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Plague Ten: The Death of the Firstborn

Exodus 11:1-13:22

Part One

Introduction

Everything within us recoils from the idea that a loving God not only permitted but orchestrated the tenth plague, which was the death of the firstborn in all Egypt. It is very important for us to address this matter. There are no easy answers and there are no answers that solve all the issues that might be raised. God is a God of grace and mercy, but He also is a God of justice and judgment.

Theme of the Book of Exodus

The theme of Exodus is redemption. This last of the ten plagues is the clearest picture of God's redeeming grace seen in Israel's redemption from Egypt. We have already noted that there is an easily identifiable intensification of the severity of each plague from the first through the tenth. The final plague, the death of the firstborn, was the most devastating of all. No household in Egypt was exempt from this judgment (11:5-6; 12:29). The spoiling of the Egyptians by taking their possessions (11:2-3; 12:35-36) and the death of the firstborn (12:29-30) may seem to be unjustly severe. Yet, this remarkable deliverance was proof of divine justice. The material goods which they "borrowed" were just payment for the hardship and oppression of their slavery. The death of the firstborn came only after clear and repeated warning (7:1-5; 11:4-10; 12:29ff). It indeed was severe judgment. But it bears testimony to the fact that God was willing to go as far as necessary to redeem the Hebrew people. The fact that Pharaoh and the Egyptians endured the first nine plagues without relenting is testimony to the fact that such severity was necessary. As we shall see, redemption was provided by faith and in obedience to the stipulations of the Passover (12:1-28). It was not simply God's response to the unjust treatment from the Egyptians. God showed the people what He was about to do and gave the specific directions needed to avoid disaster. Therefore, rather than an act of death, redemption is portrayed as deliverance from death and the promise of life by faith. This is a true view of redemption making clear that it is appointed unto men once to die (Heb 9:27), but grace and salvation is their redemption provided through the Lamb of God (Eph 1:7; Col 1:14; Rev 7:14; 12:11).

All the King's Horses and All the King's Men and Gods, 11:1-12:42

Like the nursery rhyme about Humpty Dumpty which says, "All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again," so it was that all the powers available to Pharaoh were nothing before the God of Israel. It is clear that this judgment is aimed at all the gods of Egypt (12:12). God exposed them as false and non-existent in contrast with Himself, the one true and living God of creation.

11:1-3. The Hebrews were instructed to "borrow" things from the Egyptians. While some translations have "jewels," the word is "things" and refers to anything of value. Verses 11:1-3 are a restatement of the promise made in 3:20-22. This is not a case of deception, for while the idea behind borrowing usually implies the return of a borrowed item, the word actually means "take from" and has no implication of return of the items taken. As stated previously, the writer sees this as the fulfillment of a promise by God to give them just wages for their years of slavery and hardship. It would also provide them with necessary means with which to serve God and build the tabernacle (25:1-9). Note the statements in 11:3 that God gave the Hebrews favor in the sight of the Egyptians (i.e. they were glad to give the items of value) and Moses was very great or prominent in the land of Egypt.

11:4-10. God gave a clear-cut but absolutely final warning to Pharaoh in 11:4-10. There was never any question of the fact of God's determination to redeem the Hebrews. The only question was to what extent would the judgment increase in order to cause Pharaoh to let the people go. The entire plague narrative (7:14-11:10) demonstrates the mercy, grace, and longsuffering of God. God never executes judgment without sufficient repeated warnings. Perhaps the message of Ezekiel in 18:30-32 best presents the fact that God desires repentance and redemption.

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, everyone according to his ways, saith the Lord God. Repent, and turn from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby you have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dies, saith the Lord God: wherefore turn and live.

In light of the severe nature of the plagues, one might wonder why there is no reference to the events of the exodus in any Egyptian texts that have been discovered. George A. F. Knight gives three reasons for this fact:

1. Each of the plagues could be regarded as a natural disaster. It was the timing, the severity, the revelation beforehand, and the faith of the observer that caused the Hebrews to see their real significance.

2. The Egyptians never mentioned their defeats in any of their writings.
3. The Hebrews saw the hand of God at work so that the plagues were more than historical fact; they were of deep theological significance.

