

Exodus 8:20-10:29 Recognising the Presence of God

Introduction

In the Western world we have a culture of individualism where I decide what I think, say, and do, but that is not how the Bible reveals we should live. We are accountable primarily to God for our attitudes, words and actions. God gives us a degree of latitude to run our affairs, but too often the choices people make are not beneficial to those around them. One individual's inappropriate choices can affect some many other people, as we have seen with the difficulties surrounding British Home Stores and its 11,000 employees that will lose their jobs over the next few months. In this particular social context it was the Pharaoh of Egypt who was exploiting the ethnic minority peoples in the land to fund his massive building projects, but it was not him alone, a significant proportion of the Egyptian population was complicit in this injustice. They gained benefits from the exploitation of other people. They need not have actively deprived any specific Israelites of their wages or just work conditions, but by their silence there was definite collusion in the crimes committed against the most vulnerable members of society. The plagues of Egypt were not random events God permitted or imposed on the people in Egypt. They were a challenge to the way these people and their leaders had lived their lives without thought for other people living in their midst and especially for God who created all of us as equal people. We live in a world where people are rarely treated equally. America is struggling with serious racial tension in many communities. Canada only recently has completed its Truth and Reconciliation Commission to respond to the abuses against First Nation Peoples, especially their children. It is extremely sobering to realize the extent of what they suffered and the difficulties of even beginning to compensate or correct what went wrong. In the UK one of the most significant factor in the vote to leave the European Union was the exceptionally high turnout from the poorest communities, despite being communities that were net financial beneficiaries from EU funds. When there are injustices being committed or perceived injustices going unchallenged it is inevitable that in time there will be a reaction of some kind to this situation.

The first plagues caused inconvenience throughout the land of Egypt and did not differentiate between the locations where different communities lived. Some were replicated by the Egyptian magicians but in Exodus 8:19 after plague three –of Gnats- they declared: *This is the finger of God.* That is, a power greater than our own is at work. But Pharaoh chose not to listen. What does God have to do to get your attention or mine? What needs to happen for us to heed His voice in our conscience or circumstances? How determined are we to get our way and not listen to the voices of fellow believers who might have sensed God speaking more clearly than we have done in a particular situation? There are no simple answers to these questions as each person will respond differently. What these chapters of Exodus teach is that people who deliberately act in a way contrary to God's standards will be held accountable for their actions. So often people appear to get away with wrongdoing, but they don't as God will always ultimately have the last word. Sometimes in this life as in Exodus there are remarkable interventions in human history that show God at work, but in many more situations where the hand of God is not visible we must assume and accept that He is at work in bringing about His will on earth as it is in heaven.

