

God verses Evil - Part 1

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] I'm sure many of you watch movies, read novels, and so you'll be familiar with the concept of the epic battle between good and evil.

So, for example, in Star Wars, the struggle is between the rebel resistance, the good people, in case you're wondering, and the evil empire. I can't wait for episode 9 to be coming out at the end of the year, where the evil morphs into the First Order.

Sometimes this epic struggle is personified in the battle between two individuals. So, Harry Potter versus Voldemort, or Batman versus the Joker.

Hollywood has literally made billions of dollars out of this genre. But as we can see from tonight's passage, J.K. Rowling, George Lucas, and others really owe their success to the Bible.

Because they've borrowed this whole idea, haven't they, from Exodus, where we see the first epic battle between good and evil. Over the last few weeks, we've seen the makings of this battle.

[1 : 09] The temperature in Egypt has been slowly rising. God and Pharaoh have been shadow boxing, as it were, a few jabs here and there. But this week, the conflict is finally going to boil over.

The battle itself is actually played out over many chapters, from here in Chapter 7, right up to Chapter 14. And so, the first thing I want to do today is to take a survey over this entire narrative.

Then we can see where the plagues sit within it. So, take a look at your outline, and you see that I've laid it out in the first point. What we've just read is the prelude.

In verse 28 of Chapter 6, the story resumes having been interrupted by the genealogy. Here again, we hear the Lord say to Moses, I am the Lord.

Tell Pharaoh, king of Egypt, everything I tell you. But Moses said to the Lord, Since I speak with faltering lips, why would Pharaoh listen to me? Again, God simply impresses upon Moses what he must do.

[2 : 20] 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 is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country.

If you were here two weeks ago, Daniel said that God had set up Moses and Aaron to mimic his own relationship with Moses.

Aaron is Moses' prophet, in the same way that Moses is God's prophet. But here, too, in the prelude, what we see is God setting up the terms of engagement in this epic battle.

Moses is going to be God's proxy. It says that he is to be like God to Pharaoh. And although it's implicit, Pharaoh will be the proxy for evil.

So it's going to be a contest between good God and evil. Evil being anything that opposes God's will, that seeks to bring chaos to his creation. But as we will see, whatever happens to Pharaoh is indicative of what happens to evil.

[3 : 26] And the actions of Moses are the actions of God himself. Likewise, as we go one layer down, Aaron's role is opposed by Pharaoh's sorceress.

And in particular, what he achieves with his staff is mimicked by those of the Egyptian magicians. So here, in verse 8 to 13, we witness a little proxy battle going on.

It's a precursor, if you like, a mini battle that indicates how the big battle will eventuate. And so when God predicts that Pharaoh will ask for a sign, he then tells Aaron to take his staff and throw it down.

It will become a snake, or more precisely, the Hebrew word is actually meaning a great sea creature from the sea. The same word that is used in Genesis chapter 1 and verse 21.

In other words, this is like a primordial creature is harking back to the very start of creation. Now, Pharaoh's magicians do the same.

[4 : 36] Their staff becomes snakes also. But Aaron's snake, you see, swallows up their snakes. And what this is meant to show is that God's power trumps their power.

The magicians may mimic God's sign, but it's only in an inferior and copycat way. It's very similar to how evil is.

Evil is a distortion of good. It sucks what is good and turns it into evil. But then beginning in verse 14 of chapter 7, God now displays his signs and wonders on a grand scale.

And the intent really is that all of Egypt and all of Israel then see what God is able to do. So if you look in the outline, there are 10 plagues or signs.

But they are arranged in three cycles of three. So blood, frogs, and gnats are the first three. Flies, livestock, and boils, the second three.

[5 : 42] And hail, locusts, and darkness, the third. And then the tenth, the death of the firstborn across the land, is the climax. That's the climactic sign, the one which then compels Pharaoh to let Israel go.

