

God Magnifies His Name

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[0 : 0 0] Morning, church. So I ran across a blog entry the other day titled 22 Little Known Ways to Make a Name for Yourself. On the list were such things as grow the trust, ask the unaskable, avoid the always, court the irrational, and on and on and on. I had to laugh when I read number eight on this list, which was embody the values. Right after number seven, which was eliminate the losers. I wasn't sure at that point what values we were embodying. But anyway, why are we so obsessed with making a name for ourselves? In his book, The City of God, Augustine said that one of the undeniable elements of the human condition is that we have an insatiable love of praise. We want to make a name for ourselves thinking that if we have human praise, if we make our mark, if we make a name for ourselves, we will then be happy. Right?

But so often it's the opposite that happens in our pursuit to make a name for ourselves. We end up in our pursuit of our pursuit of our pursuit of our pursuit of our pursuit. We always want more. Why is that? The late David Foster Wallace put it this way in a commencement address he gave at Kenyon College in 2005. It's a bit of a long quote, but I think you'll be able to follow it. He says, in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there's actually no such thing as atheism. There's no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of God or spiritual type thing to worship is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly.

And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. Worship power. You will end up feeling weak and afraid. You will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect. Being seen as smart, you'll end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing, he goes on to say, about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful. It's that they're unconscious.

They are default settings. Now Wallace wasn't a Christian, but he's right. Isn't he here?

We all worship something, and that thing often crushes us. And isn't the same thing true of our love of praise, worship approval and success, making a name for yourself, and you'll always end up feeling like a failure, that nothing you do matters, that you never measure up, and there's always one more hurdle to get over.

[3 : 4 8] Remember, this is our default setting, as fallen human beings. And the question is, is there anything to get us off that default setting?

To get us to not worship things, which in the end will destroy us? Again, from that same address, David Foster Wallace goes on to say, the so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings.

Because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self.

Cynical? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe not. It seems we have to look somewhere else then, than the so-called real world.

And where do we look? Well, this morning, we're going to look at Exodus, chapters 7 through 10. To a biblical text that I think is aimed at nothing less than the utter destruction of our so-called default settings.

[5 : 05] It's aimed at the realignment of our hearts to that which is truly and alone worthy of worship. So why don't we turn there together? That's page 49 in the Pew Bibles.

Exodus chapter 7 through 10. Page 49. We're going to look at a big chunk of scripture this morning, so let me encourage you to turn there.

Even if you're not super familiar with the Bible, just go to page 49 and you'll be able to follow right along. Now, as you turn there, you'll notice, maybe from some of the subject headings, that Exodus chapter 7 begins the famous story of the ten plagues.

In fact, this section of Exodus begins back in chapter 6 with the genealogy of Moses in verse 14. In the ancient world, in ancient texts, genealogies were sort of ways of marking out a new section in the work.

It was sort of a signal of a new chapter in the story. You see that in the book of Genesis over and over and over again. Whenever the story takes a new turn, it's introduced by a genealogy. The same thing's happening here in Exodus.

[6 : 12] This new chapter is starting and this, at last, will be the chapter in this story of how God rescues his people from slavery at last. Here we go.

And we're going to take the next three weeks to look at this narrative of the plagues. Next week, we're going to get into the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

Sorry if you were really hoping we'd get into that this morning. You've got to come back next week. Two weeks from now, we're going to look at the Passover, which is the sort of climactic and last tenth plague.

But today, what we're going to do is we're going to look at the first nine plagues in chapters 7 through 10 as a whole. And we're going to ask the big, overarching question of, what are the plagues all about?

Why the plagues? Now, you might be saying to yourself, well, gee, I thought the plagues were all about the Israelites being rescued from their oppressors in Egypt.

[7 : 16] And that is true. But as we look a little more closely at how this story unfolds, we find that there's an even bigger purpose at work. And it's a purpose that strikes to the very core of our hearts today.