The Death of the Firstborn

This passage describes the initiation of the first Passover as God had directed Moses, Aaron, and the Hebrew people. This set in stone the pattern for all successive Passover observances. At midnight the plague of the death of the firstborn first presented by Moses in 4:22-23 and described in 11:1-10 occurred. This whole passage begs the question, What is the significance of the firstborn? Why did God bring the death of the firstborn as the tenth and final plague?

1. Death of the Firstborn: A Lesson in Redemption. Because the firstborn of the Hebrews were spared at the time of the initiation of the Passover, all firstborn and future firstborn children of the Hebrews and animals were considered to be the personal property of the Lord. They had to be redeemed, or in the case of animals, they could be sacrificed to the Lord provided that they were unblemished. For the redemption of humans, see Exod 13:2, 15; 22:9; Numb 3:13; 8:17. For the redemption of livestock, see Gen 4:4; Exod 13:13; 22:30; 34:20; Lev 22:7; 27:26; Numb 18:15-18; Deut 15:19.
2. Privileges of Firstborn. The firstborn male child was considered to be the heir apparent to the family clan. In that role, he had a special relationship with his parents and received a double portion of the family estate, see Gen 27:29, 35; 48:13-14; Deut 21:15-17; 25:5-6; 1 Sam 20:29; 1 Chron 21:3.
3. Women and Firstborn. Women also could inherit the legacy of the firstborn as in the case of the daughters of Zelophehad, who were five in number, named Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, see Numb 27:1-11; 36:1-13; Judg 17:3.
4. Firstborn Privileges Forfeited. The privileges of the firstborn could be forfeited for misconduct, see Gen 49:3-4, 8; 1 Chron 5:1; Heb 12:16.
5. God's Providence and Firstborn. The rights of the firstborn could be superseded by divine providence as in the case of Shem who superseded Japheth, Gen 10:21; Isaac who superseded Ishmael, Gen 17:19-21; Jacob who superseded Esau, Gen 25:23; Heb 12:16; Ephraim who superseded Manassah, Gen 48:15-20; Judah who superseded Reuben, Gen 49:3-4; 1 Chron 5:1-2; Moses who superseded Aaron, Exod 7:1-2; David who superseded his brothers, 1 Sam 16:6-12; and Solomon who superseded Adonijah, 1 Kgs 2:15, 22.
6. Israel as the Firstborn. Figuratively, Israel was God's firstborn of all nations, Exod 4:22; Jer 31:9; Rom 8:29.

7. Christ as the Firstborn. The ultimate role and focus of the firstborn was to point to Jesus who was the firstborn son of God, John 3:16; Col 1:15-17; Heb 1:6; and the firstborn son of Mary, Luke 2:7. He also was the firstborn from the dead, Rev 1:5; 1 Cor 15:20, 23.

12:1-28. Chapter twelve relates the specific details stipulated in the observance of the first Passover. Note the following:

1. This month, Abib, was to mark the beginning of the new year (12:2). The agricultural new year was celebrated at the end of the harvest in October. This ordinance was instituted as the *beginning* of the religious new year marked by Passover (March-April) and the feast of unleavened bread.
2. The tenth day of the month was the day set aside for the selection of the sacrificial animal (12:3).
3. A lamb (literally, a *sheep* or a goat, *she* may mean either) was selected from the family flock (12:3).
4. It is clear that this was to be a domestic feast. It was not designed for observance at a worship center but in the home (12:4).
5. The lamb was to be suited to the family group. If the group was too small for a lamb, they were to join with their neighbors. Traditionally they practiced the use of one lamb for each ten people.
6. The lamb was to be without spot or blemish and a male of the first year [i.e. a yearling] (12:5).
7. The lamb chosen on the tenth day was to be slain on the fourteenth day between the evenings. There are several possible explanations as to the exact time of the sacrifice, but it could be anytime between 3 and 6 p.m.
8. The blood of the lamb was to be placed on the doorposts and on the lintel of the door (12:7). This was the sign of blood atonement.
9. The meat of the lamb was to be roasted and eaten (12:8). This was done so that the whole lamb could be cooked without breaking a bone, John 19:36.
10. Along with the meat, unleavened bread and bitter herbs were to be served (12:8).
11. All must be eaten with no leftovers (12:10). This was a communion meal to be eaten ceremonially. There were to be no leftovers in order to discourage profaning the meal or taking a magical approach to it.
12. The meal was to be eaten in readiness. They were to be ready to march and expectant of deliverance (12:11).
13. This meal was to be known as Yahweh's Passover, making it the first Lord's supper (12:11).

