

Exodus 9:1-12 | Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, “Let my people go, that they may serve me. ² For if you refuse to let them go and still hold them, ³ behold, the hand of the Lord will fall with a very severe plague upon your livestock that are in the field, the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks. ⁴ But the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing of all that belongs to the people of Israel shall die.” ’ ” ⁵ And the Lord set a time, saying, “Tomorrow the Lord will do this thing in the land.” ⁶ And the next day the Lord did this thing. All the livestock of the Egyptians died, but not one of the livestock of the people of Israel died. ⁷ And Pharaoh sent, and behold, not one of the livestock of Israel was dead. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go.

⁸ And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Take handfuls of soot from the kiln, and let Moses throw them in the air in the sight of Pharaoh. ⁹ It shall become fine dust over all the land of Egypt, and become boils breaking out in sores on man and beast throughout all the land of Egypt.” ¹⁰ So they took soot from the kiln and stood before Pharaoh. And Moses threw it in the air, and it became boils breaking out in sores on man and beast. ¹¹ And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils came upon the magicians and upon all the Egyptians. ¹² But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had spoken to Moses.

Exodus 9:1-12 | Plagues 5 & 6, Livestock & Boils

Today we are covering the 5th and 6th plagues of Egypt. One way to understand these plagues is taking place in three cycles of three with the final plague of each cycle being executed with no warning given to Pharaoh. So these plagues can be thought of as the 2nd and then final plagues in the 2nd cycle and these seem to be some of the most costly so far, these are the destruction of Egyptian livestock with the sparing of Israelite livestock, and then boils upon the Egyptians across the land of Egypt. Both of the plagues amount to the same response of Pharaoh to all the plagues thus far. After the 5th plague the text relates that Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and after the sixth plague the text shows us that the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh.

Which is it? Is Pharaoh hardening his own heart toward what he sees or is the Lord hardening the heart of Pharaoh? Let’s look at the 5th plague.

1. Plague 5: Livestock

Exodus 9:1 | Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, “Let my people go, that they may serve me.

Following the plague of flies and Pharaoh’s half-hearted attempt to maintain power over the Egyptians by telling them how they will worship, Pharaoh hardens his heart and does not let the people go. The Lord instructs Moses to meet Pharaoh again and offer him this

warning. It is the same call although this time it states the God of the Hebrews as the designation for YHWH and in that designation we can see the reference to the last plague in which God made the first distinction between the Egyptians and the Israelites naming the Israelites explicitly as my people.

Exodus 9:3 | behold, the hand of the Lord will fall with a very severe plague upon your livestock that are in the field, the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks.

The warning is a plague against the livestock of Egypt. Now we must consider this practically this is a plague against food, milk, textiles, and transportation for the whole land of Egypt. And like we have seen with several of the other plagues there were several gods associated with the livestock of Egypt, Ptah and Ra therefore the Lord continues to make a mockery of the Egyptian Pantheon.

Exodus 9:4-5 | But the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing of all that belongs to the people of Israel shall die.” ” 5 And the Lord set a time, saying, “Tomorrow the Lord will do this thing in the land.”

The Lord once again makes a clear distinction between his people and the people of Egypt. He is drawing a people to himself from out of the midst of another people, from all of their other Gods who he stands over and humiliates. And the distinction is that nothing of all the people of Israel shall die. There is a bit of a Hebrew play on words in this because the word for plague and the word for thing are the same consonants דבר so in the same event one will have a total loss and the others will lose nothing. The Lord is showing his precision in gathering his people.

Likewise there is a bit of irony in the Lord saying that he will not do this thing until tomorrow. Pharaoh keeps saying he will let the Israelites go free tomorrow and then he doesn't because he is faithless, The God of the Hebrews threatens his plague for tomorrow and it happens just as he said it would. The text explains that all of the livestock of the Egyptians died from the plague and that none of the livestock of the Israelites was lost. Pharaoh sends his people to check the Israelite livestock and it is all preserved. But Pharaoh's heart is hardened.