A purpose that seeks to conquer those default settings in our hearts of misplaced worship and our love of praise and our obsession of making a name for ourselves. Because you see, the plagues, what the plagues are all about really is God magnifying his name.

It's about God making his name great. Turn with me to Exodus 9, verse 13.

That's page 51. As I mentioned, the first nine plagues in the story span chapters 7 through 10. And we're going to cover as much of that terrain as we can this morning.

But I want to begin by giving us a foothold right here in the middle of the story. We're going to jump right into the middle and begin here in Exodus 9, verses 13 through 16.

[8 : 31] So Exodus 9, 13. This is the beginning of the seventh plague. Then the Lord said to Moses, Rise up early in the morning and present yourself to Pharaoh before Pharaoh and say to him, Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, Let my people go that they may serve me.

For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself and on your servants and your people so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence and you would have been cut off from the earth.

But for this purpose I have raised you up to show you my power so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. It's hard to miss there, isn't it?

God does what he does in these chapters so that his name may be proclaimed in all the earth. In other words, for the purpose of making his name great before the whole world. That's the big idea.

And that runs like a refrain throughout chapter 7 through 10. Let me show you. Let's skip around. Let's take a cross section of this section of scripture. Turn to chapter 7 verse 5.

[9 : 49] If you're new to the Bible, by the way, the big numbers are the chapters and the small numbers are the verses. Exodus 7 verse 5. Let me read. We're going to jump through these pretty quickly.

The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord. There it is. When I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them. Exodus 7 verse 17.

Thus says the Lord, by this you shall know that I am the Lord. Behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile and it shall turn into blood. Exodus 8 verse 10.

Pharaoh says, tomorrow. And Moses says, be it as you say. Why? So that you may know that there is no one like the Lord our God. Exodus 8 verse 22. Look at the end of that verse.

That you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth. We saw it twice in chapter 9 verses 13 through 16. But turn to Exodus 10 too. Here God's speaking to the Israelites.

[10 : 55] So that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I've dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them that you may know that I am the Lord.

The plagues are about God making himself known and magnifying his name. But how does God go about doing that? How does he magnify his name that we might know that he alone is the Lord?

Well, as the plagues progress we see how God does that. And that's what we're going to try to unpack this morning. And the first thing that we see is that God magnifies his name in judgment.

This is our first point. Turn back again to chapter 7. Kind of start at the beginning. In the beginning of this chapter God recommissions Moses after the disappointment and discouragement of chapters 5 and 6.

Then in verses 8 through 13 Moses and Aaron perform a preliminary sign before Pharaoh. Aaron's staff turns into a fearsome snake, a fearsome serpent and ends up swallowing the staffs of Pharaoh's magicians which is a bit of a preview of what's to come.

[12 : 00] And then in verse 14 the plagues begin. And in order to understand sort of the meaning of the plagues and how they sort of unfold this theme of God magnifying his name I think it's helpful to see that the way in which the biblical author has structured this account is that the first nine plagues kind of come at us in three sets of three.

The blood and frogs and gnats are sort of one cycle and then the flies and the livestock plague and the boils are sort of a second cycle and then lastly the hail and the locust and the darkness are kind of the last cycle.

And where do we get that? Where do we see that? Well actually the literary structure is pretty clear once you see it. Again let's fly over the passage together and notice a pattern that starts to emerge.

We're going to look at plagues 1, 2, and 3 real quick just at the beginning of each of the plagues. You can probably just follow along by looking at the subject headings in your ESV. Look at 7.15 the beginning of the first plague.

How does God describe it? He says 7.15 Go out to Pharaoh in the morning as he goes out to the water. Now jump down to 8.1 the next plague. The Lord said to Moses go into Pharaoh.

[13 : 06] Now go to the third plague 8.16 and there's no warning at all. Go out to Pharaoh in the morning go into Pharaoh no warning. Now watch that same pattern happen again in plagues 4, 5, and 6.

