

Sermon 25, Frogs Galore, Exodus 8:1-15

Proposition: The second plague humiliates Egypt, rendering it unclean, while teaching us the incomparability of our prayer-hearing God.

- I. God Smites Egypt with Frogs, vv. 1-7
 - A. The Threat Described, vv. 1-4
 1. Nuisance
 2. Pollution
 - B. The Threat Carried Out, vv. 5-6
 - C. The Threat Duplicated, v. 7
- II. Pharaoh Seeks Relief, vv. 8-14
 - A. “Pray for me,” v. 8a
 - B. “I will let you go and sacrifice,” v. 8b
- III. Moses Grants Relief, vv. 9-14
 - A. “Name a Time, Pharaoh,” v. 9
 - B. “By Tomorrow? Done,” v. 10a
 - C. The Lesson of the Plague: The Incomparableness of God, v. 10b
 - D. The Promise: The Threat Will Be Removed, v. 11
 - E. Moses Prays, v. 12
 - F. Yahweh Humbly Responds, v. 13a
 - G. The Stinking Dead Frogs Pollute the Land One Last Time, v. 14
- IV. Relieved, Pharaoh Adds Weight to His Heart, v. 15

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the ten plagues are the curriculum in the great school of the power of God. Yahweh was going to teach Pharaoh who He was. As we saw, He sent warning after warning through the mouths of Moses and Aaron. He had His messengers present credentials that proved themselves to be greater than the Egyptian magicians. And as we saw last week, He turned the Nile into blood, thus demonstrating at the outset His power over the source of Egypt’s entire life. Well, in tonight’s plague, God teaches another lesson: That there is no one like Him. God is incomparable, unique, perfect and perfectly different from any human being or set of human characteristics. He is a prayer-hearing God, and He is also a God with a sense of humor. He sent the plague of frogs to pollute the land of Egypt, rendering it unclean, making life a nuisance, and generally deflating the pretensions of Pharaoh to absolute mastery over Egypt and its people. So get to know this God with me, this God of battle as He battles the king of Egypt for the freedom of His people to worship Him.

I. God Smites Egypt with Frogs, vv. 1-7

The second plague in each set of three begins with an instruction to go to Pharaoh. God doesn’t say where, as He does in the first of each cycle; He simply says “Go to Pharaoh.”

A. The Threat Described, vv. 1-4

The next two verses describe the nature of the threat. If Pharaoh won't send out the Israelites, God will smite all Egypt with frogs. This sounds menacing and ridiculous at the same time. Frogs? What about lions and tigers and bears? There are some genuinely fearsome animals in this world. Think of hippos, allegedly the most deadly of all wild animals. Think of wolves and wild dogs. Raging bulls, wild boars, even billy goats and fighting cocks all pose some danger to human beings. God could have sent them all, or any of them. Imagine having Pharaoh be chased around his palace by an angry hippopotamus; that would have sent the servants into gales of laughter, at least if they could be reasonably sure that the hippo was going to win!

But no. God, who holds all wildlife in His hand and can send the eagles of the mountains to pick out the eyes of a magician in lower Egypt, sent frogs.

1. Nuisance

And what a nuisance they were, and were intended to be! They would be all over inside Pharaoh's house, in his bedroom, on his bed. Some of you are tender-hearted enough to sleep with your cat or dog. I highly doubt anyone here sleeps with their frog. A cold, smooth amphibian is no one's idea of a cuddly pet. And yet the blasted creatures were going to be everywhere, on couches and in ovens and inside kneading bowls and everywhere else you might possibly want to be. The nuisance level is hard to overstate.

I think we would all just go ahead and die if we found tigers in our bedroom. Wild boars in this kind of abundance could easily destroy whole cities. But that is not God's plan. By sending such a low-class nuisance, He is humbling the pride of Pharaoh and saying "You worship the frog-headed goddess? Well, I control the frogs."

2. Pollution

But the other side of this plague is not just nuisance, but pollution. Later on, in Leviticus, God will tell Moses that any water animal without fins and scales is unclean. That means, of course, no shrimp and lobster for our Jewish friends. It also means that God was making a statement to the Egyptians about His power over cleanliness and pollution. Why does He emphasize the kneading bowl? Because the frogs were going to get in the bread dough. Even from a health or germaphobe standpoint, I don't particularly want to eat anything that frogs have gone swimming in. But from a ritual purity/pollution standpoint, this was a total defilement. Any bread dough a frog swam in would have to be thrown out. Any kneading bowl it jumped into would have to be washed or broken. Anyone who got sat on by a frog would be ineligible to worship God.

Now, we do not know whether Egyptians also considered frogs unclean. But it is as though God is saying to them "You are too unclean to stand in my presence, and I am going to ratify that by spreading frogs over your whole land, and especially in your cooking and sleeping facilities." All Egypt is not only annoyed, but defiled too. God holds the power of life and death; that's what the blood plague said. Furthermore, He holds the power of pollution and cleansing; that's what the frog plague adds.