2. Plague 6: Boils

Exodus 9:8-9 | And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Take handfuls of soot from the kiln, and let Moses throw them in the air in the sight of Pharaoh. 9 It shall become fine dust over all the land of Egypt, and become boils breaking out in sores on man and beast throughout all the land of Egypt.”

This plague like the third has no accompanying warning for Pharaoh. Instead it is just a demonstration for Pharaoh of the absoluteness of the Lord's power by the hand of Moses. Moses is to go before Pharaoh and take handfuls of soot from the kiln and toss them into the air. The kiln is likely the ovens that were a part of the brick-making process in Egypt, that very toilsome work that Pharaoh plagued the Hebrews with. But it is also worth noting that the kilns makes bricks and bricks are about structure. So the whole land of Egypt he storehouses and monuments depend upon this fundamental structure that holds together.

But the dust, is the brick that can't hold together. It is the disorganized material that amounts to no structure. So Moses is instructed to take this image of structure for Pharaoh and toil for the Israelites and show that it will become toil for the Egyptians. Laboring under Pharaoh their body breaks down, now the body of Egypt will break down with boils. Boils are like a disintegration. Parts of your own skin is not holding together as it ought. And when your body falls apart that is painful.

This dust image is of course an image of death, because it is Genesis chapter three that Adam is told "for you are dust and to dust you shall return." The dust that is gathered into a brick is meaningful, how much more meaningful is the dust that is gathered into kingdom, and then how much more meaningful is the dust that is gathered into a man. So like the angel of Death will spread over the land of Egypt the dust from the source of that which is meant to bring structure, will devour the land and its people.

The dust becomes the clear connecting point between the hand of Moses and the boils on all the people of Egypt. The magicians are mentioned for the last time and they cannot even stand before Moses and Aaron as they are so burdened by the boils. Man and beast of the Egyptians we might say are sitting in ash covered in boils. But Pharaoh's heart in all of this is not softened but hardened by the Lord. Pharaoh's own experience is one of resisting the Lord, but there is this greater sense in which he is playing perfectly into his hand. Because the absolute authority and control over which God has shown regarding Pharaoh's kingdom and even his own body, is shown over his heart as well. Paul says in Romans.

Romans 9:17-18 | For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." ¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

Don't you see the absoluteness of God? I think there is a way we might better gain insight into what is happening in Pharaoh's and how it is that God moves our hearts by looking at another king in scripture, who rules over another land, that experiences a series of plagues directly from the hand of God, yet whose heart does not harden. It is a story which begins with another man sitting in ashes covered in boils after the death of his livestock and his family.

3. Job

Job 2:7-10 | So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. ⁸ And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes.

⁹ Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.” ¹⁰ But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Job received a series of reports before his body was struck with boils. First his oxen and donkeys were destroyed, much like Pharaohs. Then his sheep were burned, then his camels, then his sons and daughters.

Then he is finally struck in his body. But he says, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” And in all this Job did not sin. Job understands that he sits beneath a God who is absolute in his power, even his power over himself. Pharaoh speaks like Job’s wife, and curses God. So what do we do with the evil in the world? Is that in the territory of outside of God’s control? We must realize there is no such territory. Because here is the false lesson of the plagues. If I’m on God’s side nothing like the plagues will happen to me. And if something like the plagues is happening to me, I’m outside of the will of God. The Confession describes to us the ways in which the absoluteness of the Lord manifests for the sake of two different hearts.

Job - providence

5. The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave for a season his own children to manifold temptations and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support unto himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.

Pharaoh - providence

6. As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous judge, for former sins, doth blind and harden, from them he not only withholdeth his grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings and wrought upon in their hearts, but sometimes also withdraweth the gifts which they had, and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin; and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan; whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God useth for the softening of others.

Now within this all powerful providence of God we must see the wonder of Christ. Who is not a creature like us, but is the second person of the Trinity fully God. And see that he saved us by bearing on our behalf the very wrath of God itself.