

April 23rd, 2023

The Fifth Plague: The Smashing of Egypt's Golden Calves

Exodus 9:1-7

De-creating Egypt

The plagues on Egypt were God's unraveling of the nation. As one author has said

“Egypt was in the process of being broken, religiously and economically. At the end of [any] era or age, collapse in these two areas is commonplace. To witness this—the breakup of a false faith and a false economy—*means to witness the coming collapse of a culture.*”¹

Egypt was collapsing, God was de-creating it. Here is one unassailable truth from the Bible: *humanity can not build nations on their own terms.* Egypt was under judgment for rebelling against God. That's where we find our nation today. Under God's judgment.

In wrath God remembers mercy

But here's the good news, in wrath, God remembers mercy (Habakkuk 3:2). God could have destroyed Egypt upon Pharaoh's first disobedience, but He didn't. Why? One reason² is because God delights in remembering mercy.

¹ Rousas John Rushdoony, *Commentaries on the Pentateuch: Exodus*, Vallecito, CA.: Ross House Books, 2004), pg. 99

² The clearest explanation is found in Exodus 9:15-16

These judgments *as terrible as there were* brought many Egyptians to repentance. In 9:20 says that there were many Egyptians who began to fear the word of the LORD. Upon the Israel's departure, we read in 12:38 that "...a mixed multitude also went up with [Israel]." A mixed multitude—a great abundant mass—of Egyptians left with the Hebrews. In these plagues God remembered mercy. That's one reason for the delay. Dear congregation, that is *why* we can have great hope for our nation. We are far past our expiration date. God could have wiped us out long ago. Why hasn't He? Because in wrath He remembers mercy. That brings us to...

The Big Idea...

God's ordinary way of mercy is to crush a people's gods before He crushes that people

★ Our Doctrine

★ Our Duty

★ Our Delight

I. Our Doctrine

How God strives with man

v.1 “Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh³ and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, “Let my people go, that they may serve me.”’” Depending on how you count it, this formula “let my people go” is repeated 8 times to Pharaoh. This is not superfluous repetition, rather it is a glimpse into the very heart of God. God continues to come and reason with Pharaoh, telling him what his duty is, warning him again and again and again. This is what God does with the sinner. He strives and strives. Whether through the book of nature, or through the pangs of conscience or through Divine providence or Scripture, God strives with man. He is the merciful God who sent prophet after prophet to His people—Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—to restore them to Himself. And here Yahweh is striving with an undeserving pagan king. Isaiah 1:18 “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD.” Is God striving with you friend? Don’t harden your heart. The Scripture says “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever” (Genesis 6:3). God’s warnings to Pharaoh ended and he was destroyed, and this will happen to all who will not turn to the Lord. “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:22)

God’s threatening

v.2-3 “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

³ Just as the 1st and the 4th have a parallel formula, so the 2nd and the 5th are parallel. Moses meets Pharaoh at the Nile (1st, 4th, 7th) then in his palace (2nd, 5th, 8th) and then no warning is given (3rd, 6th, 9th).

in the field, the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks.” Here we see the progressive nature of the plagues.⁴ They got increasingly worse. The first three plagues caused great inconvenience and discomfort. In plague 4 the swarms began to destroy their property. Here that is intensified. We read “... *a very severe plague*— [will fall] upon your livestock.” This is a pestilence. The KJV uses the word “murrain” which is a fatal cattle disease. The Encyclopedia Britannica says here that:

Cattle murrain was “...closely related to...measles in humans and viral distemper in dogs...After an incubation period of three to nine days, and loss of appetite occurred in an infected animal. These symptoms were followed within a few more days by discharges from the eyes and nose, salivation, mouth ulcers, and a disagreeable, fetid odor. As the virus invaded the internal organs, the animal exhibited labored breathing, dehydration, [and] diarrhea... In many cases a skin eruption developed on the back and flanks. Prostration, coma, and death occurred about 6 to 12 days after the first symptoms appeared. The actual cause of death was dehydration.”⁵

That was God’s threat—that their cattle, horses, donkeys, camels, oxen and sheep would be struck with a burdensome disease and die.