1. The deprivation of possessions (Exodus 8:20-9:12)

(a) The plague of stinging flies (Exodus 8:20-32)²⁰ Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Get up early in the morning and confront Pharaoh as he goes to the river and say to him, "This is what the Lord says: let My people go, so that they may worship Me. ²¹ If you do not let My people go, I will send swarms of flies on you and your officials, on your people and into your houses. The houses of the Egyptians will be full of flies; even the ground will be covered with them."²² **"But on that day I will deal differently with the land of Goshen, where My people live; no swarms of flies will be there, so that you will know that I, the Lord, am in this land."** ²³ I will make a distinction between My people and your people. This sign will occur tomorrow. "'²⁴ And the Lord did this. Dense swarms of flies poured into Pharaoh's palace and into the houses of his officials; throughout Egypt the land was ruined by the flies. ²⁵ Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, 'Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land.' ²⁶ But Moses said, 'That would not be right. The sacrifices we offer the Lord our God would be detestable to the Egyptians. And if we offer sacrifices that are detestable in their eyes, will they not stone us?' ²⁷ We must take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, as he commands us.' ²⁸ Pharaoh said, 'I will let you go to offer sacrifices to the Lord your God in the wilderness, but you must not go very far. Now pray for me.' ²⁹ Moses answered, 'As soon as I leave you, I will pray to the Lord, and tomorrow the flies will leave Pharaoh and his officials and his people. Only let Pharaoh be sure that he does not act deceitfully again by not letting the people go to offer sacrifices to the Lord.' ³⁰ Then Moses left Pharaoh and prayed to the Lord, ³¹ and the Lord did what Moses asked. The flies left Pharaoh and his officials and his people; not a fly remained. ³² But this time also Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go. The least popular part of the Bible's teaching is on the judgement of God on unrepentant sinners. Wrongdoing must be punished. The more serious the crime the greater the response must be by the wider society- if the law is upheld. The Bible reveals between Genesis and Jesus the appalling consequences of human sinfulness that would lead eventually to the coming of Jesus to die in our place on the cross. He paid the penalty for our sins so that we might not face God's holy anger against sin. Each of us must make a personal response to the good news of the gospel- have you done so? Here God tempered judgement with mercy. Had these earliest warnings been heeded then the later ones need not have taken place. The pressure is now increased as the nature of the miracle becomes more challenging for the daily lives of the Egyptians. Now in this plague only the majority Egyptian community and their neighbourhoods would be affected by it (Exodus 8:22). We might think surely the majority of Egyptians would see God at work in this situation! No they didn't! Remember in Luke 16:29-31, the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, in the exchange of the man in hell asking Abraham to send someone to speak to his family so that they didn't make the same mistake of rejecting the gospel of God. It states: *Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."* ³⁰ *"No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."* ³¹ *'He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."*' Praise God for those people whose lives have been transformed by the Lord Jesus Christ whom God raised from the dead on the first Easter Sunday morning. However, there are plenty of people known to all of us who either doubt it, or deny it happened or simply ignore what they have heard and go on with their lives without any thought for God and His ways. In this case there was a temporary offer from Pharaoh to allow some time off for worshipping Yahweh, but as soon as the respite from the plague came he changed his mind and withdrew his permission. It was not a lack of evidence before him but a willfulness of heart to reject the guidance God had given him. Where do you stand today? Are you recognizing the presence of God in your life as you need to do or are you living in practice as if there was no God to account to?

(b) **The plague of livestock diseases** (Exodus 9:1-7) *Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh and say to him, “This is what the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, says: ‘Let My people go, so that they may worship Me.’² If you refuse to let them go and continue to hold them back,³ the hand of the Lord will bring a terrible plague on your livestock in the field – on your horses, donkeys and camels and on your cattle, sheep and goats.⁴ But the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and that of Egypt, so that no animal belonging to the Israelites will die.”⁵ The Lord set a time and said, ‘Tomorrow the Lord will do this in the land.’⁶ And the next day the Lord did it: all the livestock of the Egyptians died, but not one animal belonging to the Israelites died.⁷ **Pharaoh investigated and found that not even one of the animals of the Israelites had died.** Yet his heart was unyielding and he would not let the people go. Pharaoh at the time of the previous plague had not called his magicians to copy what Moses and Aaron had done. He knew they were powerless to intervene. The plague of insects was an attack on the alleged power of Kheprer, the Egyptian god of resurrection, whose symbol was the flying beetle. Some animals were deemed sacred in Egypt as they were symbols of certain gods. To sacrifice them within the boundaries of Egypt would be seen as sacrilege [J. Currid, *Exodus* Vol.1, p. 188]. A plague that was a serious nuisance and inconvenience was not heeded. The next ratcheting up of pressure came in this plague that would result in significant loss of life in the animals owned by the Egyptians. With no animals to work the land agricultural production would fall significantly. The loss of donkeys and horses, the main modes of transport on the land, would also restrict the movement of people. The social and economic wellbeing of the people was now under threat. Once again only animals owned by Egyptians would die. Was the evidence clear? Yes it was! Exodus 9:7 reminds of this fact. **Pharaoh investigated and found that not even one of the animals of the Israelites had died.** Yet his heart was unyielding and he would not let the people go.*

It was not evidence of the presence of God at work that he needed, rather it was a lack of willingness to heed what God was saying to him that was the issue. The power of a number of Egyptian gods whose symbols were of a bull or cow was shown to be lacking. Did they recognize the presence of God in their midst? No! Almost certainly they looked for naturalistic explanations. Nothing much has changed in sinful human hearts. The question we must answer is this - how do I respond to God’s call upon my life? Will I heed what He is saying or will I insist on an alternative explanation?