Our society majors on purity, conceived of in medical and hygienic terms. We have showers, deodorants, cleaning chemicals, and lots of other ritual practices and expensive

products intended to keep those nasty germs and bodily fluids at bay. Our obsession with purity would be perfectly recognizable to an ancient person — our religious devotion to counter-wiping, hand-washing, dish-sanitizing, and having every last trace of grease washed out of our hair on a daily basis. But that ancient person would be at a loss to account for which god we were serving with our endless cleaning rituals. We have secularized and medicalized the ancient human obsession with purity and pollution. We would be just as upset as the Egyptians and Hebrews about frogs in the mixing bowls; we just wouldn't think that it prevented us from serving Yahweh (thought it would stop us from serving the god of health!).

B. The Threat Carried Out, vv. 5-6

Well, whether Pharaoh cared about this threat or not is not recorded here. He had made up his mind not to let Israel go, and so obviously any and every threat that Moses can make is going to be carried out. Thus, Aaron once again stretches out the rod over all the land of Egypt, and the frogs come out and immediately make a humiliating nuisance of themselves, rendering the whole land unclean and unfit for the service of God.

C. The Threat Duplicated, v. 7

But the magicians do the same; they too make frogs come up on the land of Egypt. Once again, there is enough light for those who would see and enough darkness for those who would prefer not to. Perhaps Aaron and Moses are just better magicians than the bureaucrats who staff the Department of Magic. Of course, being on Moses' and Aaron's side, we laugh at the antics of the magicians. What a stupid way to try to show that Moses and Aaron are not really messengers of Yahweh — by plaguing your own people worse than before! "It doesn't take a Soviet agent to wrongfully imprison and kill American citizens; see, I'm a real-live nephew of my Uncle Sam and I can wrongfully imprison and kill Americans too!" Well, that's not what we were hoping for. But whatever.

Clearly, the power of the magicians is able to raise questions about the source of Moses and Aaron's power. But it is totally unable to match or overcome that power. The most the magicians can suggest is that the Hebrew brothers are rogue magicians — but they cannot prove Egypt's gods to be mightier than Yahweh.

II. Pharaoh Seeks Relief, vv. 8-14

Well, Pharaoh was pig-headed, but he was no dummy. He realized that his magicians were not prayer warriors (as Victor Hamilton commented on this passage), and instead turned to Moses to pray for him.

A. "Pray for me," v. 8a

The man who did not know Yahweh is now begging Moses to go and pray to Him! That really didn't take long. One showdown with snakes, one blood plague, and now frogs in his bed, and Pharaoh is ready to admit that Yahweh exists and that He has power over pollution and cleanliness, over the presence or absence of frogs.

In other words, we must set aside our idea that with Pharaoh, we are dealing with some kind of modern rationalist, the Richard Dawkins of ancient Egypt. Oh no. Pharaoh did not know Yahweh. But he did not dispute Yahweh's existence, nor even His power at some level. He was

more honest than Richard Dawkins and other moderns, who have spent some three centuries building a ceiling over this world so that we no longer ask whether there is anyone up there. To ask what's beyond the ceiling, what lies past the immanent horizon, is treated as the height of stupidity in our culture.

But not in Ancient Egypt, or indeed in any ancient culture that I've ever read about. Humanity in those days was very much open to the transcendent. Pharaoh was not about to deny to Moses the right to have a god; what Pharaoh disputed was the right of Moses' God to boss him, Pharaoh.

But of course, though that was the point at issue, the king of Egypt was not afraid to ask for prayers. Does that sound uncomfortably familiar? "God, you can't tell me what to do. But please help me out here. I really need your assistance."

B. "I will let you go and sacrifice," v. 8b

If you won't obey God, what makes you think that He is eager to listen to you? If you ignore Him, do you think that He should always be at your beck and call and ready do whatever you ask? Even Pharaoh recognized that it doesn't work that way. "Pray for me, and I will let your people sacrifice." In exchange for the removal of the frogs, Pharaoh promised to do something for God. Now, the lesson here is not "If you do enough for God, He'll listen to your prayers." Rather, the lesson is "Listen to the Almighty if you want Him to listen to you." Don't expect that God will hear you if you don't hear Him.

Another crucial point here, though, lies in the contrast between "serve" and "sacrifice." To serve God is, of course, a full-orbed term that refers to every aspect of human life. You serve God with your whole being. But the tyrant, even though he's lying, is unwilling to say that he will let Israel serve Yahweh. At most, he will let them sacrifice to Yahweh.

What's the difference here? The difference is between the private expression of religious worship, narrowly conceived, and the right to live openly as a follower or servant of God in every aspect of one's life. Thus, as I understand it, public worship was legal and carried on in the Soviet Union. What was illegal and banned was proselytizing, disciplining one's children, and generally letting your faith make a difference in your politics, business, family, and so on.