The distinction

v.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

⁴ It was "finger of God" in the third plague, but now as God progressively increases punishment against Egypt, it is "the hand of Yahweh"

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/science/rinderpest> Accessed April 21, 2023

Israel shall die.” We saw Yahweh make this distinction last week, swarms of flies covered Egypt but no swarms to be found in Goshen. Here, though cattle murrain is highly contagious, and though it would spread through Egypt’s livestock like a wildfire, there would be zero infections in Goshen where Israel lived. 2 Timothy 2:19 says “But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: *“The Lord knows those who are his.”*” “The Lord knows” 2 Peter 2:9 says “how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.” The Lord always makes a distinction between His children and the children of the devil. Boys and girls, think about how your own parents care for you. They treat you differently than other kids, they make a distinction between you and every other child on the planet. You are their first priority. Christians are God’s adopted children bought by the blood of Jesus Christ. He treats us differently than others, He makes a distinction between us and those who are not His, and He places His special care on us.

Time to repent

v.5 “Then the LORD appointed a set time, saying, “Tomorrow the LORD will do this thing in the land.”” Why the delay? Why not send this plague immediately? Two reasons. **1)** Because it demonstrates that this was supernatural. The plague would only come when God said, not a second later, or a second sooner. **2)** It gave Pharaoh time to repent. God gave him a day to think about it, that he might change his mind. But Pharaoh didn’t repent.

All their livestock died

v.6 “So the LORD did this thing on the next day, and *all* the livestock of Egypt died...” Stop. *All the livestock of Egypt died?* This is a difficulty because in 9:20-21 the Egyptians still had livestock—some brought them into their homes

to avoid the deadly hail while others did not.⁶ So how can v.6 say that *all the livestock died*? There are several solutions. **1)** All their livestock died and they purchased replacements from Israel or the surrounding nations.⁷ **2)** Only their livestock “in the field” died (v.3) but their stabled livestock survived. **3)** The word *all*⁸ doesn’t mean each-and-every-animal but the vast majority of animals,⁹ such that “what remained was nothing in comparison.”¹⁰ Now which ever of these options is true, the effect was absolutely devastating—either every all of the Egyptian’s livestock died or the vast majority died on the very next day.

Not one died

In comparison, the end of v.6 says “but of the livestock of the children of Israel, not one died.” *Not one died*. This seems to indicate that not even one animal died of 'natural' causes that day which would have in itself been extraordinarily wonderful since there would have been thousands upon thousands of animals living in Goshen because Israel's population was around 2.5 million. Yet not one animal died in all of Israel's care.¹¹ This is amplified in v.7

⁶ The same is true in Exodus 14:9 “The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them encamped at the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.”

⁷ Gary North, *Moses & Pharaoh: Dominion Religion Versus Power Religion*, (Tyler, TX.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985), pg. 107

⁸ Another option is that the word *all* doesn’t mean every single animal, but animals from every species listed.

⁹ This is how Scripture often uses the word “all”, see Isaiah 66:23; Matthew 3:5; Romans 11:26

¹⁰ Keil and Delitzsch Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/exodus/9-6.htm> Accessed April 21, 2023

¹¹ "The gracious care of God is not only over the persons of those that fear him, but over all that belongs to them. Whatever the poorest Israelite possessed, the Lord was the protector of it, while all that belonged to the king and people of Egypt was exposed to the destructive ravages of those plagues with which divine justice saw fit to punish their idolatries and oppressions of his people. But doth God take care of oxen? Yes, he doth; his providence extends itself to the meanest of his creatures." Benson Commentary Source: <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/exodus/9-6.htm> Accessed April 22, 2023

“And Pharaoh sent [an investigation team], and behold, not one of the livestock of Israel was dead.” Beloved God’s care for you does not merely extend to your person but to your possessions. Belonging to Yahweh means that God cares for our possessions and gives us what we need to accomplish His good pleasure in our lives. Matthew 6:32-33 “Your heavenly Father knows [what] you need...seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, *and all these things will be added to you.*”¹²

Devastation #1: The ruin of their economy

But consider how devastating this would have been for the Egyptians. What did all these animals—cows, horses, donkeys, camels, oxen, and sheep—represent. Their livelihood. Their horses were for their military. Their donkeys carried heavy loads. Camels were for transportation. Oxen plowed the fields. Sheep were for clothing. In one day their economy was ruined. It was worse than the stock market crash in 1929. At first glance the previous four plagues might seem worse than this one. But this plague—the destruction of the livestock spelled economic disaster for years to come. They wouldn’t recover from this plague alone for decades.

