

Plagues: God's mighty acts of judgment

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Date: 06 October 2024

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[0 : 0 0] And then our Assistant Minister, Jonathan, is going to come and preach to us. And Amy is going to come and bring us our reading. Tonight's reading is from Exodus, starting in chapter 7, on page 63, verses 1 to 5.

And then Exodus chapter 9, verses 13 to 35. So Exodus chapter 7, verses 1 to 5.

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. 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.

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. 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.

[1 : 5 0] You still set yourself against my people and will not let them go. 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.

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.

Those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the Lord hurried to bring their slaves and their livestock inside. But those who ignored the word of the Lord left their slaves and livestock in the field.

Then the Lord said to Moses, Stretch out your hand towards the sky so that the hail will fall all over Egypt, on people and animals and on everything growing in the fields of Egypt.

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.

[2 : 5 5] 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. Throughout Egypt, hail struck everything in the fields, both people and animals.

It beat down everything growing in the fields and stripped every tree. The only place it did not hail was the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were. 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. 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. 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. But I know that you and your officials still do not fear the Lord God. The flax and barley were destroyed since the barley was in the ear and the flax was in bloom.

[3 : 59] The wheat and spelt, however, were not destroyed because they ripened later. 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. When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned again.

He and his officials hardened their hearts. So Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not let the Israelites go, just as the Lord had said through Moses. Well, good evening.

Thank you so much, Amy, for reading. And let me add my welcome to Jack's. It would be a great help to me if you keep your Bibles open. We're in a big chunk of Exodus this evening, chapters 7 to 11. So let's pray and ask for God's help.

Father, your word is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword.

[5 : 04] It penetrates even the hardest of hearts. So by the Holy Spirit, would you help us to hear what you want to say to each of us here this evening through your word and to heed its warnings and shelter in its grace.

For we ask in Jesus' precious name. Amen. Well, Scotland, if any of you are new to Scotland this evening, Scotland is home to some of the most beautiful beaches in the world.

Actually. Actually. And according to Condé Nast, Traveller this past year, three of the top 34 beaches in the world are in Scotland.

Now, if I'd been on the panel, I'd have gone with a different three. My three would have been Sarnia Bay, Luskentyre, and Ach Melvig. We can debate about it afterwards.

But turquoise waters, impossibly pristine white sands, stunning mountainous backdrops, and completely deserted.

[6 : 21] Not a soul in sight. It's a busy day when more than two people turn up at once, sort of thing. So why are they empty? And it's not just because the temperatures really register in double figures, but because of the dreaded Scottish midge.

A formidable foe for visitors to the Scottish Highlands, the nemesis of the Scottish summer camping trip. Many a family holiday has been ruined by this microscopic predator.

And there's no known substance, no known substance to man, in my experience at least, that's effective as a repellent. And I've personally been chased by high-altitude squadrons of midges up many a rock face.

And I recall one time when we actually had to give up entirely and make a tactical retreat when we were trying to pitch a tent next to Fort Augustus and the Great Glen, engulfed by a black cloud of these midges.

And it's for this reason that plague number three, the plague of gnats, is sometimes referred to in jest as the Scottish plague.

[7 : 39] But the plagues here in Exodus are no laughing matter. And if you're here for Tri-Church, we're just visiting the past few weeks, we've been in the book of Exodus, and we've been saying that Exodus gives us the big picture in the Old Testament of what it looks like to be rescued by God, of what being rescued by God looks like and points forward to our great rescue in Christ Jesus.

A rescue from slavery. For the Israelites, it's a rescue from slavery to the Egyptians. For us, it's slavery from sin.

It's a rescue to freedom and to a promised destination. And this week and next, we're going to see that it's a rescue through coming judgment.

So if you're new to the sermon series, the people of God have been facing unimaginable hardship and persecution at the hands of their Egyptian oppressors.

A people whose condition of life was simply appalling. And last week, we saw that it got a whole bunch worse. So here they are, they're at their lowest ebb.

[9 : 01] And we heard last week that it's so very often at moments like these, utter human despair. So often at moments like these, that clears the way for God to demonstrate in power who he is.

And so we're now going to see what's going to happen when God sends Moses back to Pharaoh. And it's spelled out for us in chapter 7, verse 3.

It's on page 63, if your Bibles have fallen shut. Chapter 7, verse 3. The Lord said to Moses, You're to say everything I command you.