And this last sign is drawn out over a couple of chapters. What God does is first announce what He'll do. Then He does exactly as He says in the Passover, after which the Israelites are finally allowed to go.

That's the Exodus. Then we have chapter 13, which gives us the significance of the firstborn. Before, surprise, surprise, Pharaoh changes his mind one more time and takes chase, but is then finally defeated at the Red Sea.

So that's essentially the structure of the remainder of our series, really, but the structure of this narrative. But for the next two weeks, what we're going to do is zoom in on the plagues themselves. And the first thing we notice is that each plague follows a common pattern. In each plague, God always speaks before He acts. So you see in verse 14, for example, that each plague begins with the phrase, Then the Lord said to Moses.

[7 : 01] It was the same with the prelude. God not only speaks, but then He describes what He will do through Moses and Aaron. And then Moses and Aaron do as they are told, often by Aaron stretching out his staff or Moses doing the same with his hand or his staff.

And when He does that, God acts in response, doing what He promised. And then at the end of each plague, except for the very last one, the tenth plague, there's always a statement about Pharaoh's hardened heart.

which means He wouldn't let the people go. And often with that, we're also reminded that it's exactly as the Lord has predicted. There are differences with each plague, of course.

Some are stylistic. We don't get the writer just saying the same thing over and over again.

Otherwise, it gets monotonous. So he makes variety and variations in what he says.

But then there are also differences in detail. Not every plague is the same. With some of them, Moses speaks for longer. At other times, Pharaoh responds differently. But the general pattern is the same.

[8 : 12] One of God revealing what will happen, then the very thing happening, and then at the end, a comment about Pharaoh's heart, just as it was in the prelude.

But across the plagues, there's also another pattern at work. And so if you look at the little handout, I'm sorry about the quality of the size of the print and the quality of the photocopying, but hopefully you can see what's there.

I've pinched this couple of tables from Andrew Reid's commentary. Not this Andrew Reid in our midst, but the former vicar of Holy Trinity, his commentary in Exodus. And in the first table, we see why the plagues are grouped in three cycles, because the repeating pattern occurs every three plagues.

So if you look at the first series, as far as Pharaoh's warning is concerned, whether Pharaoh is warned or not, the plagues go yes, yes, and then no.

That is, Pharaoh is warned in the first, he's warned in the second, but then he's not warned in the third. So, for example, if you flick to chapter 8 and verse 16, the Lord simply tells Moses, tell Aaron, stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the ground, and throughout the land of Egypt, the dust will become nets.

[9 : 29] There is no warning to Pharaoh that that's what's about to happen. And you see that this pattern of yes, yes, no, is then repeated across the three cycle of plagues.

Similarly too, with the first plague, in each cycle, there is a time stamp or a time of warning. So each time, in the first, fourth, and seventh plague, Moses is told to either get up early in the morning or go to Pharaoh in the morning.

And he's also told to station himself or confront Pharaoh. That doesn't happen in the second of the cycle. In the second, Moses is simply told to go to Pharaoh.

And then, as I said before, in the third, there's no forewarning at all. Across the three series as well, there are differences.

So, if you look at the very last column, in the first cycle, Aaron is God's agent with his staff. In the second, there are no agents. Neither Moses or Aaron is there.

[10:33] God simply acts directly at the time that he said he would. But then, in the third, Moses returns as God's agent. And it's normally either his outstretched arm or with his staff in hand that initiates God's action.

So what we see then is that there is pattern in each plague, but also across the ten plagues or nine plagues. But the other thing we see is progression.

That is intensification in the plagues. And that's what you see in the second table. So as you read through them, what you'll find is that with each cycle, the plagues seem to increase in severity.

Eventually, the magicians can no longer mimic Aaron or God. Increasingly, Pharaoh's officials tell him that this is the work of God. And they even beg Pharaoh to relent.

And Pharaoh as well, as it progresses, does begin to beg more and more. In fact, in the last four, he begs after each one. He begs for the plagues to be taken away.