Devastation #2: The crushing of their gods

But this was deeper than economics. This was an assault against their religion. Think for a moment. When Israel finally left Egypt and Moses was ‘delayed’ on the mountain, what idol did Israel make? A golden calf (Exodus 32:1-4) They made a metal cow to worship. Where did they learn to worship

¹² God promised to bless Israel’s possessions for covenant faithfulness—Deuteronomy 28:1-14 and I believe by extension this same blessing rests on God’s New Covenant people since this covenant is built on better promises.

cows? In Egypt. We've seen this Ezekiel 20:6-8 says that Israel worshiped Egypt's gods. This destruction of Egypt's livestock wasn't merely an economic blow, God was putting to death their most sacred relics. As John Currid points out:

“Bull cults are known to have flourished throughout the history of Egypt. Egyptians viewed the bull as a fertility figure, the great inseminator imbued with the potency and vitality of life...bulls were understood as embodiments of the great Egyptian gods Ptah and Ra. Numerous...female deities are pictured as livestock animals: Isis, queen of the gods, bears cow's horns [and]...Hathor [has] a bovine head.”¹³

When God killed their livestock, He wasn't *only* breaking Egypt economically, He was breaking them religiously.

Our Doctrine: God crushes gods before He crushes people

That brings us to **our doctrine**: *God's ordinary way of mercy is to crush a people's gods before He crushes that people.* God is slow to anger. Judgment is His strange work. Throughout redemptive history, He ordinarily and mercifully crushes a people's gods before he crushes that people. Consider 3 proofs from Scripture.

Proof 1: God crushed the Philistine's god Dagon

What happened when the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant and put it in Dagon's temple? They come back in the morning and Dagon's stone

¹³ John D. Currid, *Exodus Vol. 1: Chapters 1-18*, (Auburn, MA.: Evangelical Press, 2000), pg. 192

head and stone hands were lying cut off. Only Dagon's trunk was left to him (1 Samuel 5:4). And then the tumors began to spread on all the people of Philistia and a deathly panic broke out. The hand of the LORD was heavy against them and they cried out "Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people" (1 Samuel 5:11). *God mercifully crushed the Philistine gods before He crushed Philistia long years later.*

Proof 2: God crushed the statism of Babylon

King Nebuchadnezzar went out on his balcony and arrogantly proclaimed "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" (Daniel 4:30). God then punished him by giving him the mind of a beast for seven periods of time. When God gave him his mind back, Nebuchadnezzar confessed that the Most High God was the King of Heaven (Daniel 4:37). Nebuchadnezzar relinquished his position as a god. But years his son Belshazzar didn't learn the lesson, though he knew all that happened to his father. And God sent the Medes in one evening and Babylon fell. *God mercifully crushed the Babylon gods before He crushed Babylon years later.*

Proof 3: God crushed the Baal worship in Judah

The last good king in Judah before their captivity in 587 B.C. was King Josiah. He turned to the LORD with all his heart and soul and might.¹⁴ God worked mightily through Josiah and we read in 2 Kings 23:4 that he brought "out of the temple of the LORD all the vessels made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven. He burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of Kidron

¹⁴ 2 Kings 23:25

and carried their ashes to Bethel.” He cleaned Judah from top to bottom overturning every false god, burning every altar. *God mercifully crushed the false gods in Judah before He crushed Judah just a few years later.*

Summa Theologica

Dear congregation, this plague against Egypt’s livestock certainly showed God’s wrath towards Pharaoh’s obstinance. But it also showed God’s mercy. God’s ordinary way with men is to be slow in judgment.¹⁵ He sent plague after plague on Egypt, first taking away their comforts, then their gods long before He took away their lives. That’s **our doctrine**: *God’s ordinary way of mercy is to crush a people’s gods before He crushes that people.*

II. Our Duty

Informatory Use

Our **first duty** is just to *consider the wonderful patience of God.* Dear congregation God’s patience towards the sinner is deeper than hell and higher heaven. Here we see Pharaoh, the epitome of the wicked man. He was the dragon incarnate on earth. Ezekiel 29:3 says Thus says the Lord God: “Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon that lies in the midst of his streams, that says, ‘My Nile is my own; I made it for myself.’” Pharaoh believed himself to be a god and demanded that all Egypt worship him.

