

# A DIFFICULT PLACE

**SERIES: EXODUS - JOURNEY TO  
FREEDOM**



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Exodus 7-10  
Seventh Message  
Scott Grant  
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## *Exodus 7-10*

When I was twenty-seven years old, I was fired as the editor of the weekly newspaper in Los Gatos because the new publisher had a different vision for the paper from me. After she informed me that my services would no longer be needed, she also told me to leave right then and there. So, I walked out of the office and up the stairs of Lyndon Plaza in a state of shock.

I was in a difficult place. What now?

You've probably been in some difficult places. Perhaps you're in a difficult place now. What now?

In the book of Exodus, the people of God are in a difficult place. They're in bondage in Egypt. Even though Moses has returned in obedience to the Lord to deliver the Israelites, things have gone from bad to worse. What now?

The Lord's words to Moses in Exodus 7:3-5 form an apt introduction to the ten plagues.

## **Signs and wonders**

### **Exodus 7:3-5:**

**"But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, 4 Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. 5 The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them."**

Sometimes in the plagues narrative, as in Exodus 7:3, the Lord takes responsibility for hardening Pharaoh's heart. At other times, as in Exodus 8:15, Pharaoh is said to harden his own heart. When the Lord hardens Pharaoh's heart, he is not going against Pharaoh's will. Instead, he is cooperating with Pharaoh's will. The Lord helps Pharaoh's heart remain "maximally itself."<sup>1</sup>

The Lord hardens Pharaoh's heart through his word, which comes through Moses and Aaron. The word of God either softens a heart or hardens a heart. The word is like the sun, which melts butter and hardens clay.

The Lord's purpose in hardening Pharaoh's heart is to multiply his signs and wonders. Through these signs and wonders he will make himself known. The Lord intensifies the opposition to make himself unmistakably known through his deliverance from that opposition.

Where are the signs and wonders multiplied? In the land of Egypt. It's one thing for the Lord to demonstrate his power in the wilderness, with no one else around, as he did to Moses; it's quite another for him to demonstrate his power in Egypt, the place of bondage.

## **What does God do?**

God wants to be known. God wants us to know him. God wants you to know him. God wants you to know how great it is to know him.

How does he make himself known to us? How do people make themselves known to us? Mostly, by what they say and what they do. It's no different with God. He makes himself known to us by what he says and what he does, what he says in the Scriptures and what he does in the world, even what he does in our lives.

The Lord's goal in the ten plagues is to reveal himself. The formula "that you may know that I am the Lord," or something like it, appears in Exodus 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29; and 10:2.

What does God do? The Lord enters our "Egypt," the places of darkness, opposition, and bondage. He wants to enter the place of our deepest fears, anxieties, and insecurities and multiply his signs and wonders there. If he shows himself to be powerful in such places of difficulty, what does that say about him? What does that say about his power and goodness?

In Exodus 7-10, the Lord multiplies his signs and wonders in Egypt, a difficult place, so that everyone in the story—Moses, Pharaoh, the Israelites, the Egyptians—may know him.

By his power, the Lord says he will bring his “hosts,” or armies, out of Egypt. He turns them from slaves into warriors. By his power, the Lord transforms us from slaves of sin to warriors for the kingdom.

### The ten plagues

The Lord makes himself known, and thereby gives the players the opportunity to recognize him, by revealing his awesome power. That power is seen through differentiation. Ultimately, the Lord reveals himself by differentiating between himself and everyone else.

The Lord wants the world to know the difference he makes. Especially, he wants the world to know the difference it makes to know him.

This differentiation is enhanced in the following ways, as seen in the plagues, which appear in three series of three, with the tenth and final plague standing alone:

—Plagues 1-3: The Lord differentiates between his servants, Moses and Aaron, and the servants of the Egyptian gods, the magicians. Although the Egyptian magicians duplicate the first two plagues (Exodus 7:11, 22), they cannot reverse the effects (Exodus 8:8), and they cannot duplicate the third plague (Exodus 8:18), finally recognizing “the finger of God” (Exodus 8:19).

—Plagues 4-6: The Lord differentiates between his people, the Israelites, and the Egyptians. While the first three plagues affected all of Egypt, the next three don’t impact the land of Goshen, where the Israelites live (Exodus 8:22-23).

—Plagues 7-9: The Lord differentiates between himself and everyone else. In these plagues, he demonstrates that “there is no one like me in all the earth” (Exodus 9:14); therefore, the severity of the plagues is without precedent (Exodus 9:18, 9:24, 10:6, 10:14).

