

Signs and wonders

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 May 2023

Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 00] Well, I'm sure you've all heard the phrase before, a plague of biblical proportions. It's an expression that headline writers will use when they want to describe some massive natural disaster.

So whenever the word plague is used, it always is used to describe something bad. And whenever the phrase of biblical proportions is put after the word plague, it is meant to describe something that is really bad.

And it's interesting how when our commentators are looking for words or looking for language to explain something terrible, something devastating, there's a sense in which they need to hijack biblical language, biblical terminology, in order to emphasize just how extreme, just how severe something is.

Let's think of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, a plague on both your houses. What does it mean? Essentially, it means, I hope both your houses, both your families are cursed.

So a plague is a bad thing. And that takes us to the plagues in Exodus, in chapters 7 to 11 of Exodus. At Christ Church Glasgow, over the past few weeks, we've been looking at Exodus.

[1 : 14] And so today we come to the plagues in these chapters. And we could look at each plague individually. And that would be 10 sermons. And I'm not confident of anyone's ability to cope with 10 sermons on 10 plagues.

So instead of looking at each one individually, what we're going to do is look at the plagues as a whole. Not because the individual plagues don't matter, simply because they do matter.

And so by looking at them together, we'll better understand their significance as a narrative within the Exodus story. In other words, we're not trying to miss the wood for the trees.

And so we're going to think this afternoon about the purpose and the pattern and the power of the plagues. Because the plagues reveal God's power. The plagues bring God's judgment.

And the plagues announce God's salvation. And so we need to grasp the severity of the plagues, how bad they really are, because of what they tell us about God. The plagues reveal God to us.

[2 : 16] So the plagues urge us, in a sense, by way of application of the whole message of these chapters, the plagues are urging us to take God seriously. Showing us why nobody should mess with God.

And so the three points this afternoon are the purpose of the plagues. They reveal God's power. Second, the pattern of the plagues. They bring God's judgment. And then third, the power of the plagues.

They announce God's salvation. So first of all, the purpose of the plagues. They reveal God's power. And the purpose is made clear at the first part of our reading in Exodus chapter 7.

And the purpose is made clear by God's words to Moses. Let me read that again. Chapter 7, verse 1 to 4. Then the Lord said to Moses, See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet.

You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you.

[3 : 29] Then I will lay my hand on Egypt, and with mighty acts of judgment, I will bring out my divisions, my people, the Israelites. Okay, so the plagues are part of the Israelites being set free from their slavery in Egypt.

They are God's signs and wonders. They are God's mighty acts of judgment. But this wasn't just God showing off his power by flexing his muscles.

There's a purpose to these plagues, because through them, God is saying that he is revealing himself. So verse 5 says, And the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it.

Now, you may remember Pharaoh's question. The last passage, last sermon we looked at in chapter 5, his question was, Who is the Lord? Chapter 5, verse 2.

And there's a sense in which the plagues answer that question, because the plagues tell Pharaoh, they tell Moses and Aaron and the Israelites and us who God is, what God is like.

[4 : 38] Because these signs and wonders, these mighty acts of judgment, reveal God to us. So God would prove that he is the Lord, not just by what he says, but by what he does.

And this is highlighted before the plagues start. But it's also repeated throughout. So just, if you've got your Bible, look at these verses. Chapter 7, verse 17, the purpose of the plagues.

This is what the Lord says, By this you will know that I am the Lord. In chapter 8, verse 10, Moses replied, It will be as you say, so that you may know there is no one like the Lord our God.

Chapter 8, verse 22, So that you will know that I, the Lord, am in this land. Then chapter 9, verse 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.

And then chapter 10, verse 2, that you may know that I am the Lord. So can you see how God's purpose in the plagues is to reveal himself?

[5 : 54] So Pharaoh, the Egyptians, the Israelites, even all the earth, and even for generations to come, we'd know that the God of the Exodus is the Lord.

He is the supreme power. He is the authority over everything and everyone. And these mighty acts of judgment display his awesome power for all the world to see.