And yet God patiently postponed punishment.

¹⁵ cf. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 2*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), pg. 718

He enslaved human beings for his own gain.

And yet God patiently postponed punishment.

He threw helpless Hebrew babies into the Nile to be crocodile food.

And yet God patiently postponed punishment.

He mocked God in 5:2 “Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice?”

And yet God patiently postponed punishment.

God sent Moses and called him repentance again and again. Again and again Pharaoh ignores God’s word.

And yet God patiently postponed punishment.

Pharaoh has cheated God twice so far promising to let the people go after the plague of frogs and flies only to lie after the plagues were lifted.

And yet God is patient still.

Even in this plague, we read in v.5 “And the LORD set a time, saying, “Tomorrow the Lord will do this thing in the land.”” ‘Pharaoh you have 24 hours to change your mind before I crush your gods. Obey me and you will avoid the judgment.’ Pharaoh disobeys. But God doesn’t wipe him out, He only kills Egypt’s livestock. I say *only* because what is a ruined economy compared to a soul in hell. Even in this act of wrath, God remembered mercy. And He still has 5 plagues left. 5 more times of patiently pleading with Pharaoh, 5 more times of patiently postponing the Great Judgment of Pharaoh’s soul. Loved ones if God is thus patient with a reprobate sinner that He had already determined to

harden, how much more will He be patient with you? Oh loved ones consider how patient God has borne with you.

Elenctic/Consolatory Use

How many times have you preferred yourself to God—acted like a little Pharaoh—making your own desires god and serving them instead of Him?

And yet He patiently bears with you. Isaiah 44:22 “I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you.”

How many times have you disobeyed God’s word and doubted His promises?

And yet He patiently bears with you. 2 Timothy 2:13 “if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.”

Loved ones God’s patience towards Pharaoh is the greatest argument of His patience towards you.

Hortatory Use

That brings us to our **second duty**: *appeal to sinners to be reconciled to God*. Don’t miss what Moses is doing here. Moses again and again is trying to persuade Pharaoh to obey God. Don’t you know that is our great privilege as Christians? 2 Corinthians 5:20 “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.” Just as Yahweh spoke through Moses to Pharaoh, God the Holy Spirit makes His appeal to the lost through us. Oh what an unspeakable privilege this is! What family members do you have that are

lost, what friends do you have that are lost? God has made you His ambassador to them, just as Moses was God's ambassador to Pharaoh. Go after them. Tell them what the LORD says.

Tell them *why* God made them.

So that they could glorify Him and enjoy Him forever.

Tell them *how* sin has ruined them.

That they will someday die and face the judgment for what they have done.

Tell them *what* God has done in Christ to save them.

That Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners!

Be an ambassador. Go into the world and say "Thus says the LORD." How do you start? Just begin by praying: 'Lord please give me an opportunity. Lord whether its with my neighbor, co-worker, family member, friend, stranger, whoever. Lord please give me an opportunity and help me to speak your Word with all boldness. Help me to love the lost with patience and mercy just like You.'

Admonitory Use

Our **third duty** is to *warn all who have a hardened heart like Pharaoh*. Even after this plague, we read at the end of v.7 "But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go." There are two terrible things that will happen to those who continue to harden their hearts.

I. Increasing punishment

First, *their punishment will get worse and worse.* The plagues on Egypt got progressively worse. The punishment of the wicked will grow worse and worse. Jesus stated this principle to a man whom He healed but didn't believe. John 5:14 says Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you are well! Sin no more, *that nothing worse may happen to you.*" Sin is never neutral. In the Christian, sin is progressively being put to death. But in the man who is unreconciled to God, his sin is always piling more and more. And this piling up of sin is just like the plagues in Egypt. In each plague more misery was felt, likewise in each sin more misery is felt. The philosopher Seneca once said "The greatest punishment for sinners is sin." In Romans 1, God's punishment on those who refuse to be reconciled to Him is to give them up to more sin. How is this a punishment? Because sin is like the army of locusts, it devours everything green and good and alive in the heart of man.

Sin robs a man of peace.

Isaiah 48:22 "“There is no peace,” says the LORD, “for the wicked.”