The Hebrews were to memorialize this day as the birthday of their nation. It was to be their new year and fourth of July all in one. The observance was established as an ordinance forever. It was to be a basis for teaching each generation about

the great redemptive work of God in their deliverance from Pharaoh and Egypt. The Passover also signaled the beginning of the feast of unleavened bread. This feast is observed on the seven days following Passover, 12:15-20.

The results of the Passover are carefully outlined in 12:15-28, where Moses spelled out the details of each aspect of the observance of the Passover. All the firstborn of both man and beast in the land of Egypt were to die. Only those with the blood on the doorpost would be spared. This judgment was to be a powerful demonstration of Yahweh's strength and the helplessness of the false gods of Egypt. All the king's horses and all the king's gods were of no consequence in light of Yahweh's might, 12:21-28.

Christ in the Passover

Every element of the observance of the Passover was intentionally set forth to point to the ultimate redemption that God provided for all people in the person of His only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

1. The Blood on the Doorposts - The doorway represents access to the home but finally to the human heart. God only seeks access where redemption has been made by the blood of His paschal Lamb, Jesus, see Rev 3:20, "Behold I stand at the door and knock . . ." Revelation 5:1-14 is a grand hymn of praise for the redeeming work of Jesus who is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, see John 1:29; Eph 1:4; Rev 13:8.
2. The Passover marked a new beginning, Exod 12:2, as our union by faith with Christ marks a new beginning in our lives, 2 Cor 5:17.
3. The paschal lamb was selected on the tenth day of the month, which corresponds to the day of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, indicating that the people who were shouting "Hosanna" were choosing Jesus to be their Lamb of sacrifice, Matt 21:1-11.
4. The lamb was selected from the family flock, Exod 12:3, just as Jesus was chosen from the Hebrew family of which Joseph and Mary were an integral part, so the paschal lamb was chosen from the family flock.
5. The Passover was a domestic feast to be observed in the home. The Lamb of God came to take up residence in the "home" of the human heart, see Eph 3:14-21. Worship begins in the home and in the home of the human heart.
6. The Passover lamb was to be without spot or blemish, a perfect sacrifice. Likewise, Jesus, who knew no sin, took our sin upon Himself that we might receive the righteousness of God through His sacrifice for us, 2 Cor 5:18-21.
7. The paschal lamb was to be kept until the fourteenth day of the month and then to be slain in the evening, Exod 12:6. So, Jesus was selected on the tenth day of the month and slain on the fourteenth day, according to the Scriptures, see Isa 52:13-53:12; Matt 27:32-56.

8. The blood on the doorposts was the sign of redemption and of a blood-bought atonement, Exod 12:7. So, Jesus' blood, by faith over the human heart, is the sign of our redemption, Eph 1:7.
9. The paschal lamb was roasted and eaten as a communion meal to be eaten with unleavened bread, Exod 12:8-10. Likewise, Jesus commands us to "eat" His flesh and "drink" His blood, John 6:53-59. This is an act of faith by which we give an outward symbol that we have appropriated Christ to ourselves, John 6:22-59.
10. The Passover meal was to be eaten in readiness, expecting the immediate joy of the deliverance from Egypt, Exod 12:11. Likewise, in Christ, believers are delivered from the guilt of sin and the power of sin and released to experience the joy of salvation, Acts 3:1-10; 1 Pet 1:3-9.
11. The Passover was known as the "Lord's Passover," Exod 12:11. Likewise, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper at the Passover meal He observed with His disciples, Luke 22:14-23; 1 Cor 11:20, 23-34.

In light of these facts, it should not be surprising to read Paul's rebuke to the Corinthians about immorality in their congregation. He borrowed the figure of the Passover reminding them they should purge themselves of the leaven of sin and remember that "Christ our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth," 1 Cor 5:7-8.

12:29-30. These verses give the declaration of the fulfillment of God's warning to bring this final judgment on the Egyptians if Pharaoh did not comply with God's demand to let His people go free. Note that the plague included every family from Pharaoh to those in prison. It also included all livestock. At midnight the plague struck and there was great mourning in the land because no house among the Egyptians was exempt.