And so it's when we see the overall purpose of the plagues that we're able to make some sense of the more difficult issues in the narrative, like the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

Because when we read this, we're kind of confused and perplexed that sometimes it is God who hardens Pharaoh's heart. Sometimes it is Pharaoh who hardens his heart.

And then sometimes we read that Pharaoh's heart was just hard, a kind of neutral description. And so it can be confusing because it keeps changing. And interestingly, all three descriptions come together in that passage that Fiona read for us at the end of chapter 9 and the beginning of chapter 10.

[7 : 01] So which is it when it comes to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart? Was it God? Or was it Pharaoh who hardened Pharaoh's heart? Well, the answer is both.

And it's interesting because at no point was Pharaoh forced into doing something against his will or against his desires. He deliberately and he willfully set his heart against the Lord.

So Pharaoh was culpable for his action. And yet, God clearly hardened Pharaoh's heart. In fact, throughout the plague narrative, the description is mostly of God hardening Pharaoh's heart.

So six times we read God hardens his heart. Twice we read that Pharaoh hardened his heart. And five times we read this kind of neutral that Pharaoh's heart was hard.

So it's saying that God is the ultimate cause and yet Pharaoh was also guilty because of his defiance of God. And so here's the issue.

[8 : 05] Well, if the purpose of the plagues was simply to set the Israelites free from Egypt, then surely God could have done it in a more straightforward and simple way.

Why not just change Pharaoh's heart? Instead of hardening it, why not soften it so that he lets the Israelites go immediately? And yet, that doesn't happen, does it?

Why? Well, because the purpose of the plagues and the goal of the Exodus is not just to set the Israelites free, God's purpose is to show that he is the Lord, which clearly involved hardening Pharaoh's heart so that God could give these multiple signs and wonders.

And that's why before the plagues even began, God said that he would harden Pharaoh's heart. So last time we looked at chapter 4, verse 21 to 23, where we read, the Lord said to Moses, when you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do, but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.

Then say to Pharaoh, this is what the Lord says, Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you let my son go so that he may worship me, but you refuse to let him go so I will kill your firstborn son.

[9 : 36] So here, God indicates that it's going to take the death of the firstborn son before the Israelites are set free from their slavery in Egypt.

So God knew before he started that plagues one all the way through to nine wouldn't be effective. Of course, as the Lord, he could have performed the exodus by wiping the Egyptians out in an instant, but he doesn't do it that way.

He chose not to. And in fact, he even said this to Pharaoh, and we had this in our reading, chapter 9, verse 15 and 16, where it says, for by now, this Lord speaking through Moses, 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. And so God persisted with Pharaoh, allowing him to resist so that he could have more opportunities to show his power.

God wanted to show that there was no one like him in all the earth, so that his name would be proclaimed in all the earth. And so God did it this way for his greater purposes, which stretch way beyond the Exodus.

[11 : 09] And so look, verse 10, chapter 10, verse 1 and 2. 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 them, that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, that you may know that I am the Lord.

And so future generations were to hear of these signs and wonders, why? So that they would know the Lord. And that's why the Lord here reiterates why he hardened Pharaoh's heart.

At the end of the plagues in chapter 11 and verse 9, the Lord said to Moses, Pharaoh will refuse to listen to you so that my wonders may be multiplied in Egypt.

And so Pharaoh's refusal to completely listen to God, let God's people go, his refusal to comply basically is God fulfilling his plans.

So through all of these plagues, God was multiplying his signs and his wonders, showing his awesome power as the Lord. Now there's a friend of mine who is an up-and-coming artist, he's called Craig Jefferson, and he exhibits all around the UK and I think soon all around the world.

[12 : 40] And I could say to you that he is a brilliant artist and you'd believe me because I'm a truthful person so you'd take my word for it. But I could better prove it to you if I took you round our house and I showed you his paintings, they're up in the lounge, they're in my study, they're around the hallway, there's even a big stack of them in the cupboard because we haven't found any space to put them up yet.