[11:44] But every time he does, and God does take them away, he also goes back on his word and refuses to let Israel go. So, I guess what I'm saying is that whilst you read the templates and there's a lot of interesting detail in it, and it's good to spot what the differences are and all that, so I encourage you to go and read it if you haven't, the way to understand and see the significance of the plagues is to recognize the pattern and then the progression in them.

I will deal more with the progression next week. So, this is a two-part mini-series, as it were. Bring back your handout from next week, for next week. But this week, what I want to do is focus on pattern.

What I want to do is ask the question, what do we learn about God in the pattern of these plagues?

What do we learn about God in the pattern of these plagues?

And so, we're on to point two on the outline, part B. Well, as I said before, this is an epic between God and evil. Now, recently, I've noticed people using the word versus as a verb.

Have you heard that? So, for example, I've heard people say, Carlton is versing the eagles tonight. Or, I'm looking forward to versing you in tennis. Now, to be honest, this is a real butchering of the language.

[13:13] But, I've succumbed to it myself. So, if you look at my third point, not third point, second point, part B, God versus evil, the word versus for tonight's purposes, is to be taken as a verb.

Okay? I was actually going to spell it V-E-R-S-E-S, because that's what you normally do with third person singular, right? But that would just be odd, I think.

God versus evil. Now, so, we're sticking with versus, V-E-R-S-U-S, but you take it as a verb. So, what do we learn when God versus evil? Well, first, that God is the Lord of creation.

Now, I don't know whether you've ever been generous and allowed someone to stay at your place while you're away, only to come home one day and discover that they've taken liberty with your things.

Like, rearrange the furniture. You know, take the TV from the lounge room and put it into the spare room or something. Or scratched up all your pots and pans. Or this one, which I think happens quite a bit.

[14:18] They've used your favorite bath towels as doormats. It's pretty annoying, isn't it? Well, that's what Pharaoh has been doing with God's creation.

God is the creator. This world is his home, as it were. Israel is his people. But ever since the start of Exodus, Pharaoh has been trying to disrupt God's creation.

In particular, while God gave a very clear mandate in Genesis 1 for humans to be fruitful and multiply, Pharaoh has been doing his best to stop Israel from multiplying.

And he has refused to let Israel, his people, go. As we saw, not even for three days last week. And so, what God is doing in visiting the plagues on Pharaoh and Egypt is to show Pharaoh visibly how

anti-creation and anti-God his actions have been.

God is showing Pharaoh what it's really like to disobey God's commands. That the effect of Pharaoh's actions is to try and turn creation back into chaos.

[15 : 32] So, that's the first thing that God is trying to do. But the other thing that these signs and wonders have, a second effect that it has as well, is what God has already said in verse 5 of chapter 7.

God is showing, God is performing these signs and wonders because he wants to show the Egyptians his power. He wants to show them that he is the Lord.

God has the power simply to stretch out his arm through his servants Moses and Aaron at the command of his word, creation bends to his will.

Just as it did in Genesis 1, then God said, and it was. And here again, this is what the Lord says, and it is. Pharaoh may think he's all powerful, able to do as he wishes with the Israelites, but God's showing him otherwise.

And each time, as quickly as the plagues come, God is also able to make them pass and go away. Every time Pharaoh begs for God to take it away, God does.

[16 : 41] with ease. Why? Because the whole of creation is at his command. But secondly, the pattern of the plagues also show that God is in full control of history because he's the Lord over creation.

Now, sometimes we look at God moving mountains and turning rivers to blood and we think, you know, wow, that's really, you know, shows God's power and full control over history.

But actually, for me, I don't think those are the trickiest things for God. Moving mountains and, you know, turning rivers to blood, these are simply inanimate, you know, objects.

They don't really have a mind of their own. And if you understand the forces of nature and you had enough power, which God does, then actually, that's pretty simple for God to do.

