

Clash of the God-Kings

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Preacher: Wayne Schuller

[0 : 00] Lord God bless us as we look at a number of chapters of Exodus together as we reflect on what you were doing in the plagues of the Exodus and make us open with soft hearts for the revelation of who you are through those events we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well friends, I'm going to give a book review a bit later in the sermon but I'll just tell you in advance what the book is. It's by this American Baptist preacher called John Piper and this book is called God is the Gospel.

The subtitle is Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself. And I'll tell you as we get into the plagues why I think this book is fantastic and a much needed message today.

This sermon is really not on just one chapter. I want us to reflect on the plagues that happened in the book of Exodus in Egypt. I want us to think about what God is teaching then and what God is teaching us today through those events.

Last week God made it very clear to Moses in chapter 3. God said, So God knows what he has to do.

[1 : 28] And so God says, So God has said what he intends to do in the plagues.

It will be the compelling of Pharaoh for the deliverance of God's people who are oppressed in Egypt. And God could have actually used any number of means instead of plagues.

God could have done something to depose Pharaoh from office and replace him with a better kind of Pharaoh who liked Israel. God could have done something in Pharaoh's heart, changed his mind. God could have used any kind of internal or external means to sort of free Israel from Egypt. But he decided in his divine wisdom to use plagues, to strike out his hand against Pharaoh in Egypt.

And it's funny because these plagues, they're very carefully planned out by God. They increase in intensity each time. And each time Pharaoh looks like he's repented or responds, and then he gives up very quickly.

[2 : 41] And then each time it looks like we're getting closer and closer, but not quite there. Until they culminate, of course, the plagues will culminate, 10 of them, and then they'll culminate in the death of the firstborn son in Egypt.

And we'll look at that next week, so we won't get that far. So I've got five points I want to share with you. What do we learn about God by the plagues? The first thing the plagues teach us is that our God is the God of creation.

Our God is the God of creation. There's a lot of creation themes in the book of Exodus, because in chapter 1, we're told that Israel were fruitful and prolific.

They multiplied and grew exceedingly strong. Now, where have you heard words like that in the Bible already? Words like, the land was filled with them. Does that remind you of anything in the Bible?

It should remind you of Genesis chapter 1, when the God of heaven and earth created the earth, he said, he blessed them, be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it.

[3 : 46] God has made a promise to these people in Abraham to fulfill his creation intent, that they will multiply and fill the earth. That is God's creation power at work in Israel.

And yet, Pharaoh says to the God of creation, no, tries to stop God, tries to stop God by oppressing Israel, so they won't multiply as quickly.

And that doesn't work. And so then he commands the death of the firstborn sons of Israel. That is Pharaoh sitting himself up against God and saying, I will fight your purposes, God.

I will seek to stop what you are doing as the God of creation. And what happens when you try and fight God? Well, if you try and fight the creator God, God turns against you and creation turns against you.

So we have plagues. The God of heaven and earth, the God of the universe, of galaxies, he is able to unleash creation as a weapon against rebels, against his enemies.

[5 : 00] And so God fights in the plagues with the weapons of blood, frogs, gnats, flies, disease, boils, hail, thunder, locusts, darkness.

God employs these weapons against his enemies. The plagues themselves are kind of like turning creation on its head.

They're like undoing creation. They are chaos. And yet, when God says enough, he creates order out of chaos again.

And so God undoes creation and then he orders it again in every plague. And each plague is also sort of a reversal of what creation should be.

Creation should be for life. Water should bring life. But when water is turned to blood, it brings death. Animals that should live in order and harmony damage everything.

[6 : 05] Beasts that should nourish as food harm with disease. And light turns to darkness. So in these punishments, God turns creation on its head.

In each plague, we see, friends, the power of God. And in each plague, we see, you cannot stop God. You cannot fight God.

You see, if God is using creation against you, you can't defend yourself. If you are working against God and he unleashes these weapons on you, there is no defense.

So what do the plagues teach us? They teach us God is a God of creation. And it goes without saying, but always worth saying, we Christians, we love creation. Because we worship the God of creation.

I think the environmentalists doesn't go far enough. They say, stop wrecking the earth. We say, yes, stop wrecking the earth. And worship the God who made the earth. We are people of creation.