(c) **The plague of boils** (Exodus 9:8-12) *Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Take handfuls of soot from a furnace and let Moses toss it into the air in the presence of Pharaoh.’⁹ It will become fine dust over the whole land of Egypt, and festering boils will break out on people and animals throughout the land.’¹⁰ So they took soot from a furnace and stood before Pharaoh. Moses tossed it into the air, and festering boils broke out on people and animals.¹¹ The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and on all the Egyptians.¹² But the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said to Moses. What is going on here? The type of furnace is likely to have been one for burning bricks – a symbol of the crushing oppression on Hebrew men and women. The soot resulting from the labours of enslaved people was now to cause severe discomfort to those who benefitted economically and materially from their labours. This plague in symbolic form speaks powerfully in every generation. Am I profiting from the forced labours of enslaved or ill-treated people? Ask the question of the clothes or footwear we purchase in shops, or the food we buy in the supermarket. Under what conditions was it produced? If it is sold at less than the cost of production then there is a serious moral issue to consider. We cannot always buy properly certified fair-trade goods, but we can act*

with our conscience when we become aware of unethical trading. We don't know what this plague was in detail, but it had a serious impact on the daily lives of the Egyptians who experienced it. It became a symbolic warning to Israel in later years against turning their backs on God's ways. In Deuteronomy chapter 28 there are some examples of how God might punish Israel if she turned her back on God in future generations. In Deuteronomy 28:27, one example, it states: *The Lord will afflict you with the boils of Egypt and with tumours, festering sores and the itch, from which you cannot be cured.* In addition, in Revelation 16:2, a repetition of this plague on the followers of the Antichrist in the last days is seen as an evident sign of God's judgement on their wicked behavior. However, the most solemn part of this incident is recorded in Exodus 9:12: *But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said to Moses.* What does this mean? Simply that God allowed him to go his own way and stopped speaking to his conscience. This is the worst possible scenario on earth when a person has repeatedly refused to heed God's call on their life and a time may come when God says okay- go your own way. I will leave you to it. A sinful human being may think that is freedom. A wise human being knows that a conscience uninformed by the Holy Spirit of God is a frightening prospect. Do you recognize and heed the presence of God in your life?

2. The deprivation of life and cessation of normal activities (Exodus 9:13-10:29)

(a) **The plague of hail** (Exodus 9:13-35) *Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Get up early in the morning, confront Pharaoh and say to him, "This is what the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, says: let My people go, so that they may worship Me, ¹⁴ or this time I will send the full force of My plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like Me in all the earth. ¹⁵ For by now I could have stretched out My hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. ¹⁶ But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you My power and that My name might be proclaimed in all the earth. ¹⁷ You still set yourself against My people and will not let them go. ¹⁸ Therefore, at this time tomorrow I will send the worst hailstorm that has ever fallen on Egypt, from the day it was founded till now. ¹⁹ Give an order now to bring your livestock and everything you have in the field to a place of shelter, because the hail will fall on every person and animal that has not been brought in and is still out in the field, and they will die."* ²⁰ **Those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the Lord hurried to bring their slaves and their livestock inside.** ²¹ *But those who ignored the word of the Lord left their slaves and livestock in the field. ²² Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand towards the sky so that hail will fall all over Egypt – on people and animals and on everything growing in the fields of Egypt.'* ²³ *When Moses stretched out his staff towards the sky, the Lord sent thunder and hail, and lightning flashed down to the ground. So the Lord rained hail on the land of Egypt; ²⁴ hail fell and lightning flashed back and forth. It was the worst storm in all the land of Egypt since it had become a nation. ²⁵ Throughout Egypt hail struck everything in the fields – both people and animals; it beat down everything growing in the fields and stripped every tree. ²⁶ The only place it did not hail was the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were. ²⁷ Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron. 'This time I have sinned,' he said to them. **The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong.** ²⁸ *Pray to the Lord, for we have had enough thunder and hail. I will let you go; you don't have to stay any longer.* ²⁹ *Moses replied, 'When I have gone out of the city, I will spread out my hands in prayer to the Lord. The thunder will stop and there will be no more hail, so you may know that the earth is the Lord's. ³⁰ But I know that you and your officials still do not fear the Lord God.'* ³¹ *(The flax and barley were destroyed, since the barley was in the ear and the flax was in bloom. ³² The wheat and spelt, however, were not destroyed, because they ripen later.) ³³ Then Moses left Pharaoh and went out of the city. He spread out his hands towards the Lord; the thunder and hail stopped, and the rain no longer poured down on the land. ³⁴ When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned**