—The tenth plague: The three ways that the Lord distinguished himself reappear in the tenth plague, the plague of the firstborn. Moses (Exodus 11:3), the Israelites (Exodus 11:7), and the Lord (Exodus 11:6) are all differentiated again. Moreover, the Lord executes the

tenth plague himself and not through Moses (Exodus 12:12). The tenth plague is outside the series and, unlike the other nine, has nothing to do with natural events, completely defying any explanation that denies the power of the Lord.

This differentiation is enhanced by the literary structure of the narrative, as seen in the chart below.

### Literary structure

<i>Plague</i>	<i>External source</i>	<i>Warning</i>	<i>Instruction formula</i>
1. blood	7:14-24	yes	“In the morning,” “station yourself”
2. frogs	7:25-8:11	yes	“Go to Pharaoh”
3. gnats	8:12-15	no	none
4. flies	8:16-28	yes	“In the morning,” “station yourself”
5. livestock	9:1-7	yes	“Go to Pharaoh”
6. boils	9:8-12	no	none
7. hail	9:13-35	yes	“In the morning,” “station yourself”
8. locusts	10:1-20	yes	“Go to Pharaoh”
9. darkness	10:21-23	no	none
10. firstborn	11:4-7, 12:29-30	yes	none

### Going to war

In the plagues, the Lord goes to war against the Egyptian gods, showing that they aren’t gods at all (Exodus 12:12, Numbers 33:4). The plagues represent defeats for specific Egyptian gods that supposedly ruled over some natural force. For example, the first plague impacted the Nile, and the Egyptians had a Nile god named Hapi.

The New Testament correspondence is the war the Lord fought and won against Satan through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of his Son, Jesus Christ (Mark 3:27, Ephesians 1:19-23, Colossians 2:15, Hebrews 2:14-15). The prize in both wars is the people

of God, whom the Lord delivers in the first case from bondage to Egypt and in the second case from the bondage to sin (Romans 6:17-18, Revelation 1:5).

The Lord's differentiating himself culminates for the Israelites on Mount Sinai, where they are given the Ten Commandments, the first and primary of which is, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3).

The Lord went to war against Satan, demonstrating his power. He has differentiated between those who serve him and those who are serve Satan, however unwittingly; between his people and those in the clutches of Satan; and finally between himself and everyone else. By demonstrating his power through such differentiating, he has revealed himself so that people may know that he is the Lord and that they may have no other gods before him.

The prologue to the ten plagues (Exodus 7:8-13) introduces elements that will reappear in the plagues themselves, thus forming an apt introduction. The Egyptian magicians duplicate the sign of the serpent (Exodus 7:11), but Aaron's serpent swallows that of the Egyptians, demonstrating the Lord's superior power (Exodus 7:12).

In the first three plagues, the Lord distinguishes between his servants and Pharaoh's servants.

**God reveals himself through his servants (Exodus 7:14-8:19)**

**Exodus 8:18-19:**

**The magicians tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, but they could not. So there were gnats on man and beast. 19 Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.**

The Egyptian magicians are able to duplicate the first two plagues. It looks as if they can do what the Lord does. But even in their duplication of the first two plagues, there is one thing the magicians can't do: reverse the effects. What good, in fact, does their duplication of the plagues do them? It's not helping the situation; it's making it worse. The helpful thing would be to reverse the effects, but they can't do it.

With the third plague, which they can't duplicate, the magicians acknowledge "the finger of God," thus validating the power of the Lord and also giving testimony to Pharaoh from his own people, who are intimately acquainted with spiritual things. Pharaoh's servants will acknowledge the power of the Lord two more times, finally urging Pharaoh, "Let the men go, that they may serve the LORD their God. Do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?" (Exodus 9:20, 10:7).

At best, our false gods can do what we want them to do only for a while. When they fail, we have the opportunity, like the magicians of Egypt, to recognize the true God.

In one of F. Scott Fitzgerald's stories, he writes of a new generation that has "grown up to find all Gods dead."<sup>2</sup> I think about that line sometimes when that which I put my trust in other than the Lord fails me. All gods but the true God are dead, and if we pay attention, we'll wake up some day to realize that whatever they did for us, they can't do it anymore and, indeed, can't do anything more.

In contrast to the new generation that Fitzgerald writes of, consider Brother Andrew, best known for smuggling Bibles into closed Communist countries, who died September 27 at the age of 94. A sticker on his battered briefcase read, "My God's not dead. Sorry about yours."<sup>3</sup>

In the second three plagues, the Lord distinguishes between his people and the Egyptians, as seen in the words the Lord gives to Moses to relay to Pharaoh before the fourth plague.

**The Lord spares his people (Exodus 8:20-9:12)**

**Exodus 8:22-23:**

**"But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth. 23 Thus I will put a division between my people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall happen."**

Each of the first three plagues affected all of Egypt, including Goshen, where the Israelites live. The Israelites were seeing the power of God, all right, but God was seemingly afflicting them just as much as the Egyptians.