[7 : 10] Christianity is not about us escaping creation. It's about the transformation of our creation. That's one thing the plagues teach. That's the God is the God of creation. Secondly, the plagues teach us, friends, that salvation or rescue is always more than deliverance.

It's always a means to something else. It's always a means to worshiping God. You see, the Exodus is sort of a great kind of practice run of Jesus' rescue of us.

It's like the great shadow of the rescue that Jesus gave. And it's very easy, I think, to emphasize in salvation, what we've been saved from and forget what we've been saved for.

So for example, in Egypt, we could say, Israel, they were slaves. They were burdened. They were oppressed. It was hardship. It was hardship. Wasn't God great to set them free?

But friends, that's only half the story. We have to ask, what were they set free for? And God tells them, he says, the Lord, the God of the Hebrews sent me to you, Pharaoh, to say, let my people go so that they may worship me in the wilderness.

[8 : 28] And many times Moses told us, let my people go, not just so they can be free, but so they can worship and have a relationship with God, so they can know the living God.

Friends, it would be very easy for us to make this mistake today with your faith. You could emphasize in your faith as you share it, as Jono was sharing that his wife was sharing her faith in the workplace, you could easily just say things like, Christianity gives me hope, or Christianity gives me meaning, or I had none, or it helps rescue you from the effects of sin, or the short-term harmful effects of selfish living.

You know, Christianity will transform your marriage, and all those things are true, but that's actually missing the point. It's not just what we are delivered from, it's what we are delivered for.

We are saved to worship. We are saved to live a whole life of worship. To worship God means to serve him, to live for him, to enjoy him, day and night, every day of the week.

This is actually why I commend this book to you. John Piper says controversially in this book that the good news of the gospel is not forgiveness of sins.

[9 : 47] He says, forgiveness of sins is just a means to an end. It's just, you need your sins forgiven, so that you can be friends with God, and you can know and love God.

You can be intimate with God and enjoy him. And so it's a great, this is a great book. I commend it to you for that very controversial point. Friends, any view of salvation that is merely about lifting your burdens, but not centered on knowing and serving God, is not really full Christianity.

So the plagues teach us that rescue is for worship. Point three, if salvation is about knowing God, there's also something to be said about judgment.

In Exodus, in the plagues, we learn that judgment is about making God known and glorifying God. Many times in Exodus, in these plague chapters, it says, the hand of the Lord will strike, or it's the finger of God.

You know, God carefully sends Moses to tell them what plague is coming and when, so they will know it comes from God. God even tells them what time the plague will come, just so they know it's God's hand.

[11:09] What does this tell us about God? Well, friends, it tells us a very important thing about God, and that is, our God is a punishing God. He's a God who punishes sin.

You see, friends, just think about it. God could have teleported Israel out of Egypt and landed them at Sinai to worship, and not punished Egypt at all.

He could have raptured them. But again and again, God says, you will know me through the plagues. You will know that I am the Lord when I stretch out my hand.

Here's what God tells Pharaoh. Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, let my people go. This is from chapter 9 before the hail. Let my people go so they may worship me.

For this time, God says, I will send my plagues upon you yourself, Pharaoh, and upon your officials, and upon your people, so that you may know there is no one like me in all the earth.

[12:09] Why does God send a plague? So that they will know there was no God like him in all the earth. God goes on, for by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence.

I could have just destroyed you like that, says God, with the punishment you deserve. But I haven't. You would have been cut off from the earth. But this is why I have let you live, to show you my power, and to make my name resound in all the earth.

In the plagues, God's power and glory is shown. Even though they are horror of horrors, his great judgment power is shown. God could have annihilated Pharaoh from day one.

But the preservation of Pharaoh's life under judgment glorifies God's name. I think, as an aside, I don't say this lightly, but I think this is why Jesus spoke of hell as an eternal punishment.

Because God's power and greatness will be known forever as he punishes those who are eternally unrepentant. God's greatness is shown.

[13:27] God does not euthanize his enemies. He displays his power. Friends, if you're here today and you are not a Christian, the God of judgment who punishes offers you a way out through his son, through the death of his son.

You do not have to be punished. The punishment can be placed on Christ if you will trust in him and become a Christian. One day, we will all make God the judge.