No, to me, what's tricky with controlling history is the fact that God has made humans with their own wills and minds. He has made us in His image.

[17 : 47] And so, that includes giving us the freedom to make decisions and the decision, actually, to disobey and defy God. And as we've seen so far, Pharaoh has stubbornly been exercising that God-given freedom, hasn't he?

He's refusing to submit to God. He's defying God. Let my people go? No. Let my people go? No. And on it goes.

Nine times he says that, more than that. And yet, if you recall what we heard in the prelude, we're being told time and time again that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart has occurred under the sovereign hand of God.

And this isn't just foreknowledge, mind you, because in verse 3 of chapter 7, God reveals that he is the one who hardens Pharaoh's heart.

It is very clearly part of God's plan that Pharaoh's heart is hardened. And he does this in order to show the world his power.

[18 : 56] Now, if you look at the other plagues, we find that it also says on top of God hardening Pharaoh's heart, that Pharaoh also hardens his own heart.

And there are also some plagues in the middle that state that in the passive, that Pharaoh's heart has been hardened without actually specifying who does the hardening. So, if you look at the middle columns in the table, in the second table, table, column 4, 5, and 6, you'll see that distribution.

Now, it's rather random, although at the end, you find it consistently said that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. But I think the randomness suggests that the phrases are actually interchangeable.

that is, it's just saying that God is sovereign at the very same time as humans are responsible for their own sin and evil. Both of these things go hand in hand.

God is sovereign, full control, and yet humans are responsible for their actions and choices. And you may well ask, how can this be?

[20 : 05] If we simply lay in God's hands, then why isn't He to blame? Now, when I was a bit younger, I used to hurt my brain trying to rationalize this question.

I don't nowadays. Brain cells are not as many as they used to be. But I think part of the problem is that we think control of the will is a black or white thing or an all or nothing thing.

So we think that if we're in control, then God can't be. Or we think that God is in control, then we can't be. But the Bible never presents it this way. does it? Instead, in the Bible, both God's sovereignty and human responsibility sit side by side.

They go hand in hand. And actually, the clearest example of this was in our second reading today, in Acts chapter 4. I'm going to put the words on the slide again, or Hugo is going to do it.

Did it very quickly. And we're going to look through it again, but I want you to also notice that just as a side point, it's fascinating as well, how many allusions there are in this passage to the Exodus passage.

[21 : 14] How many references back to Exodus there are in this passage in Acts. So in verse 24, which I've highlighted in a shade of orange or something, the believers prayed, Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

In other words, God, you're the Lord of creation. Then they quote from Psalm 2 of how pretend rulers like Pharaoh rise up and think they can defy God.

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

Sounds a bit like the battle with Moses and Pharaoh, doesn't it? And this same thing applied to Herod and Pontius Pilate as well, which the disciples were talking about.

So, they go on to say, Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.

[22 : 18] And here's the key sentence. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. In that very one sentence, God's sovereignty, human responsibility.

And let me just finish it off. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand, sounds familiar, does it not, with Exodus, to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

But my point is this, God's sovereignty goes hand in hand with human will. And you know what? If we just test it with our own experience, we know that to be true, don't we?

I mean, have you ever felt coerced to rebel against God? Have you ever felt coerced to disobey His command? of course not, right?

Every time we disobey, it's because we resolve that we want to do our own thing. God, you're not going to tell me what to do.

[23 : 28] That's what we say, isn't it? That's the exact opposite, isn't it, of being compelled to do something? And that's our natural inclination, actually. We want to be independent of God.

That's what original sin is all about. ever since Adam, that's what we are by nature. It's like the alignment in our car. When it comes out of the factory in Japan, or China more nowadays, it was perfectly aligned to go straight without anyone needing to put a hand on the steering wheel, right? But then you give it to me and I put it on the road and clunk. I run it over a curb. I put the wheel out of alignment, don't I? And so now the only way the car will drive straight, and I do know I need to take it to the mechanic, they can fix it.