Why does the Lord, in the first three plagues, equally afflict the Egyptians and the Israelites? Because the Israelites needed to be jolted out of their complacency. Fearful, they were secure in Egypt. But they are in bondage; they are not free. To be free, they need to want to be free. They need to be shown the reality and misery of their condition as slaves.

Likewise, we need to be jolted out of our complacency. We become comfortable with sin, which nevertheless restricts us as we are comfortably fearful.

Beginning with the fourth plague, the Lord does something different with Israel. He sets Israel apart. The land of Goshen is spared. All along the Lord has been forming his people, preparing them to leave Egypt. It just didn't look that way to them. Now what's always been true becomes clearer.

God has spared those who believe in Christ from his wrath, according to the apostle Paul: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life" (Romans 5:8-10).

Moreover, God has set apart people who believe in his Son by giving them the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes, people outside the faith can see that there's something good going on inside the faith by what they see in followers of Jesus. On the one hand, sadly, there are many people who claim the name of Jesus and give others no good reason to believe in him. On the other hand, thankfully, there also many people who claim the name of Jesus and are being transformed by the Holy Spirit. They just don't get a lot of press.

Years ago, I met weekly with a man, a seeker, to study the Scriptures. I also on occasion took him golfing with some guys from the church, who go out on Fridays (and still do, by the way). He commented to me that his experience playing golf with the church guys was different from his experience playing with his usual playing partners. The Friday guys were interested in him. They didn't cut each other down. They encouraged him.

Eventually, he gave his life to Christ and was baptized. The Lord used the Friday guys to show him a different way of life.

Finally, the Lord distinguishes between himself and everyone else, as seen, again, in the words the Lord gives to Moses to relay to Pharaoh, this time before the seventh plague.

**There is no one like the Lord (Exodus 9:13-10:29)**

**Exodus 9:14-16:**

**"For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. 15 For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. 16 But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth."**

The Lord now sends his plagues in increasing severity. The Lord had been gracious to Pharaoh and Egypt, holding back. Had he unleashed all his power, Pharaoh would be dead and Egypt would be ruined by now. But Pharaoh's hardness of heart prompts the Lord to finally send all his plagues so that the Egyptians, Pharaoh included, may know that there is no one like the Lord—not the Egyptian gods, not the Egyptian magicians, and not Pharaoh.

The word "earth" appears three times in these verses. Pharaoh, as ruler of the most powerful nation on earth, thinks he controls the earth, or at least his corner of it. But all the earth belongs to the Lord, who could easily cut Pharaoh off from it. Pharaoh thinks he's in control, but he's not.

Some of us try to control others, keep them under our thumb, keeping them bound to our vision for who they should be and what they should do. Control, however, is an illusion, and some powerful people who seem in control know it.

Several years ago, media mogul Ted Turner, a so-called powerful person, said, "I'd feel powerful if my kids got straight A's and my wife never got mad at me and I never got a case of diarrhea. As it is, power is a bunch of hooey."<sup>4</sup>

The final three plagues teach us, and together the nine plagues teach us: there is no one like the Lord in all the earth.



## The irony is rich

Remember, the Lord wants to reveal himself to everyone through the plagues. So, what happens to Moses? How do the plagues affect him?

After the first plague, “Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart” (Exodus 7:23). After announcing to Pharaoh the eighth plague, Moses “turned and went out from Pharaoh” (Exodus 10:6).

The irony is rich. At the beginning of the plagues, Pharaoh was unconcerned with Moses. Toward the end of the plagues, Moses is unconcerned with Pharaoh.

After the ninth plague, Pharaoh said to Moses, “Get away from me; take care never to see my face again, for on the day you see my face you shall die.” Forty years earlier, when Pharaoh threatened Moses’ life from a distance, Moses literally fled from the “face” of Pharaoh (Exodus 2:15). Now, forty years later, Pharaoh makes a brazen threat against Moses’ life face to face. This time, Moses responds, “As you say! I will not see your face again” (Exodus 10:28-29).

Again, the irony is rich. Once afraid of Pharaoh’s threats, Moses is now unfazed.

When Moses began his confrontation with Pharaoh, everyone was against him, including his own people. Moses himself was shaking like a leaf. Now he’s solid as a rock.

What happened? The nine plagues, for one thing (or nine things, actually!). The Lord multiplied his signs and wonders in a difficult place. Again, why? So that he may be known. Moses increasingly came to know how great it is to know the Lord.

Moses will have a story to tell.

## A story to tell

### Exodus 10:1-2:

**Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, 2 and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the**

**Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the LORD.”**

The Lord says that “you” may tell your son and grandson about what the Lord did in Egypt. The pronoun is singular, meaning that Moses is in view. But when the Lord says he has done signs among the Egyptians that “you may know that I am the Lord,” the pronoun is plural, meaning that the Israelites are in view.

