The Final Plague

November 1, 2015
Exodus 11

We have come to the 10th and final plague on Egypt, the killing of the firstborn. At the conclusion of this plague, Pharaoh will finally relent and allow the nation of Israel to leave his country. And yet, this plague is going to take us three weeks to go through. So, hang with me, we are not quite done with the plagues yet.

Part of the reason this plague takes so long is because it takes up several chapters of text, but another part is that it involves a key issue, a very disturbing issue, a big picture issue. This plague involves the taking of life, of seemingly innocent life, of the life of the first born son of each family. Pharaoh has to suffer the consequences of his rebellion against God by giving up his firstborn and the firstborn of every family in his land. Are you beginning to grasp where this might be headed?

Today's text is rather short, there is more to follow. And yet, there is much here for us to contemplate. Follow along with me as I read Exodus 11. READ.

Main point: The LORD has a first claim on every living person.

Since He is Lord, He and He alone has a claim on every one of us. He has the authority and power to take life from us for His own personal reasons. He needs no permission. He needs no justifying reason. He needs no help in doing so. He is Lord. He is sovereign over all life, including human life. Now, this might make us cringe, but it is the truth. He holds all of our lives in His hands. We live only because He graciously allows us to live. Again, this seems harsh, but is true. And so, when He makes the demand of the life of the firstborn son from each family, He has the right to do so. If you don't like it, take it up with Him. See how far you get.

Until then, I ask you to pay attention to the text this morning. It says some important things about God and about us. Indeed, it might just lead us to a central truth of Christianity, right here in the middle of Exodus. (3 parts)
I. The Lord grants favor for His own. vv. 1-3

Before we get into the text, I point you back to the end of chapter 10. If you remember, Pharaoh kicked Moses and Aaron out from his presence. And yet, here we are in chapter 11 with Moses pronouncing another plague on Egypt. What gives? This is a classic example of how the chapter markers ought not be viewed as scripture. If we take out the chapter break, we see that this is all part of the same conversation. Moses has not left yet. Even though he announced his departure with no future return, that was not the end of what Moses had to say. The announcement of the 10th plague was part of that conversation.

And yet, the author Moses pauses the narrative to relate a previous conversation between Moses and God. He does this again at the end of the chapter. So, this is filling the reader in on something that took place before the present event.

v.1- Now the LORD had said to Moses, “I will bring one more plague on Pharaoh and on Egypt. After that, he will let you go from here, and when he does, he will drive you out completely.

Moses now knows that the end of this confrontation is at hand. We have gone through 9 plagues and there is but 1 more left. This is explaining why Moses could promise never to see Pharaoh’s face again in 10:29. He already knew that this was the end, but there was one more plague.

Not only was there but one more plague, but this plague would produce the desired outcome. After this plague, Pharaoh will not only allow them to leave, but actually push them out. It will be the opposite of their present situation. Right now they are slaves, prevented from leaving. But at the end of this plague, the Egyptians will push them out of Egypt. This is a dramatic turn around. What could it be after all these plagues that would push Pharaoh and the Egyptians to so completely change their position?
Tell the people that men and women alike are to ask their neighbors for articles of silver and gold.”

This has to be viewed as the most unexpected of requests. Basically the Lord tells Moses to have the Israelites all go to their neighbors and ask them for tribute, for parting gifts. In honor of Halloween, this is like sending the whole nation out trick or treating for trinkets. “Just go and ask them all for their jewelry. They will give it to you.” This goes back to the promise made to Moses at the burning bush (3:21-22) that the Egyptian people would treat them with favor as they left. They would receive the spoils of war without having to fight. God would provide the spoils. And yet, looking ahead what will they end up doing with these spoils of war? Making an idol to worship, a golden calf. I’m disgusted already! But here, we marvel and rejoice that God had granted them favor with their neighbors. Both men and women (hardly intimidating) could go to their neighbors, who would gladly give them their precious metals if it meant they would leave.

(The LORD made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and Moses himself was highly regarded in Egypt by Pharaoh’s officials and by the people.)

Again, this is an aside explaining that God had shown His people grace. Why is this significant? Because it shows that God is indeed very good to His people. They grumbled that He didn’t care about them. But when it came down to it, He provided for them in a most unusual and spectacular of ways. The Egyptians would voluntarily give up their gold to them.

Not only that, but Moses enjoyed the favor of the highest officials as well. Isn’t this ironic? The Israelite people are shown grace by the people. Moses is shown grace (favorably disposed) by the officials and the people. In other words, they saw the power, they knew the consequences, and at this point in the encounter they had more respect for Moses than for Pharaoh. Pharaoh was willing to take down his entire nation rather than give in to Yahweh. Moses did what he said he would do. He announced the plan before it happened, giving the people a chance to take protective action.
I think there are important lessons here. First of all, if God is involved, nothing is beyond the realm of possibility. No one would have or could have conceived of this result. Oppressors blessing them as they left? Moses being looked on with more favor than mighty Pharaoh? And yet, it was true because God was in it.

Second, taking a strong stand does not automatically mean people will hate us. Principled, God led leadership sometimes garners favor from enemies. This is counter-intuitive but true. Moses was the face of their diseases, their loss of livestock, their infestation of bugs. And yet, God showed Moses favor from the very ones we would expect to be most upset.

Third, the gold was actually all God’s gold. He was lord over the gold. He could take it from them and have them actually think it was their idea. As we have seen throughout the plagues, all of creation is under His lordship. It all belongs to Him.