again: he and his officials hardened their hearts.³⁵ So Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not let the Israelites go, just as the Lord had said through Moses. A new set of plagues begins at this point as the impact becomes increasingly severe in its consequences for the Egyptians. Yet even here judgement is tempered with mercy. A clear warning is given so that the consequences of the plague can be greatly mitigated for those who take God seriously, but those who refused to heed the warning would face the full consequences for their workers and their animals. The wording of this plague in Exodus 9:14 *Therefore, at this time tomorrow I will send the worst hailstorm that has ever fallen on Egypt, from the day it was founded till now* reflected the pronouncements of a number of the Pharaohs who claimed that their deeds were greater 'than all the things that were in the country since it was founded' [J. Currid, *Exodus* Vol.1, p. 203]. This plague naturally challenged the powers of the gods / goddesses who were alleged responsible for controlling the weather. It was an extraordinary claim to make that it was the worst hailstorm since the nation had been founded around 3100BC. What happened that day in Egypt would never be forgotten by those who survived this plague. God indicated here that He has been incredibly merciful. Why was this the case? *For by now I could have stretched out My hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth.*¹⁶ *But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you My power and that My name might be proclaimed in all the earth* (Exodus 9:15-16). God had allowed this wicked man time to consider his ways and reflect upon his misconduct. Yet he had chosen to resist and continue in his evil ways. God's mercy, though, was not just for his benefit but for the other people in Egypt. Our actions affect other people for their good or their harm. In national contexts when nations are blessed by God because of behavior pleasing to God by many, undoubtedly there are other people in the nation whose life choices were not pleasing to God, but they benefitted from national blessings; in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said these words: *your Father in heaven....causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous* (Matthew 5:45). The same occurs in reverse when evil people are punished that some right living people suffer at the same time. In World War Two there were a minority of German people that stood against Hitler, but they endured the punishment inflicted on their fellow citizens when the evils of Nazism were overcome. But in line with Romans 8:28 God can bring good for the benefit of His people out of situations that are far from 'good'. *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.* Again here God appealed directly to Egyptian people over the heads of their leaders to take out of harm's way their employees and their animals. Exodus 9:20-21 states: ²⁰*Those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the Lord hurried to bring their slaves and their livestock inside.* ²¹*But those who ignored the word of the Lord left their slaves and livestock in the field.* Why was that done? To enable these people to acknowledge the King of Kings and Lord of Lords; they had no excuse for not heeding God's call. Another merciful act of God was to limit the crop damage (Exodus 9:31-32) so that the ordinary people did not face a potential famine situation. What can we learn here from this account? It is likely that God gives many people opportunities to reflect something of Him in nature or in some other context, possibly through their conscience (Romans 2:15-16). You and I pray for people to come to faith and often years can pass and we see no discernable progress in matters of faith. Don't give up! God may be at work providing a witness to them in unexpected ways.

(b) **The plague of locusts** (Exodus 10:1-20) *Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these signs of mine among them² that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed My signs among them, and that you may know that I am the Lord.'*³ *So Moses and Aaron*