12:31-32. Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and told them to "Go, worship the Lord as you requested." The English translation seems to suggest a contradiction of Pharaoh's statement in 10:28 "you will see my face no more," and Moses' response in 10:29, "I will never see your face again." The word "called for" is the Hebrew *qara le* which may be translated "called for" or "summoned," but it also can mean to call out a word to be sent by a messenger. It is used this way in Num 16:12; Judg 21:13; Hosea 11:1; Amos 7:4; 9:6; Isa 61:1; Jer 35:17 and Psa 57:3. The statement therefore does not suggest that there was a face-to-face meeting with Pharaoh, which would be in keeping with the statements of 10:28-29.

12:33-36. The startling severity and extent of this plague weighed heavily on the Egyptian people who urged the Hebrews to leave before "We shall all be dead." The

Hebrews responded in accordance with the use of unleavened bread and packed their belongings. They also made a request that they be given gold, silver, and clothing as they were instructed in 11:2-3. These were just wages due the Hebrews for the many years of forced labor and oppression in Egypt. Note the language used states, "so they plundered the Egyptians" in verse 36. This is military language that suggests they were now the people of God and His army, see v. 41. He had won a great victory for them.

12:37-42. This is the beginning of the exodus from Egypt. The Hebrews journeyed from Rameses to Succoth and there were 600,000 men besides the women and children. Several attempts have been made to solve the question, "How many people left Egypt?" If it was 600,000 men plus women and children, the number would be between 1.5 to 2 million people. Critics have suggested it would be impossible for such a large number to move safely through the desert and to find adequate provisions and places to camp. There are reasonable explanations for all these objections and no reason to assume that there was not a large group that made an exodus from Egypt.

One fact is the opening of the Book of Exodus that states emphatically that there were many Hebrews in the land. Exodus 1:6-7 uses at least five terms to emphasize the growth in Hebrew population in Egypt. The size of this group also was the stated reason for Pharaoh's plan to enslave the Hebrews in 1:9-10. They were at least numerous enough to pose a threat to Egyptian security. As to provisions in the wilderness, we shall see that God made special and miraculous provision for food and water that would have been more than adequate to take care of the Hebrews. He also gave miraculous guidance of the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. One writer even states there was no place for them to camp at Mount Sinai. He obviously had never been to Sinai because there is a large relatively flat valley near Sinai that the Bedouins say is the place of the Hebrew camps. There seems to be no logical or factual reason to doubt that it indeed was possible and probably that a large number, at least 1.5 to 2 million, left Egypt under the leadership of Moses.

12:43-13:16 The Perpetual Passover

The perpetual nature of Passover is stressed again in the passage which follows. Certain restrictions and stipulations are given regarding the observance. Not everyone was to be allowed to partake of the ceremonial feast. Five exclusions are mentioned:

1. Foreigners were not to be included in this observance. This means one who worships other gods (*ben nekher*). The name means "son of a strange god."

2. Slaves of the household (*'ebhedh*) were also excluded, unless they were circumcised and accepted as a part of the family.
3. Sojourners (*toshabh*) were also excluded. These were non-Israelites who were living temporarily in the land of Israel.
4. Hired servants (*sakhir*) were employees and were usually foreigners. Therefore they were excluded.
5. Strangers (*ger*) were to be excluded. This is another term descriptive of foreigners. It was often used as a designation for one of the native groups in the land of Israel, e.g. Canaanites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites, etc.

These stipulations were to be applied to the first and all successive observances of the Passover. The fifth stipulation regarding exclusion of strangers was aimed at these groups that were in the land of promise at the time of the conquest (12:49). It is clear that the Passover was only for the people of the covenant. The significance of this great act of deliverance could never have the depth of meaning for others that it had for Israel. It is not until the Bible tells us that Christ became our Passover (1 Cor. 5:7) that the ideas take on a new significance for all mankind.

Since the firstborn of Egypt were slain at the first Passover, another way of remembering Israel's deliverance was the consecration of all of their firstborn. All firstborn males, both men and animals were consecrated to the Lord. In this way they were set aside as the Lord's. Animals were to be brought to the priests for sacrifice. But since the Hebrews did not practice child sacrifice, provisions were made for the redemption of the firstborn son. While the redemption price is not mentioned here in Exodus, later the consecration of the Levites as priests was considered a substitute for all the firstborn males of Israel (Numb 8:14-18).