II. The LORD has the right to demand the life of any and all of His creation.

vv. 4-8

This is the part that makes us cringe. This seems harsh and unfair. What could possibly justify the taking of the life of the first born? Hmmm....

So Moses said, “This is what the LORD says: ‘About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the slave girl, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well.

Notice there is no agent of this plague. He is not going to send disease, or pestilence, or even darkness. He is just going to come and do this Himself. He is making a direct claim for the firstborn. It belongs to Him and He is going to take it. This is harsh. This seems like a power move, and it is. He is Lord! Pharaoh has refused His demands and so it is going to cost him. That which is most precious to them will suffer the consequences of his rebellion.

It will happen in the middle of the night, again when it is dark, when people would ordinarily be asleep. He will come as a thief in the night. Hmm..
Every family will lose their firstborn son. Power, status would be no help. Every family would lose their firstborn. Even the animals would lose their firstborn. Every family would be equally affected, all lose the same thing.

So, why firstborn? Well, the firstborn would be the one most precious. He is the one who would stand to inherit everything. The LORD has a claim on every family, on the first and best of every family, from the greatest to the least. All owe their firstborn to Him. Clearly, the demand of the firstborn also conveys the sense of true lordship. When you demand someone's firstborn, it is a claim of lordship. Only a master can make such a claim. No one willingly gives up his firstborn.

There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt—worse than there has ever been or ever will be again.

If you thought people were upset before, it will be a whole lot worse now. This is the worst possible grief for the most possible people. Every family weeping and wailing. Every family having to suffer because of one man's refusal to relent. Truly this would be the worst imaginable. Can you imagine watching your firstborn son die needlessly?

The interesting thing I read this week is that there are multiple mentions of the "slaying of the firstborns" found by Egyptian archaeologists. It is not proof, but there seems to be evidence from Egyptian sources that this plague took place.

But among the Israelites not a dog will bark at any man or animal. Then you will know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.

Once more, there will be a distinction between what happens to Egypt and what happens to the Israelites. On one side, there will be weeping and wailing unlike anything ever heard before or since. On the other side, not a creature is stirring, not even a mouse. The Egyptians lose every firstborn, the Israelites lose not one. And yet, as we will see next week, it is more complicated than that. There is a new wrinkle in the protection of Israel, a wrinkle that is most important. Let me just say that it is not as simple as all Egyptians automatically
lose and all Israelites automatically win. There is another step in between. But more on that next week.

8 All these officials of yours will come to me, bowing down before me and saying, 'Go, you and all the people who follow you!' After that I will leave.” Then Moses, hot with anger, left Pharaoh.

In the end, the LORD will show Himself to be the only true God and the Egyptian officials, who joined in the mockery of Him will have to bend the knee in humility before Him. They will humble themselves before the One true God and grant permission for the followers of Yahweh to leave their country. In other words, the Israelites will not have to sneak off, but rather they will be given the blessing to leave. Once they receive this blessing from their captors, they will leave, the ordeal will be over. There will be no war, no fighting.

At that, Moses finally departs for the last time. The text tells us he leaves with anger. Why? He just pronounced victory. But I think it makes sense that such a loss of life because of the stubbornness of one man made him angry. None of this had to be, if only Pharaoh had heeded the word of the LORD.

And such is the case among us. It angers me as well when people continue their stubborn rebellion against God and it costs others around them. It ought to anger us when a drunk driver crashes and kills someone. It ought to anger us when the enemy convinces someone that they would be better off dead. It is not a satisfying or pleasant place to be to have to tell your children that you were right, they were wrong, and that they were going to have to deal with the consequences of their behavior. Such displays of victory are at best bittersweet. Better is to give up our rebellion before this point, before it takes the life of our firstborn. Right?

III. History will show that rebels deserve their judgment. vv. 9-10

When all is said and done, we will be able to see that the consequences fit the situation. Right now, it might look unfair, but when we see the whole picture, God’s judgment will prove to be just.
The LORD had said to Moses, “Pharaoh will refuse to listen to you—so that my wonders may be multiplied in Egypt.”

None of this took God by surprise. In fact, it happened just as He had planned for a purpose, to show more wonders in Egypt. Just as we have been saying all along, the purpose of the plagues was judgment to be sure, but more than that to put the power of God on display. It was to reveal Him to the world. Pharaoh’s heart was hard, he was rebellious. And God intensified that hardness, that rebellion to prove His point, to show that nothing would have caused Pharaoh to repent. It had to go all the way to losing his firstborn son before he would give in to Yahweh.

And everything would take place according to the plan. Nothing would go wrong. After all, He is Lord!

Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh, but the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let the Israelites go out of his country.

I see this as a summary verse. This is the end of the line. That is what The Lord had already declared. That is how it all worked out. Everything happened as planned. Moses performed the wonders, showing to anyone and everyone that Pharaoh was not God, that none of the Egyptian gods were actually God. The display of wonders showed that Yahweh, the God of the Hebrew people was truly God. Pharaoh would eventually have to let them go, but not without a fight. But that was okay, because the fight brought with it the display of wonders. And some 3,500 years later, we are still talking about the display of wonders. Isn’t that interesting?

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1) We will adjust our world view to reflect that God’s grace comes to His people at unexpected times in unexpected ways. He loves to graciously give to His people. We will stand with God.
2) We will remember that all of this world’s wealth actually belongs to Him.

3) We will remember that He has a first claim on us and ours.

4) We will recognize that the LORD wants the world to see His power.

5) We will acknowledge that Yahweh is Lord. We will quit our rebellion before it costs us our firstborn.