8.20 Rise up early in the morning present yourself to Pharaoh as he goes out to the water. Oh that sounds familiar. Plague 5 then the Lord said to Moses go into Pharaoh. Plague 6 9.8 no warning.

And again the same thing happens for plagues 7, 8, and 9. Go out to Pharaoh in the morning go into Pharaoh and then the last one comes without a warning. You see those are signals that the biblical author is giving us so that we can understand how this thing is unfolding.

And once you see that threefold structure you begin to realize that each cycle of three brings out a different element of God magnifying his name.

Each one building on the last. And as this first cycle kind of breaks upon us as we've said God shows us that he's magnifying his name in judgment.

[14 : 15] You see when God through Moses turns the Nile into blood in verse 7, 14 and following he's not just sort of doing a random act of power it's not sort of a large scale party trick.

Ha ha! You see for the Egyptians the Nile as Greg mentioned a few weeks ago was worshipped as a God. It was their life source.

So right from the start God is enacting a judgment on the so called gods of Egypt. Proving that they are no gods at all but that they are mere idols.

And that the one who really controls the life source of this people and all peoples is the God of the Hebrews the Lord. But just when things start to get off the ground Pharaoh's magicians enter the scene again.

And they too it seems can turn water to blood by their secret arts. and so the battle is on. Round one seems to be a tie.

[15 : 24] What about round two? God unleashes hordes of frogs from the Nile so many that they begin to infest the cookware the ovens the beds.

Imagine that crawling into bed at night finding nothing but frogs. In Australia actually there are things called cane toads which are giant they're like this big they're disgusting.

Rhys you know what I'm talking about. And they're everywhere. Imagine that opening up your pot to cook and out jumps a frog. But the magicians step up and they too it seems can make frogs appear.

But it's a bit of an irony isn't it? This is only a sort of partial victory for the magicians because haha they can make the frogs appear and yet that's not really the problem is it?

We want the frogs to go away. So Pharaoh wisely appeals to Moses and he seems to concede okay Moses fine you win.

[16 : 30] but as soon as the Lord removes the frogs Pharaoh hardens his heart and refuses to let the people go. Then comes round three and this time there's no warning and there's no contest.

Aaron strikes the dust of the earth and as the dust rises from the strike of his staff suddenly gnats mosquitoes begin to rise and sweep over the land.

and the magicians try to do the same and yet they are bested and in 819 the magicians admit defeat.

This is the finger of God they say. But you see this contest is about more than God foiling some ancient magicians.

This is a contest about who controls creation. Who is the rightful authority? The gods of Egypt or the one true God of Israel?

[17 : 41] Pharaoh and his magicians or the Lord? And as the Nile runs with blood and as the piles of dead frogs fill the land with their horrible smell and as the gnats fill the air God is giving them a clear uncomfortable sign that he is the Lord of creation and not them.

And as the cycles continue the plagues intensify in severity. You know this first cycle is kind of gross as it might be blood and frogs and irritating as it might be with gnats not necessarily the most hygienic situation.

It's a bit unfortunate it's a bit uncomfortable. But then comes the second cycle and flies will swarm their houses and ruin their land and a severe plague will kill the livestock which is a bit like your 401k losing 50, 60, 70 percent.

And then finally soot from a kiln will again sweep through the land and this time not just irritating gnats that you need to flick away but boils on the skin.

And the magicians at the end of plague six at the end of the second cycle now can't even stand before Moses because they're so sorely afflicted. But then the severity increases even more with the final cycle of three.

[19 : 15] Hail and locusts and darkness what was painful and costly in the second cycle has now become utterly devastating. By the end of the ninth plague there'll be nothing left in Egypt of value.

It's all gone. And you see what's happening across these plagues. Again they're not mere random displays of power.

this is the creator God exercising his judgment on a rebellious people in an unfolding act of un-creation.