But I will harden Pharaoh's heart. And though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt, and with mighty acts of judgment, I will bring out my people, the Israelites.

So essentially, the Lord does two main things. He sends ten plagues, ten mighty acts of judgment, and he hardens Pharaoh's heart. And we're going to see that through it all, God is a faithful, rescuing God who graciously warns us of coming judgment.

[10 : 25] A faithful, rescuing God who graciously warns us of coming judgment. And then, through the lens of Pharaoh's hard heart, we're going to think about how we're to respond to that warning.

So first, then, the ten plagues, the ten signs and wonders. So there's ten plagues. There's blood in the Nile. There's frogs. There's the gnats, the Scottish plague.

Flies. Livestock. Boils. Hailstones. Locusts. Darkness. And death.

And the final plague is set apart in many ways. It's going to be the entirety of our focus next week, the final act of judgment.

This week, we're going to focus on the first nine. But why are there ten plagues? Why not just one? What purpose do they serve? Could it be because it's a close contest, a closely run thing?

[11 : 35] Pharaoh trading blows, going toe-to-toe with the Lord, neck and neck, until God finally lands the knockout blow in plague ten. Could that be the reason why there's ten plagues?

Or hardly. So turn back with me to plague seven, on page 66, chapter nine, and verse 13.

The plague of hailstones. The Lord said to Moses, confront Pharaoh, say to him, let my people go. For this time, I'll send the full force of my plagues against you, literally against your heart.

Why? So you may know there is no one like me in all the earth. The Lord means business.

He's not to be messed with here. And God graciously warns us of coming judgment. And the plagues are a very sort of graphic depiction of that.

[12 : 41] And you ignore them at your peril. And it's a bit like warning lights coming on in a car. Something flashes up on your dashboard. The car's way of telling you that something's not right.

And I remember years ago, on the way down to a wedding in Norfolk, a friend's wedding in a stately home. It was a really hot day. The air conditioning was on in the car, full blast.

And suddenly one of the warning lights came on. I wasn't paying too much attention to it at the time. And a little bit further on down the road, the electric windows stopped working.

That's odd, I thought to myself. But I kept on going. Didn't give it a whole lot of attention. A bit further on down the road, and I think we were in Lincolnshire by this time, and the air conditioning stopped working.

And I noted that this is really getting quite annoying now. But we kept on going. And it was only when the power steering gave up that I realized that, okay, we've got a bit of an issue here.

[13 : 42] And we pulled over and called the AA. By the way, arriving at a stately home for a wedding on the back of an AA tow truck is one way to make an entrance.

But the plagues are flashing warning lights, unmistakable signs and wonders that things are not right. God gives ample warning to Pharaoh. He doesn't have to, but very graciously he does.

Verse 15. 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. So the number of plagues underline, in a sense, God's patience in his dealings with us.

Ten opportunities to watch the Lord at work. Ten opportunities to witness his demonstration of power. Ten ways God impresses on us the urgency of the situation.

Think back to COVID, how it dominated the news for months on end. Well, each one of these plagues in Egypt would have been front page news in their own right.

[14 : 52] The hailstones are the worst storm since records began. But just imagine the cumulative effect. Enduring it round after round.

It starts off and it's bad enough in plague one. In chapter 7, verse 20. The Egyptian economy gets it in the jugular. The river turns to blood. The fish in the Nile died.

Chapter 7, verse 20. And the river stank so bad that the Egyptians couldn't even drink the water. It's death in the Nile run the tabloid headings.

And then there's the frogs. And my children like frogs. They think they're cute. Perhaps you're partial to frogs' legs and garlic butter. But how would you like it if you're grabbing toast for breakfast and there's Kermit the Frog entombed in your loaf of bread.

And that's an AI-generated image. No amphibians were harmed in the production of it. But that's how it's described in chapter 8, verse 3.

[15 : 59] The Nile will teem with frogs. They will come up into your bedroom and onto your bed, into your ovens, and kneading bowls. And the newsreels accompanied by grim footage of the aftermath in verse 14 of chapter 8.

The frog carcasses piled into heaps and the land reeked of them. Now that's just the first two plagues. That's just the beginning of it.

We don't have time to go through them all, but when we were discussing them as a staff team, it was plague four, the Lord of the Flies, that most freaked out my colleague Joanne. And she described the horror of going into a restaurant in Cambodia.