went to Pharaoh and said to him, 'This is what the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, says: "How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me? Let My people go, so that they may worship Me. ⁴ If you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country tomorrow.⁵ They will cover the face of the ground so that it cannot be seen. They will devour what little you have left after the hail, including every tree that is growing in your fields.⁶ They will fill your houses and those of all your officials and all the Egyptians – something neither your parents nor your ancestors have ever seen from the day they settled in this land till now.'" Then Moses turned and left Pharaoh. ⁷ Pharaoh's officials said to him, 'How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the Lord their God. Do you not yet realise that Egypt is ruined?' ⁸ Then Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh. 'Go, worship the Lord your God,' he said. 'But tell me who will be going.'⁹ Moses answered, 'We will go with our young and our old, with our sons and our daughters, and with our flocks and herds, because we are to celebrate a festival to the Lord. ¹⁰ Pharaoh said, 'The Lord be with you – if I let you go, along with your women and children! Clearly you are bent on evil. ¹¹ No! Let only the men go and worship the Lord, since that's what you have been asking for.' Then Moses and Aaron were driven out of Pharaoh's presence. ¹² And the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand over Egypt so that locusts swarm over the land and devour everything growing in the fields, everything left by the hail.' ¹³ So Moses stretched out his staff over Egypt, and the Lord made an east wind blow across the land all that day and all that night. By morning the wind had brought the locusts; ¹⁴ they invaded all Egypt and settled down in every area of the country in great numbers. Never before had there been such a plague of locusts, nor will there ever be again.¹⁵ They covered all the ground until it was black. They devoured all that was left after the hail – everything growing in the fields and the fruit on the trees. Nothing green remained on tree or plant in all the land of Egypt. ¹⁶ Pharaoh quickly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, 'I have sinned against the Lord your God and against you.¹⁷ Now forgive my sin once more and pray to the Lord your God to take this deadly plague away from me.' ¹⁸ Moses then left Pharaoh and prayed to the Lord. ¹⁹ And the Lord changed the wind to a very strong west wind, which caught up the locusts and carried them into the Red Sea. Not a locust was left anywhere in Egypt. ²⁰ But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let the Israelites go. Once more the stakes were raised higher. It was clear from the responses of Pharaoh's officials in Exodus 10:7 that they recognized it was the God whom Moses worshipped who had done this, not the man who stood before them. The pressure told a little on Pharaoh as he reluctantly was willing to allow the men to attend worship services, but not the women and children (Exodus 10:11). It was not a serious concession. How severe was this plague of locusts? In Exodus 10:6 Moses declared: *They will fill your houses and those of all your officials and all the Egyptians – something neither your parents nor your ancestors have ever seen from the day they settled in this land till now.*' Then Moses turned and left Pharaoh. The sad reality was that no amount of evidence would be convincing to these officials and their Pharaoh. Likewise there are people today who are similarly so closed in their minds to the Lord that nothing you or I could ever say will make a difference. Yet our calling is to present the good news of Jesus to people around us. Each person must choose their own response to it. We must not be discouraged and give up when responses are very limited. Paul when pioneering a Christian witness in Corinth was discouraged and possibly on the verge of quitting and going elsewhere despite a church being formed and as Luke explains: *many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized* (Acts 18:8b). God met with Paul one evening and gave him this encouraging message: *Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent.* ¹⁰*For I am with you, and no-one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city* (Acts 18:9b-10). Do you need to be reminded that the same God is at work in Dundee and Broughty Ferry. There are people He will bring to faith through your witness and mine and through believers in other Christian Churches here in the years to come. It is a long term business. Paul reminded struggling Christians in southern Turkey of the blessings of persevering in their witness in

Galatians 6:9: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.* There was to be one more plague of warning of God's judgement in Egypt before the final judgement fell.

(c) **The plague of darkness** (Exodus 10:21-29) *Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand towards the sky so that darkness spreads over Egypt – darkness that can be felt.'*²² *So Moses stretched out his hand towards the sky, and total darkness covered all Egypt for three days.*²³ *No one could see anyone else or move about for three days. Yet all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived.*²⁴ *Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and said, 'Go, worship the Lord. Even your women and children may go with you; only leave your flocks and herds behind.'*²⁵ *But Moses said, 'You must allow us to have sacrifices and burnt offerings to present to the Lord our God.'*²⁶ *Our livestock too must go with us; not a hoof is to be left behind. We have to use some of them in worshipping the Lord our God, and until we get there we will not know what we are to use to worship the Lord.'*²⁷ *But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he was not willing to let them go.*²⁸ *Pharaoh said to Moses, 'Get out of my sight! Make sure you do not appear before me again! The day you see my face you will die.'*²⁹ *'Just as you say,' Moses replied. 'I will never appear before you again.'* Once more although willing to make some grudging concessions Pharaoh was still quite unwilling even to allow the modest request of Moses and Aaron to take place. Notice who terminated the conversations: *Pharaoh said to Moses, 'Get out of my sight! Make sure you do not appear before me again! The day you see my face you will die.'*²⁹ *'Just as you say,' Moses replied. 'I will never appear before you again'* (Exodus 10:28-29). It was Pharaoh who ended the conversations. Our job is not to give up on people, but the results must be left with God. Peter in II Peter 3:8-9 wrote: *But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.*⁹ *The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* Do you and I share His love for people? I hope we do and with prayer and creative approaches to outreach do our very best to point people to Jesus in the coming days, Amen.