Further regulations regarding the feast of unleavened bread served the purpose of impressing upon Israel their great deliverance which was totally the work of the Lord. This, too, was a reminder that they were a covenant people. It also kept alive the hope of future blessings which God would provide. In addition to the teaching value for Israel, the Passover, consecration of the firstborn, and feast of unleavened bread gave a witness to their ungodly neighbors of what great things Yahweh had done for them (see 13:5).

All of these regulations have a pointed purpose behind them. It is stated again in 13:14-16 as it was in 12:26-28. These observances were to be teaching exercises for each new generation. Each new generation would rehearse the facts of God's great redemptive work in bringing them from the bondage of Egypt. Israel must never forget that they were a redeemed people.

The tenth plague was indeed the crowning act of God's power and determination to redeem Israel. Roy L. Honeycutt, in the *Broadman Bible Commentary* has identified eight explanatory and theological truths which the plagues communicated to Israel, Egypt, and the world.

1. They were acts of revelation. Each plague was designed to reveal to Pharaoh and to the Hebrews the nature and action of Yahweh (10:2).
2. Each plague revealed the uniqueness of Yahweh. By these great demonstrations they were to know that He was the Lord (7:17; 10:2).
3. The plagues demonstrated the incomparable nature of Yahweh as opposed to the false, non-existent gods of Egypt (9:14).
4. These plagues were remarkable demonstrations of the power of God (9:16).
5. These plagues were given that the fame of Yahweh might be established in the earth (9:16).
6. God was established as the Lord of all creation. He created the earth and it was and is in His control (9:29).
7. Yahweh is also the God who cares for and redeems His people (11:7).
8. All the plagues, but especially the tenth, establish the victory of Yahweh over the Egyptians, Pharaoh, and their gods. His judgment was executed on all the gods of Egypt (12:12).

Perhaps Honeycutt's own words best summarize the theological importance of God's great deliverance.

The theology of the plague narratives assumes that they were revelatory in nature and character; that they revealed a God who was unique, incomparable, powerful and to be known among the nations through his actions in history. He was the sovereign Lord of creation, Who delivered His people in the midst of calamity and who was victorious over all powers hostile to his purposes, even the gods of Egypt. In essence, the plagues demonstrate that Yahweh, God of Israel, also is Lord of creation.

The miracle of redemption from Egypt was not a chance happening. It was a dramatic demonstration of the power of God and the love of God. Therefore steps were taken to insure that the Passover become a perpetual reminder of all the facts which this great deliverance declared to the world.

13:17-22 The First Days out of Egypt

This passage describes the first days in the wilderness and the rationale for God's leading them toward Sinai. The most direct route to Canaan would have been to follow the coastal plain to the east and north. This area was under the control of the Philistines.

13:17-18. While God made it clear the Hebrews were His army in 12:41, they were not ready for battle. They had no military training and they had no experience in trusting God to the point that they would be able to let Him take care of attacks from enemies. God led them into the wilderness of Sinai lest they encounter attacks from the Philistines and seek to return to Egypt.

13:19. Joseph made the Hebrews take an oath that when they were delivered from Egypt they would bring his bones with them to be buried in the land of Canaan, Gen 50:24-26. The Hebrews were committed to keeping that covenant. Moses took the bones of Joseph so that they would be able to keep the promise made to bury him in the land of Canaan.

13:20-22. Moses led the Hebrews from Succoth just east of Goshen and Etham located further east and on the edge of the desert wilderness. This would be their staging area from which they would move to cross the Red Sea. It is at this point that the Hebrews were introduced to the divine guidance system known as "the pillar of cloud" that could be seen by day and the "pillar of fire" that could be seen by night. Later in 14:19, we learn that the Angel of the Lord was associated with the "pillar" and that when it moved, the Angel of the Lord took up his station as the rear guard of the marching people. The cloud continued with them to Sinai where it covered the mountain, Exod 24:15-18. But it was more than a guidance system. It also was a daily assurance of the presence of God with them in the wilderness. Even though their route was erratic, they were aware that God was with them and went before them in the pillar cloud, 13:21.

Conclusion

In announcing the death of the firstborn, God made clear His commitment to redeem His people from Egypt. Chapter 11:1-10 marks the final warning before the death of the firstborn and redemption of Israel. Chapter 12 presents the details concerning the observance of the first Passover and the standard for the perpetual observance of the Passover by all future generations. Christ may be seen in all elements of the Passover observance.