Cambodia, I think it was, and every surface being covered in flies. And then she ran out of it. But the intensity of the plagues, the intensity of the warnings increases.

And it's just a very graphic demonstration of the Lord's impending judgment. Now before we go on to consider Pharaoh's response, I want us to see that these plagues are not random, but they're organized into three cycles of three plagues linked together.

[17 : 18] So if we go back to the plague of Hailstones in chapter 9, 13, it starts off, and the Lord said to Moses, get up early in the morning.

Now if you were to go home this evening or this week and to read through these chapters, 7 to 11, you'd notice, maybe not in the first reading, maybe not even in the second reading, but after a few times, you'd notice, you'd see a repeating pattern.

The first plagues in each cycle start off the same way in the morning. So just flick back to the first plague again. I'm sort of flicking about all over the place.

But chapter 7, verse 15, go to Pharaoh in the morning. And then the first plague of the second cycle, chapter 8, verse 20, Joanne's plague.

The Lord said to Moses, get up early in the morning. Second plagues of each cycle begin with a different formula. Plagues 2, 4, 8, go to Pharaoh.

[18 : 21] Then each of the third plagues happen without warning. So the plagues are linked horizontally like that. They're also linked vertically. And it's the first three plagues, it's Aaron who starts it.

Aaron raises his staff, strikes the water of the Nile. Aaron stretches out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs get into his sandwiches, and Aaron strikes the dust of the earth with his staff, and the midges come.

The middle cycle, it's the Lord himself who starts it. And then in the last set, it's Moses who kicks things off. Now plague 6 is a bit of an anomaly.

It gets going when Moses picks up suit and throws it into the air. Suit from the kilns. And that's poetic justice, you might say, for all the kiln-baked bricks that the Israelite slaves have had to make.

The point is, the plagues are intricately structured. They fit together like a Rubik's Cube. And so what? So what if they're intricately structured?

[19 : 26] Well, it shows us that the Lord is completely, sovereignly in control. It's very deliberate. Now if we had time, which we don't, we could see how the plagues mirror in many ways the account of creation in Genesis, but in reverse.

The same language of swarming and teeming. Instead of teeming with life, it's teeming here with death. Creation begins by God creating order from chaos.

God says, let there be light, and there was light. Well, in the penultimate plague in Egypt, God switches off the sun. The plagues are an unraveling of creation, a descent into chaos.

It's maybe something for you to think about in your own time. The point is, the plagues are very deliberate, very carefully ordered, warning lights flashing on a severe mercy.

the question is, how to respond to these warnings? How do we respond? We're going to think about that through the lens of Pharaoh's response, his hard-heartedness in our next section.

[20 : 43] You can do it the easy way, or you can do it the hard way. That's what my dad told me and my brothers when we were little.

In the kindest possible way, you can do it the easy way, or you can do it the hard way. It was a warning. And what he meant was, we needed to pay attention, listen to him, obey him, do what we were told.

That's the easy way. But here's the thing. If we dug in our heels and were stubborn, it wasn't going to change the outcome. That wasn't in question.

But in choosing the hard way, we'd only be making our own lives more difficult for ourselves in the process. So we go back again to the plague that we read out, the plague of hailstones in chapter 9.

We're meant to see a contrast between those those who choose the easy way and those who choose the hard way. And they are warned.

[21 : 48] They're warned to take shelter from the worst hailstorm that's ever fallen on Egypt, ever. How will they respond? Verse 20 of chapter 9, those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the Lord hurried to bring their slaves and their livestock inside.

They chose the easy way. By the way, in chapter 12, verse 38, when it comes to the exodus itself, many Egyptians, we're told, chose to join Israel in leaving Egypt.

They escaped. But those who foolishly ignored the word of the Lord left their slaves and livestock in the field. And by choosing the hard way, they faced the full brunt of it.

And Pharaoh chooses the hard way. It looks a little bit like he comes close to repentance in verse 27. This time I've sinned, he said to them.

Sounds a little bit like a confession. But Moses sees right through it, sees that it's more self-pity than genuine remorse on his part.

[22 : 58] Verse 30, I know that you still do not fear the Lord. the question is why? Why does Pharaoh choose to dig his heels in?

Why does he choose to go at the hard way in light of what's staring him in the face? And the answer to that question gives us a little bit of insight into human nature, shows us the nature, shows the inner workings of the human heart, holds up a mirror to ourselves, helps us to understand why when we try to share the gospel with those around us, with our friends, with our colleagues, our neighbors, we're so often met with stubborn resistance.