And you could look at them and see that he is a good artist and appreciate his work that way. But far better if I take you to sit beside him and you watch him paint a picture with his paints and his brushes and his canvas.

Then you'd have a far greater appreciation of his work because you could see him doing it. And see why he's a great artist. Well, there's a sense in which God does this with the plagues.

He's already said who he is, he's already declared what he is like, but here in the plagues it's as if he paints a fuller, a brighter, a bigger picture through his signs and wonders.

He's revealing that he is the Lord by showing his handiwork. Because whether then, for Pharaoh, for the Egyptians and the Israelites, or for now, for you and for me, the plagues show us the Lord so that we know who he is and so that we see why it is futile and it is foolish to try and fight against him.

[14 : 13] And so that's the first point, the plagues reveal God's power. That's the purpose. The second point, the pattern of the plagues, they bring God's judgment. They reveal the Lord and his power because they're his mighty acts of judgment.

And yet there's a pattern to them, not just structurally, but first of all, the pattern structurally is that they come in three cycles of three, ten plagues, three cycles of three, and they build in severity, until we get to the last and final tenth plague, which is the plague of the firstborn.

And that stands apart from the rest. And so it's obvious when we see the plagues that they're not haphazard or random or chance. They don't happen in some kind of strange way.

They're deliberate signs and wonders with a specific purpose. And so in the first plague of each cycle, three cycles of three, Moses goes to Pharaoh in the morning.

Every third plague, Moses goes to Pharaoh in the morning. But then the following two plagues, there's no time mentioned in them. And in the first two plagues in each cycle, they're preceded by a warning from God.

[15 : 30] And then the third plague in that cycle, there's no warning. God just acts and brings his judgment. And so what are the plagues? Well, first one, the first plague is blood.

The water of the river Nile turns to blood. And this didn't make any difference at all to Pharaoh. He got his Egyptian magicians to do the same. And then his heart was hardened and he would not listen.

Second plague is the frogs. Egypt's invaded by frogs. They're everywhere. Whole land is covered. And again, the magicians copied. Pharaoh wanted Moses and Aaron to pray to God to take them away, promising he'd let the people go.

And the frogs, they all die. They were croaked. But when relief came, Pharaoh's heart was hardened again. Thirdly, the gnats.

This is probably like lice. The dust turns into these tiny flies. People and animals would have been itching and scratching. And this time, interestingly, the magicians can't replicate.

[16 : 34] And it's the magicians who say to Pharaoh, chapter 8, verse 19, this is the finger of God. And yet, Pharaoh's heart was hard and he still wouldn't listen.

And so it was the first three plagues and they made life uncomfortable, but then God in a sense takes it up a notch in the next three plagues, which are far worse.

So the fourth plague is flies. Swarms of flies cover the land. Egypt was plagued by them. And interestingly, God's people were safe. Pharaoh said he'd let the people go, but when the flies disappeared, he hardened his heart again.

Then we get to the fifth plague, the livestock. All the livestock of the Egyptians died. It's like foot and mouth disease on a massive scale, a national scale.

But again, Pharaoh was stubborn and his heart was hardened. Then the sixth plague is the boils. Festering boils break out on all the Egyptians and on all their animals.

[17 : 35] And still, it makes no difference to Pharaoh. And this time, it's the Lord, the first time who hardened Pharaoh's heart. And then the seventh plague is the hail.

And this is the third cycle of plagues. And in this third cycle, the Lord turns up the heat again. And it's the worst hailstorm that ever fell on Egypt, we're told.

Just imagine millions of hailstones like cricket balls falling from the sky. And then with them thunder and lightning, an awesome experience.

And Pharaoh was warned about it. And he did nothing. But what is interesting is some of the Egyptians did do something. Chapter 9, verse 20.

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.

[18 : 34] And they died. And then there's the eighth plague, the locusts. And God sends the plague of locusts. They devour everything. The whole land is ravaged and empty.