That the one who brought creation into being is now letting it fall apart. Piece by piece layer by layer the land of Egypt is reverting to chaos.

The created order is coming unraveled. Frogs don't stay where they're supposed to stay. Hail isn't the size it's supposed to be.

[20 : 26] And with each new cycle the breakdown deepens. Order in life is stripped away until the ninth plague ends in total darkness. darkness. Do you remember the creation week of Genesis 1?

Begins with what? The creation of light. And now it's as if creation has completely rewound into darkness. The light is made black and the un-creation is complete.

And all this Exodus tells us throughout this narrative is a sign. the plagues are a sign. They point to something.

They point to the fact that to reject our creator, to reject the Lord, ends in disintegration, chaos, darkness, and death.

Of course the judgment of God is not a popular topic. But friends, it is a reality. And on the one hand, if it is a reality, if God will judge, then that does mean that our lives aren't just a string of meaningless events, that what we do does actually count in the grand scheme of things, and they will be counted in the grand scheme of things.

[21 : 58] God's judgment isn't just real, it's also perfectly just. Like the Egyptians, we often live our lives without any reference to the true God.

We ignore him in the world that he has made. We reject his law and want nothing to do with him. we choose other gods and so God gives us exactly what we ask for.

The wages of sin is death, Paul will say in Romans 6. And friends, what that means is that this God, this God is the one with whom we really have to do.

The most important thing in your life is not what job you have or what college you graduated from. The most pressing issue of your life is not how beautiful or successful or wealthy you can become, how much comfort you can stock up, how much status you can win.

It's not about getting a spouse or starting a family. The most pressing issue before each and every one of us is to be reconciled to God, our creator.

[23 : 29] What does it profit, Jesus said, to gain the whole world and lose your soul? And the plagues are here before us like a megaphone.

They're like smelling salts getting us to wake up from our stupor to realize that God is God and he must be the center of our lives.

And all the pursuits that we wrap our lives around, no matter how great they may seem in the world's eyes, work and sex and wealth and success, all right, all good, in their proper place are nothing compared to God.

And to reject God for those things can mean nothing but eternal death. It's like we're sawing the branch that we stand on at any moment.

Down we go. My friends, the message of the plagues is not just that God magnifies his name in judgment.

[24 : 48] In the second cycle of plagues we see that God magnifies his name in salvation. As the judgments increase, as the destruction mounts, what do we find?

We find the Lord sheltering his people from the coming wrath. Look at the beginning of the second cycle in chapter 8, verse 20. Chapter 8, verse 20.

I'm going to read these first few verses. Then the Lord said to Moses, rise up early in the morning and present yourself to Pharaoh as he goes out to the water and say to him, thus says the Lord, let my people go that they may serve me.

Or else, if you will not let my people go, behold, I will send swarms of flies on you and your servants and your people and into your houses. And the houses of the Egyptians shall be filled with swarms of flies and also the ground on which they stand.

But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen where my people dwell so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth.

[25 : 57] Thus I will put a division between my people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall happen. God Why does God stop the plagues from ravaging the people of Israel living in Goshen?

Are they more deserving than the Egyptians? Do they have a more impeccable moral record? No. They are the recipients of God's grace, of his undeserved favor.

And he sets them apart so that all the world might know that he is the Lord. We see this highlighted again in the fifth plague, and in the seventh plague, and in the ninth plague.

We're told that God keeps his people safe. You know, I wonder for those living through the plagues at that time, was it more of a wonder to see the flies swarm and the livestock die and the hail fall and the darkness descend?

Or was it more of a wonder to see the flies and the hail inexplicably stop right at the border of Goshen? Was it more of a wonder to see their livestock remaining healthy?

[27 : 19] Was it more of a wonder to see the sun shining there, though all else had gone black? God was magnifying his name in salvation.

I mean, think about it. After all, there's glory, isn't there, when a team of firefighters show up on the scene and they just douse a home with water.