Both Moses and the rest of the Israelites see and experience the power of the Lord. Both Moses and the rest of the Israelites have a story to pass on. Indeed, that story has been passed on through the generations, and we are hearing it today.

Each of us who believe in Christ has stories to tell about what the Lord has done in our lives, including stories of what the Lord has done for us in difficult places.

### What’s in a name?

When Karen and I were expecting our first child, a girl, we began seeking the Lord for a name. Perhaps God had a name in mind for our child. If so, perhaps he would make it known to us. So, Karen and I began to pray.

We began suggesting names to each other. Our plan was to settle on a name for a while and see how it resonated with us. One by one, we thought of names, and some resonated for a while, but one by one, they stopped resonating, and we dismissed them.

About a month before our daughter was born, the name Christina, which Karen had suggested earlier, resurfaced. When it did, it sounded right to both of us.

Two weeks before the due date, we visited an Italian restaurant in San Francisco. I had dined there perhaps a dozen times and had befriended the owner, an immigrant who enjoyed playing the over-the-top Italian restaurateur for his patrons. When Franchino saw me this time with my pregnant wife, he was particularly excited.

“We’re having a girl,” I told him.

“I’ll tell you what you should name her,” he said. “Just one minute.”

He turned away for a moment, searching for—or pretending to search for—a name. Then he turned back.

“Christina!” he said. “It is a good Italian name.”

When Franchino said “Christina,” Karen and I knew our search was over.

Nineteen years later, that little girl is a sophomore in college. This year, she’s studying abroad, in Switzerland. She and some of her classmates often travel to different places on the long weekends they’re given. Two weeks ago, she and about a half-dozen friends traveled to a small town in Italy. While swimming in the Adriatic, they struck up a conversation with a local man named Leonardo.

Later that evening, Christina and her friends were dining outside in town when Leonardo happened by. Christina tells the story:

He approached us to say hello after spotting our group. He apologized, saying that he had forgotten our names, all except for mine. In the strongest Italian accent you can imagine, he exclaimed excitedly, “But I remember you, Christina, because it is a good Italian name.” I was speechless. Suddenly I became my childhood self, listening for the hundredth time about how I got my name.

Tell your children, your grandchildren—and anyone, for that matter—the stories of what the Lord has done. You never know how he will use those stories—or when they’ll resurface.

### **Speaking to my twenty-seven-year-old self**

The Lord does great things in difficult places so that we may know how great it is to know him.

During my sabbatical in August, after returning from a personal retreat to Big Sur, I stopped in Los Gatos. I went back to Lyndon Plaza, thirty-seven years after having been fired. I sat down on a bench at the top of the stairs, looking down.

I asked myself, “What would I say to that twenty-seven-year-old guy, that guy in a difficult place, that guy who was me, if I somehow could have said something to him?” I decided that I would say something like, “You have no idea what God is going to do for you.”

Thirty-seven years ago, I was in one of the most difficult places of my life, but the Lord began multiplying his signs and wonders in breathtaking ways that led me away from journalism and into pastoral ministry.

Along the way, the Lord gave me a better job, working as an editor for the *Contra Costa Times* (now the *East Bay Times*), based in Pleasanton. About the same time, my former youth pastor, who had been serving as a pastor of a small church in Washington, had just returned to California to try his hand at youth ministry again. It just so happened that his new position in California was in Pleasanton.

I hadn’t seen Conrad in seven years, but I called him, met with him, and he put me to work as a volunteer in his church’s high school group. I started studying and teaching the Scriptures and shepherding high school students. More signs and wonders in the next few years finally led me away from journalism and into pastoral ministry. And, well, here I am today.

How great it is to know the Lord!

### **Endnotes**

- 1 Leon R. Kass, *Founding God’s Nation: Reading Exodus* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2022), 131.
- 2 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise* (New York: Scribner, 1920).
- 3 Here’s a quick story about Brother Andrew. Our church had some dealings with him more than twenty years ago when we shared ministry in a certain country that is closed to the gospel. After getting to know him a bit, we invited him to preach here when he was visiting the States. Anyway, when the PBC pastors were breakfasting with Brother Andrew one morning before their teaching assignments, they engaged in a little nervous gallows humor, observing that they were risking their lives to teach the Scriptures in such a place. Brother Andrew jumped in and said to them, “What, do you want to die in your bed of cancer as an old man?” To Brother Andrew, it was preferable to be gunned down while preaching the gospel and go out in a blaze of glory. Well, he died as old man, though I don’t know whether he had cancer or whether he died in bed. In any event, he left behind blaze of glory that lightened the path for millions.
- 4 *San Jose Mercury News* (September 19, 1995), 3A.