicians would be able to imitate a couple of the plagues, but not all of them.

But speaking of those magicians, it's time for us to notice some of the sins that this passage reveals. I was shown some X-Rays of my spine this week that revealed quite a few good things and a couple of things that are imperfect, and it occurred to me that when we look carefully at the word of God, it reveals things to us about our lives that we should pay attention to.

Let's look at just a few of the sins that show up here in the Exodus 7 X-ray. (1) Original sin is always there, teamed up with every other sin we have, multiplying out sins, augmenting them, by adding the guilt of fallen humanity to each and every one of the times when we cross the line of God's law.

(2) Pharaoh's heart became hard. In the first few plagues of the ten, Pharaoh hardens his own heart, turning away from God. But later, about halfway through, God will start hardening Pharaoh's heart, and if God turns away from us, what hope would we have? Do not put the Lord your God to the test!

(3) Underlying the need for the plagues is Egypt's policy of enslavement and hard treatment of the Israelites, and this came from (4) an inherent racism against all foreigners, including but not limited to Israel. (5) We can also include here the sin of witchcraft and magic, which God would condemn along with using horoscopes and fortune-telling in the giving of the law, strictly speaking, those things are violations against the First and Second Commandments.

(6) Finally, Pharaoh used anything as an excuse not to believe. He thought he should be obeyed no matter what, and finally he simply refused to bend his knee to God Almighty.

Unbelief always ignores plain facts. Unbelief finds any excuse at all not to listen to God; not to believe God, whether God's threats or God's promises. Unbelief turns a blind eye. Moses and Aaron were not perfect; far from it. Moses had been a murderer, he tried to reject God's call to be a prophet. Aaron would show his colors later at Sinai.

Look at what the plagues did for Egypt. This was only the first of the ten. The plagues lasted for many weeks, perhaps many months, during that year. The plagues stripped away Egypt's confidence in its own power, in its false gods, in its smug self-confidence that was not deserved. The plagues glorified God, again and again, plague by plague, as God was shown to be supreme in all things. The plagues also gave Egypt, gave to Pharaoh, the opportunity to repent, to cry out, "Stop! Enough!" A few times, Pharaoh would very nearly do that, but he kept changing his mind, he kept hardening his heart. But there are other examples: David faced a plague in Jerusalem near the end of his reign and showed what repentance can be. The people of Nineveh faced a plague in Jonah's time and showed what repentance can be.

You and I don't always know if our lives reflect chastening of some kind, but it's never the wrong time to repent. But repentance is not brought about by the law alone. The law makes us afraid. Think of Adam and Eve, newly fallen into sin, cowering under the branches of the Lord's own Garden. Without the Gospel, repentance stops at terror, there is no comfort there at all. Staying away from the word of God means keeping the gospel from our hearts. It's like keeping medicine from the sick.

But God is patient. God is loving. God sent his Son to take the punishment for my sins and endure it all in my place. This is not symbolism. This is not Egyptian mythology. This is a fact of history. There was another kind of plague, even a plague of blood, our blood, demanded by God for our sins. But all of his rage and wrath and mercilessness was slammed down on one man, Jesus Christ, in our place. God mercilessness to Jesus means God's mercy to us. God's rage on his own Son means his gentle kindness to us, his children. God's wrath over sin is appeased. It's all over and done with. Don't invite it back on your own head—that's what unbelief actually does. Unbelief damns, but faith, faith in Jesus, saves us all. Put your faith in Jesus. The plague of God's wrath has passed you by.

Now, live with that in mind.

Live under God's eye with the Gospel of forgiveness as your most-used language.

Be patient with your loved ones with that peace in your heart.

Pray for God's help with that certainty in your smile.

Face each new day as a new gift from your merciful God.

Amen.