Some of us will bring Christ with us. Make sure you do. So it teaches us about the judgment of God, the plagues. Fourthly, the plagues teach us a lesson, I think, about the dangers of hardness of heart toward God.

And especially, this is seen in this great example of the king of Egypt, of Pharaoh. And there's different phrases used to describe Pharaoh's heart. Sometimes, it's just sort of passive.

Pharaoh's heart remained hardened. Other times, Pharaoh is described as hardening his own heart. You know, so for example, after the frogs, when Pharaoh saw there was a respite, frogs are gone, he hardened his heart.

[14:46] That is, Pharaoh hardened his own heart and he would not listen to Moses. But interestingly, whenever Pharaoh hardens his own heart, it always adds, just as the Lord had said.

And more often than that, the text actually says very often, God hardened Pharaoh's heart. You know, in chapter 7 he said to Moses, Moses, speak everything I command you.

Your brother Aaron will tell Pharaoh to let my people go, but I will harden Pharaoh's heart and I will multiply my signs and wonders in the lands of Egypt. It's part of God's punishment to Pharaoh that he gives him over and hardens him.

It's also the opportunity for God to display his glory in judgment. And in some texts, it's fascinating in chapter 7, you have both themes together of Pharaoh hardening and God hardening in the same verse.

So in chapter 7 verse 22, Pharaoh's heart remained hardened and he would not listen to them as the Lord had said. So God has said and it's remained hardened as God said.

[15:56] And Pharaoh turned and goes to his house and he did not take this even to heart. that even as God hardens, Pharaoh himself is culpable in turning against God.

And the unusual thing is that as this is happening to Pharaoh, he kind of has these spurts of repentance, of apparent repentance, spurts of apparent conversion.

Plagues happen and he says, this is the finger of God and pray for me for God to forgive my sins and he says, I've sinned against the Lord, your God.

Pray for me and I'll let you go. If I had a friend who said that, I'd think they were becoming a Christian. Except every time as soon as respite comes, as soon as order comes out of the chaos of the plague, Pharaoh turns back.

friends, beware of hardness of heart. If you feel the call of God, if you see the beauty of Christ in the gospel, but attempted to defer following him, tempted to say, you know, I'll do the Christian thing when I'm about to die or later in life.

[17:18] I just want to play a bit now with the world. that's a dangerous game because the opportunity God may be giving you today, he may withdraw and take away tomorrow.

So beware hardness of heart and you may not know if your heart is being hardened. Pharaoh would feel very justified. He would rationalize doing what he's doing against God.

He would think, I'm justified in what I'm doing. His self-logic would be compelling and yet he's a fool. He's hardened against God and acts like a fool.

The book of Hebrews says, watch out that none of you are hardened by sin's deceitfulness, Hebrews chapter 3. But he says, encourage one another daily as long as it is called today.

One of God's means for the protection against hardness of heart is Christians encouraging each other, warning each other, having fellowship. It's why it's so important to stay after church and encourage each other and get to know people and share your burdens and your temptations.

[18:30] Why it's so good to be in a small group and share meals with other Christians. Christian fellowship, exhortation and warning is one of God's instruments to protect us from the deceitfulness of sin.

So check your heart today. And finally, friends, the fifth point, and I'm glad to say it's my most positive about the plagues. Even under judgment, even in Egypt, people find salvation.

People find God in judgment. Despite the horror of the plagues, despite the ferocity of judgment, there are some people in Egypt who heed the word of the Lord.

And I think every time Moses goes to Pharaoh, it's something of an evangelistic sermon, a warning sermon, a flee from the wrath to come kind of sermon.

So for example, in chapter 9, just before the hail plague, which is one of the bad ones, although they're all bad, tomorrow at this time, I will cause the heaviest hail to fall that has ever fallen on Egypt from the day it was founded until now.

[19:44] And here comes the evangelistic plea. Send, therefore, and have your livestock and everything that you have in the open field brought to a secure place.

Every human or animal that is in the open field and is not brought under shelter will die when the hail comes down upon them. That's God addressing Egypt, offering them a way out of the judgment.

And what happens is, it goes on chapter 9 verse 20, those officials of Pharaoh, there's two groups, those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the Lord hurried their slaves and livestock off to a secure place.