But until I do that, the only way the car will drive straight is if I actively put my hand on the wheel and steer it so, isn't it? And so that's the way with us too.

Without God's intervening hand, our natural inclination is to go astray. Pharaoh's natural inclination is wickedness and evil, to harden his heart.

[24 : 47] And God brings this to pass by withholding his hand of mercy. Only his gracious act of intervention will make Pharaoh submit to him.

So, you know, it may not be that we understand exactly how God changes or harden someone's heart. But from our own experience, we know this to be true, isn't it?

That we are responsible for our own actions. We cannot blame God for how we decide. And the converse is true as well. If today you hear God's word and you do want to believe, nothing's going to stop you.

God is not going to say, Oh, you know, I had already decided to harden your heart. So even though you want to believe now, you can't. No, God will never do that. If you today hear God's word to repent and turn to Christ, and you want to do it, God would only be more than willing to embrace you and welcome you and give you the power to believe in him.

So here's the challenge for anyone here today. If you've heard God's word, don't harden your heart against God. That's your natural inclination.

[25 : 56] But if you want to believe in God, then cry out to him, and he will come and give you the strength to do that. As for the rest of us, we can sometimes despair, can't we?

When we see the evil in the world. We may be tempted to think that if God's in control, then why is all this stuff happening? Particularly in my life. Why is all this bad stuff happening in my life? But Exodus encourages us to remember that God is in control. He's in control even when evil seems to abound. And as he's shown us already, he actually uses the evil to bring about good. He did it with Pharaoh's hard heart, and he did it with the evil intent of Herod and Pilate. They put Jesus on the cross, yes.

And yet, that was the very thing that God used to bring about his plan of salvation for all of us. You know, I can imagine Moses and Aaron and the Israelites, you know, when they first saw the plagues happen, you know, their hopes would have been, you know, they would have got their hopes up, you know.

[27 : 10] They would have gone, yes, finally. Pharaoh is going to submit now that, you know, these, you know, plagues by God are going to bite. And then when Pharaoh begs for mercy and asks God to take away the plagues, their hopes would have gone even further up.

But then, when Pharaoh begins to change his mind and the plagues don't seem to end and God seems to just, you know, on and on, I don't know, maybe by the time of the sixth or the seventh plague, they might have begun to wonder if God was really going to do this.

And yet, we know God does. He did. Because he had planned the last plague from the very beginning. Because he promised what he would do.

He knew that it was all going to lead to the death of the firstborn. And in the coming weeks, we will see exactly why that is the most significant plague. So friends, we shouldn't be surprised by the evil in our time because God has actually warned us about it.

So Paul says in 2 Timothy 3, But mark this, there will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers God, having a form of godliness but denying its power.

[28 : 42] Have you suffered under any of these evils, do you think? Well, God's already warned us that this sort of evil will happen.

So we shouldn't be alarmed when evil people come to power. If you think your boss is the wrong person for the job because he's arrogant, God's already warned us about that.

If you think we might have chosen the wrong prime minister, or maybe the UK has, God's already warned us about that. I'm not saying Boris Johnson's or any one of these things, but if you think he is, even if you think he is, if you see greedy and selfish people getting away with crimes, or when you're betrayed, and they get away with it, well, nothing is going on in our lives that is outside God's warning and control.

We may not see exactly what God is up to, but friends, we can trust that God knows what he's doing. We don't need to fear that somehow evil will overtake us or overcome us.

No, we can sort of rest in peace, live and rest in peace, knowing that God is in control, and that everything that he's doing in this world is according to his will and plan.

[30 : 02] Let's pray. Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. We thank you that you are the Lord of history and that nothing, not even evil in this world, can frustrate your will and plan.

Thank you that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you have conquered sin, death, and evil. Help us to trust you even in dark and troubled times.

You are in control. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.