Sin robs a man of joy, because sin never satisfies the soul. Ezekiel 7:19 "They cannot satisfy their appetite nor can they fill their stomachs, for their iniquity has become an occasion of stumbling."

Sin robs a man of all his relationships, because a sinner is selfish and is only ever thinking of himself and his own gain. 2 Timothy 3:2 “For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud...”¹⁶

For a man to remain in sin is to declare a civil war on one’s self.

Pharaoh warred against himself in these plagues, and so the unreconciled man wars against himself in this life.

2. A Day of Judgment

Secondly, *God has set day when He will judge the world*. In v.5 we read that the LORD *set a time*, saying, “Tomorrow the Lord will do this thing in the land.” Likewise Acts 17:30-31 says that God “...commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world...” When the time expired with Pharaoh, God sent the plague. And certainly the time will expire for the wicked, and the day of judgment will come. And how terrible it will be that day for those who have hardened their hearts. All these plagues are *nothing* in comparison to the misery of hell. These plagues lasted but a short time, but hell is has no end. Revelation 14:11 “And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night.” The Egyptians found some relief in these plagues, but there no relief in hell, there is only endless weeping and gnashing of teeth. Oh how foolish it is for anyone to harden their heart like Pharaoh. If that is you, don’t be a fool. Don’t harden you heart. Turn to the Lord. The Scripture says “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:22).

¹⁶ KJV

III. Our Delight

Crushing the God-man

God's ordinary way of mercy is to crush a people's gods before He crushes that people. Why didn't God crush Israel? They had hardened hearts *just like Pharaoh*. No sooner do they get out in the wilderness that they start complaining and grumbling. No sooner does Moses disappear for 5 minutes and they start worshiping a golden calf *just like Pharaoh did*. Why didn't God crush them? More to the point, dear congregation, why hasn't God crushed you and I? When is God going to crush our gods? Oh but don't you see, even here in this strange judgment we see the gospel.

- God crushed the gods of Egypt and eventually Egypt herself.
 - But for us, God crushed His only Son, so that we will never be crushed. Isaiah 53:10 “Yet it pleased the LORD to [crush] Him; He has put Him to grief.”¹⁷
- God pronounced sentence against Egypt's gods and this granted them a temporary mercy.
 - But God when pronounced sentence against our God—against the God-man Jesus Christ—He has granted us mercy forevermore. Lamentations 3:22-23 “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; ²³ they are new every morning.”

- When God killed the gods of Egypt, he killed their economy and their very livelihood as well.
 - But when the Son was killed for us, His death brought us every blessing that can be conceived. Peace with God. Forgiveness of sins. Imputed righteousness. Everlasting life. The plagues overwhelmed the Egyptians, but we will be overwhelmed with joy. “In [His] presence there is fullness of joy; at [His] right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11).
- Pharaoh will eventually have to answer for his sins at the final judgment.
 - But our sins have already been answered for. Acts 13:38-39 “Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, ³⁹and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”

Our God didn't stay dead

Oh but I haven't told you the best part. Children, boys and girls, imagine that you were in Egypt on this particular day when all these thousands upon thousands upon thousands of cows and horse and camels and donkeys and sheep died. Have you ever come across a large dead animal that has been cooking in the sun? It's so bad. You see Egypt's gods stayed dead. But our God the Lord Jesus Christ didn't stay dead. Acts 2:24 “But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.” Our God was crushed *and* was raised again on the third day. Beloved you can say with Job “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in

the end he will stand on the earth” (Job 19:25)¹⁸ When all other gods are finally defeated, when all other enemies are vanquished, there will be One God that will be left standing—our God, the Son of God and Son of Man, the Alpha and Omega, the ruler of Kings on the Earth—Jesus Christ our Savior.¹⁹

¹⁸ NIV

¹⁹ Consolatory Use

Comfort yourselves dear congregation. You worship the God-man who is the True and Living God. The One who died, who is now alive forevermore. The God who has the key of Death and Hades. So that no matter what difficulty you face in life, be strengthened by the invincible truth that Your God lives.

Is disease threatening Your life? Take heart! Jesus said “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (John 11:25).

Do you feel dead inside? Don’t let your heart be troubled. “For you have [already died to sin] and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Colossians 3:3-4).

Jesus is the God who was crushed and who now lives forever more. And He now lives in you.