Group B, those who did not regard the word of the Lord left their slaves and livestock in the open field. So even as Moses preaches and God's judgment is revealed in a plague, there are two groups in Egypt, some who are heeding the word of the Lord and some who are not regarding the word of the Lord.

And later as they do leave Egypt, as Israel escapes, we find that some Egyptians join them and are rescued and join the people of God.

[20:57] Chapter 12, verse 28, the Israelites journeyed from Ramesses to Sukkoth, they're leaving and Moses counts them, he says about 600,000 men on foot beside children.

So that's the Israelites. And then it says, a mixed crowd also went up with them and livestock in great numbers, both flock and herd.

So even in the Exodus, some Egyptians heed the warning and are saved. Even in times of judgment, many escape and find salvation.

Friends, you may have friends whose hearts seem hard to God. Moses had no idea that he would be drawing out from Egypt people to join the people of God.

We need to pray that God will open people's hearts, that if God can harden, he can also soften and open. We need to share with our friends the warning of the gospel and pray that they will open up and join God's people.

[22 : 02] So friends, five lessons we learned from the plagues. One, God is the God of creation. He wields creation as a weapon. And to turn against God is to have creation turned against you.

You know, the heavens declare the glory of God, but, you know, the horrors of judgment, the horrors of creation turned in disaster, they declare the horrors of the judgments of God.

He's the God of creation. Secondly, salvation is more than just freeing us. Salvation is freeing you for worship, to love God, to know God, to enjoy God.

Thirdly, judgment is about making God known to the world. It's about showing his power. And judgment glorifies God. We ought not to be embarrassed about judgment.

Fourthly, beware hardness of heart against God, lest you are deceived by sin's deceitfulness, as Pharaoh was. And fifthly, even under judgment, many escape and find salvation.

[23 : 08] Even under judgment, many escape. God's mercy is always mingled in with his judgment. And there's always a chance in this life to receive God's mercy.

Well, friends, what happens in Exodus with the plagues? It's really, the theme continues throughout the Bible into the New Testament. We can find similar themes on Jesus' lips when people came to him and asked him about natural disaster.

And he said in Luke 13, you know, do you think that those whom the tower of Siloam fell on, were they worth sinners? Well, no, it wasn't a kind of spiteful, specific judgment on those people.

It was a general warning of judgment to come. So Jesus says, unless you repent, you will perish as they did. So natural disaster when creation is turned on its head in a way it shouldn't be by God, it is a warning of eternal judgment.

The Apostle Paul wrote of the book of Exodus, its function for us as Christians. He said, in 1 Corinthians 10, these things happened as examples that were written down as warnings for us, warnings on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.

[24 : 22] So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall, that the plagues are a warning to us. And finally, friends, you go to the book of Revelation, you see the final judgments of God, which I believe are being played out in our world as we speak, they are described as plagues.

Revelation chapter 16, the fourth angel poured his bowl on the sun and it was allowed to scorch people and fire, they were scorched by the fierce heat but they cursed the name of God who had authority over these plagues and they did not repent and give him the glory.

The language is apocalyptic, we're in the last days now, waiting for Christ's return. I can't tell you how exactly that's being played out but in times of disaster we need to turn from our sin and come back to God and give him the glory and not curse him as many do.

In fact, friends, the Bible itself finishes on the theme of warning and of plagues. Revelation chapter 22, the last book of the Bible.

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book, if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book.

[25 : 45] So friends, hear God's warning. Humble yourself before the living God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. You need not perish, repent.

Repent and give God the glory. Trust and follow Jesus Christ. Seek his redemption and worship him today with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

It is what you are made to do. It is what you are redeemed to do. Let's pray for ourselves now. Lord God, we thank you for revealing yourself to us in your judgments.

judgments. We confess that we find this hard and it's both scary but also we don't like to talk about it.

Father, help us to own the fact that you are a God who judges in power and might when you stretch out your hand. Dear God, help us to tremble before your name and give you the glory.

[26 : 46] Forgive us our sins in Jesus' name. Help each one of us not to judge our neighbor but just to examine our own heart to see where do we stand before you and to flee into your forgiving arms in Jesus Christ.

Amen.