But when the locusts leave, the people don't because Pharaoh has his heart hardened by the Lord. And then there's the ninth plague, which is darkness, supernatural darkness descending over Egypt.

And for three days it was impossible to see or do anything. And Pharaoh said the people could go. But again, the Lord hardened his heart and he wouldn't let them go.

And then the tenth and final plague is threatened there in chapter 11. And it is the plague of the firstborn, death, essentially. Death of the firstborn son.

And so after all of these mighty acts of judgment, it was only after the death of the firstborn son that the Israelites were set free.

[19 : 35] And so can you see the pattern? It's a pattern of increasing intensity in these plagues as the Lord works to save his people through his judgment on their oppressors, the Egyptians.

And this comes out as the Israelites are protected when the plagues are unleashed. And so the Lord makes a distinction between his people and the Egyptians.

And this happens five times. So in the fourth plague of the flies, we read chapter 8 verse 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. So God's people protected. And then the fifth plague, the livestock, chapter 9 verse 4, we read, 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.

And then the seventh plague of the hail, we read, chapter 9 verse 25 and 26. Throughout Egypt, hail struck everything in the fields, both people and animals.

[20 : 54] It beat down everything growing in the fields and stripped every tree. The only place it did not hail was in the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were. And then in the ninth plague, the darkness, we read, chapter 10 verse 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.

And then in the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn, we read, chapter 11 verse 7. Then you will know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.

Isn't that interesting? God's power, he is able to, have his judgment fall on the Egyptians and their animals, and yet save his people who are all in Egypt.

So God's mighty acts of judgment only fall on the Egyptians. The Lord strikes the Egyptians hard, whereas the Israelites, his people are safe.

[22 : 00] How can he do this? Well, it's because the Lord is the creator. He rules over his creation, and he can make his creation do, anything he wants.

And that's why his mighty acts of judgment, you'll notice, are all connected to the natural world. In a sense, they are acts of decreation, of, if you like, the dismantling of Egypt.

And so God's mighty power in the decreation of Egypt, in a sense, inversely parallels his mighty power displayed in the creation of the world.

So the plagues, decreation, creation, Genesis 1 and 2, God makes, God forms, God shapes. And so the plagues, in a sense, are the creation out of control, nature breaking down.

One commentator calls them creation reversals. And so see what happens. First plague, the blood, life-giving water is turned into blood and becomes a source of death because the fish die and the people can't drink it.

[23 : 12] And then the insects destroy the land. And then the weather destroys the animals. And then the darkness takes away the light. And so if you think back to the original creation in Genesis, the creation account, humanity is the climax of creation.

whereas the climax of the plagues is the death of humans. And it echoes that pre-creation chaos that we read of in Genesis chapter 1 verse 2 where the earth was formless and empty and darkness was over the surface of the deep.

It's all indicating to us the severity of God's judgment. The Lord will not tolerate any rebellion against him. And so to be under God's judgment means discord, it means disintegration, and ultimately it is destructive and it ends in death.

And yet while these individual plagues are acts of God's decreation, displaying his judgment, the end of each plague is an act of God's recreation as he restores the order again from the chaos.

God's judgment is not but you may be asking, well, aren't God's judgments just a bit too severe here? And this is just why people have so many problems with Christianity.

[24 : 41] They don't like a God like this. They can't stomach a God who gets angry and who judges people, who destroys and brings death.

And so they look at the plagues and they say, well, who'd want to worship a God like that? Who'd want to believe the Christian God and follow him? And yet, what God does to Pharaoh and Egypt is entirely just.

Remember, Pharaoh's not some kind of nice guy that we read of in the Bible. He's a cruel tyrant, the equivalent of Vladimir Putin in his own day.

He oppressed an entire people. He kept them as slaves. He refused to let them go. And at one point, he even acknowledged his sin to Moses in chapter 9, and he confessed that he and his people were in the wrong.

And so Pharaoh deserved God's judgment. And it's not as if God judged him instantly either. Yes, the plagues did end with death, but that's not how they started, was it?