And the answer for Pharaoh is he's got a heart problem, spiritual heart disease. As soon as the storm's over, as soon as there's respite from the consequences, it's right back to his old tricks for Pharaoh.

Verse 34, When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned again. He and his officials hardened their hearts.

So Pharaoh's heart was hard. Let's just pause there and think about what it means to have a hard heart. In the Bible, a hard heart means that you're spiritually unresponsive to God's word, spiritually unresponsive to the warnings in Scripture.

[24 : 32] Hardened heart is stubborn, unyielding, and defiantly resists God's gracious warnings. Pharaoh's defiance against God, his refusal to release the Israelites from slavery, is a prime example in Scripture of a hard heart.

Who is this Lord, that I, I, Pharaoh, should obey his commands, he'd said back in verse 2 of chapter 5. In Pharaoh's case, his hard heartedness stems from his pride, overestimating his own importance, and his rebellion, his outright refusal to heed God's many warnings.

In my own case, my hard heartedness stemmed from the fact that I didn't trust the Lord in my own life, didn't trust him to be Lord of my life.

I grew up in a Christian home. When I turned 18, left home, I walked away from church. For many years, I hardened my heart. And friends, it is perilous to do so.

by choosing to square up to God, Pharaoh chose the hard way. He's got a heart problem.

[25 : 58] And we see it right the way through the plague sequences, usually at the end of each plague. So end of plague one in chapter 7 verse 22, Pharaoh's magicians copied the water into blood and Pharaoh's heart became hard.

He's ignoring the warning lights that are coming on. End of plague two, chapter 8 verse 15, when Pharaoh saw there was relief, he hardened his heart just as the Lord had said.

End of plague three, his magicians realized that they cannot compete with this kind of power. They say to Pharaoh in chapter 8 verse 19, you know what, you'd better pay attention to this.

This is the finger of God. But Pharaoh's heart was hard. And actually it's like this all the way through and it's another pattern.

Alternating between his heart became hard in plagues one, three, five, and seven and Pharaoh hardened his heart in plagues two and four.

[27 : 10] And actually it's only when we get to the plague of boils in chapter 9 verse 12. And the magicians couldn't even stand before Moses because they covered themselves in festering boils that we're told that now the Lord hardens Pharaoh's heart.

And again after the plagues of locusts and darkness, the Lord hardens Pharaoh's heart. heart. So what's going on here? What do we make of this?

Doesn't this just make Pharaoh the king of Egypt a pawn in God's game of chess? Part of the answer is that it's not all God's doing.

Pharaoh's done more than his fair share of hardening his own heart. The Bible's clear. We are free agents. We are responsible for our own actions.

We are responsible. And at the same time God is ultimately in control. He is sovereign. And God exerts his sovereign control without ever doing violence to our human free will.

[28 : 30] So the Bible holds these two things, God's control and our free agency intention. It's a bit like concrete setting on a building site.

The longer you leave it to set, the less able you are to reshape it. It's like that with our hearts in the way that we respond to the warnings in Scripture.

Pharaoh digs his heels in, hardens his heart, and eventually that's God's judgment on him. Pharaoh hardens his own heart, so God hardens Pharaoh's heart in response.

The Bible warns us, today if you hear the word of God, do not harden your hearts. Today if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts.

Plagues are like massive wake-up calls, ten opportunities to witness the power and the inevitable victory of the Lord, ten opportunities to turn and repent.

[29 : 34] Massive warning lights coming on in a car screaming, do something about it before it's too late. And one way or another we're to respond to that.

So today when you hear his voice, don't do it the hard way. Do what the God-fearing Egyptians did and run for cover. Go and take shelter.

Where? Well, you're going to need to come back next week. And God willing, we're going to see the reality of God's judgment and his deliverance through Jesus Christ, through the blood of the Lamb.

Either he faces the storms of God's wrath on our behalf, or we do. So let's pray. Today is the day of salvation.

Lord God, we thank you that you are a gracious God. Thank you that you are a loving and patient God who has warned us through scripture of the coming judgment.

[30 : 49] And we thank you that in your mercy and in your patience that dreadful day has not yet come, but that there is opportunity opportunity for us to take shelter from your wrath, that there is opportunity for us to share the hope that we have with those you've placed around us.

We thank you for your grace. Amen. that know the