Sure! You can sacrifice to Yahweh. If you want to go to church a couple of hours a week, that's fine. But God help you if you attempt to translate any of that into righteous action in the home, never mind the public square! That's what Pharaoh means. Sure you can sacrifice to Yahweh. But you can't serve Him, because you serve me!

Thus says sin, the devil, and our own wicked flesh. You can go to church, give money, do whatever you want, as long you don't seriously attempt to deal with your besetting sins. That's what these evil powers tell you. But pray for me!

III. Moses Grants Relief, vv. 9-14

Well, Moses is no dummy. He is aware of these dynamics. And yet, in accordance with his orders from the Almighty, he grants relief.

A. “Name a Time, Pharaoh,” v. 9

He begins by offering Pharaoh the honor of naming the time when the frogs will leave. “You want them gone? Tell me when, and it shall be accomplished.” This is a pretty incredible boon to offer. He is not the king; he is the commoner. Yet he assumes the position of strength as the one with total control of the situation. “Pharaoh, I can bring or take away the frogs just as I choose. I’m so confident of this that I’ll give you the right to say when I’m going to do it.”

Of course, though Moses offers Pharaoh “glory,” really Moses is enhancing the glory of God by making Pharaoh a suppliant who is reduced to begging at Yahweh’s feet.

B. “By Tomorrow? Done,” v. 10a

Pharaoh names his time: “By tomorrow.” Most translations simply say “Tomorrow,” prompting Calvin to comment on how incredibly arrogant the tyrant was. One would think that anyone would say “Immediately,” but Pharaoh gave it 24 hours to show how tough he was. A better translation, though, is “by tomorrow,” as though Pharaoh knew that these things take time. Speaking as one ruler to another, he says “They should all be gone by tomorrow.”

C. The Lesson of the Plague: The Incomparableness of God, v. 10b

Moses accedes to the request, and adds that this request will be granted in order to make it clear that there is no one like Yahweh our God. How does the request show that there is no one like God? Because no one else has power over cleanness and defilement! God alone can send frogs and remove frogs. The magicians of Egypt can bring up frogs; they can defile. But they cannot remove them. God is incomparable; there is no one like Him.

When He takes away your suffering, do you learn this lesson? When He removes that difficulty from your life? When He answers your prayer exactly as you asked it? Does that let you know that there is no one like Yahweh our God? It should.

D. The Promise: The Threat Will Be Removed, v. 11

So Moses promises that the plague will go away.

E. Moses Prays, v. 12

Then, to make that promise good, he goes and cries out to Yahweh. You are not going to get rid of defilement, or even of nuisance, without prayer.

F. Yahweh Humbly Responds, v. 13a

And then — get this. Yahweh did according to the word of Moses! Over and over and over Exodus says that Moses did according to the word of Yahweh. But this is our God. No one is like Him. He has absolute power over everything, and yet He does according to the word of Moses. The frogs die everywhere.

G. The Stinking Dead Frogs Pollute the Land One Last Time, v. 14

Yet the stinking dead frogs pollute the land one last time. They leave their calling card, kind of a bonus nuisance plague reminding Pharaoh that he is far from all-powerful, that he cannot even rid Egypt of a nasty stench. There is no one like our God!

IV. Relieved, Pharaoh Adds Weight to His Heart, v. 15

But Pharaoh lied. He was just trying to bargain to get rid of the frogs, and so he offered something that was within his power. When God was naive enough to fall for it, to take away the plague before getting His people out, Pharaoh instantly returns to his old resolute self.

Why does God let Himself get “taken advantage of,” as we would call it? Because He is gracious and merciful and slow to anger. He lets Himself be defrauded, because He is just that kind and gracious. He is not a pushover; that’s why He sent the frogs. But He is also never cruel. He doesn’t force everything to be His way.

Pharaoh doesn’t know that he’s dealing with graciousness. He thinks that Yahweh is a cruel and merciless tyrant like himself. And so he can’t believe that he suckered Moses’ God! Yes, on second thought, he can. “I’m just that smart. I’m just brilliant enough to fool a god! Ha ha ha!”

Pharaoh’s arrogance will yet be overturned. Wait for it; God will bring it to pass. And in the meantime, learn that when you think you’ve pulled a fast one on the Almighty, you’re a fool. Pharaoh hadn’t tricked God; he’d only fooled himself into thinking that he was in charge of the situation.

When will you learn that you’re not in charge? That God rules you, and not vice versa? Until you do, don’t expect freedom. Don’t think that sacrifice and service are one and the same, either. You exist not just to sacrifice, but to serve with your entire life. Do not fall prey to Pharaoh’s delusions. If I walk away from an encounter with the Almighty thinking “Yep, there’s no one like Caleb Nelson,” then I’m an idiot. I have not even begun to learn the lesson of God’s incomparability. Pharaoh is going to learn that lesson, if it kills him. And so are you, if you’re God’s child. There is no one like our Father, no one else who will send as many frogs as necessary to teach you to stop thinking you’re hot stuff. Amen.