[25 : 50] They began with the Nile being turned into blood. And before that, was a staff being turned into a snake. So God could have wiped out Pharaoh and Egypt in an instant, like he says, but he doesn't go straight for the knockout.

He gave Pharaoh plenty of opportunities to let the Israelites go. And so God's judgment on Pharaoh and the Egyptians wasn't vindictive.

God's judgment never is. It was justice. The punishment fitted the crime. And so what the plagues do is they give us a terrifying warning of God's judgment, that God must judge and punish all sin and wrongdoing if he is to be just.

And so when we see the pattern of the plagues, then they should warn us, warn us against hardening our hearts against God. There's an old saying that says the same sun that melts wax hardens clay.

And so the plagues were warnings for Pharaoh, for the Egyptians, the Israelites, even us, to wake us up to the reality of God's judgment if we continue to defy him.

[27 : 11] And so we must never think that it is acceptable and possible to oppose God. The plagues tell us that it isn't. And Pharaoh discovered that the hard way.

And so first there's the purpose of the plagues, they reveal God's power. Second, the pattern of the plagues, they bring God's judgment. And then thirdly, there's the power of the plagues, they announce God's salvation.

Every one of the plagues revealed God's power and brought God's judgment. So how then did they announce God's salvation? Well, it was through the judgment of the plagues that God saved the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt.

And so the power of the plagues is that God brings his salvation through judgment. So the plagues aren't just about judgment. If that's all we see, then we haven't looked closely enough.

Because Exodus shows us the God who saves. How does he save? Well, his salvation comes through judgment. Salvation through judgment, if you look, is a theme that flows all the way through the scriptures.

[28 : 24] And it's because God brings his salvation through judgment that there's hope for us. Because the ultimate display of God's salvation through judgment is seen at the cross where Jesus died.

God's judgment on sin brought salvation for God's people. And that's why our escape from judgment, our exodus, can only come through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And so the plagues announced God's salvation. Remember the plague? The plagues ended with darkness as the land was covered for three days before the death of the firstborn.

Well, that darkness. And then there's another darkness that came hundreds of years later. It came before Jesus, who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation died.

And we read of this in all the Gospels. And so Matthew records it this way in Matthew chapter 27. From noon until three in the afternoon, darkness came over all the land.

[29 : 37] About three in the afternoon, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, Eli, Eli, Lema sabachthani, which means, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And then when Jesus died, Matthew says, the earth shook and the rocks split. De-creation again. And so what's happening? Well, on the cross, the darkness was a sign of God's judgment.

judgment, just as the darkness in Egypt was a sign of God's judgment. And yet what is fascinating is it wasn't God's enemies who faced his judgment on the cross.

It was his son, Jesus Christ, who faced it. Not because he had done anything wrong, but because we have. We have defied God and sinned against him.

And so we deserve God's judgment to fall on us, on you and me. But as Jesus hung on the cross, all the plagues of God's judgment fell on Jesus.

[30 : 42] And so Jesus experienced the ultimate agony of God forsakenness, so we would never have to. And so Jesus saves us from a fate far worse than the ten plagues of Egypt by saving us from the God forsakenness of eternal suffering in hell.

Jesus experienced the full force of God's judgment in our place. And so can you see how his salvation comes through judgment?

Jesus came, didn't he? Not to bring God's judgment, but to bear God's judgment. And so our salvation is previewed in the plagues, but it is accomplished on the cross.

And so we don't just look backwards to the cross at Calvary or before that to the plagues in Egypt. Salvation will come as we look forward to the end of time when Jesus returns to bring judgment.

And all we have trusted in him as Savior will receive his salvation in all its fullness. us. As we catch a glimpse of this gospel of grace, we catch a glimpse of God's salvation plan because he is the God who saves a way back in the plagues in Exodus, long before Jesus arrived on the scene.

[32 : 10] And so when we have experienced this salvation from God, salvation in Jesus Christ, what do we do? where we go and we proclaim his great name in all the earth.

seguinte to