That's a home that's on fire. They just put it out and blow it away. That's pretty awesome. glory. But isn't there more glory when they enter the burning building and bring out the survivors in the midst of it?

And, friends, just so, God's glory is seen in his judgment, his sovereignty, his justice, his holiness, but how much more in his salvation through judgment?

We see this again and again in the Bible, don't we? Think of the flood. The flood was a display of God's power and holy justice, but rescuing a family in the ark through the flood made God's name great.

[28 : 36] Jump ahead to the exile to Babylon, which was a display, again, of God's perfect character. But rescuing and preserving a remnant through the exile displayed God's faithfulness and his mercy.

And just so here, bringing the Egyptian nation to its knees in judgment made God's name great, but how much more carrying out a whole people safely through the midst of those plagues, protecting them, sheltering them.

And here's where the rubber hits the road for us. Have you ever wondered, have you ever doubted whether God is willing to save?

Friends, the reality is that right now, during this sermon, you, right in your seat, can turn from sin, trust in Christ, Christ, and be saved from death and judgment.

But do you wonder whether God would really receive you with your sins and your fears and your doubts and your pride?

[29 : 56] God. But remember, friend, he doesn't save because of how great you are. He saves because of how great he is.

And look at how great he is. There is none like him. He shelters his people. He sets them apart for the sake of his great name.

He's incomparable like none other. And that leads us to our third point. God magnifies his name in judgment and in salvation.

And the third cycle of plagues, chapter 9, verse 13, through the end of chapter 10, God shows us that he magnifies his name beyond all compare.

That he's like no other. God judges, God saves, and God does what no one else can do. Where do we see that? As the last three plagues rain down their destruction, it's the totality and it's the magnitude of them that set them apart from the previous plagues.

[31 : 09] Look at chapter 9, verse 24. Chapter 9, verse 24, there was hail and fire flashing continually in the midst of the hail, very heavy hail such as had never been in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation.

And that same thing is said of the locusts in chapter 10, verse 14. Chapter 10, verse 14, the locusts came up over all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country of Egypt, such a dense swarm of locusts as had never been before nor ever will be again.

Like nothing that ever had been or ever will be. And the magnitude of the hail and the locusts and the other devastation that they bring, verse 10, 15 says, not a green thing remained, neither tree nor plant of the field through all the land of Egypt.

That complete devastation, all of that is matched by the complete darkness of the ninth plague. A darkness so thick you could feel it, the writer says.

And that ninth plague would have been perhaps the most powerful symbolic message to the Egyptians. Because you see the sun in Egyptian culture was their supreme god, the god Ra.

[32 : 38] Its worship was pervasive, especially in the official palace and in the rituals there. But this last plague is saying to the Egyptians, and for that matter saying to us, take the greatest, take the highest conception that you have of God.

Take your highest, most exalted, most powerful thing that you can imagine, whatever that God is. And the reality is, the blazing glory of the Lord, the true God, makes such a God seem like darkness in comparison.

There's none like him, none greater, none higher. He is beyond all compare. And so great is this God, so unexpected, so incomparable, that in this last cycle of plagues, he actually does the unthinkable.

And he offers mercy to his enemies. Though Pharaoh's heart is hardened toward ever-increasing destruction, as this third cycle of plagues begins, the Lord warns and invites the Egyptian people.

He says, come. Look at chapter 9, verse 19. Now, therefore, get your livestock and all that you have in the field into safe shelter, for every man and beast that is in the field and is not brought home will die.

[34 : 21] God calls out to them in mercy and invites the Egyptians to take shelter from the coming wrath. And what about us?

Friends, the reality is that God will come. The Creator will one day come in fullness to his creation and put it right again.

God, our true judge, will come and put an end to evil and wrong. And the question is, where will we find shelter? Now, as we think about that question, I hope you see, I hope you see that this passage that we're looking at actually offers much hope to a hurting world.

Because what we have on display here, in no uncertain terms, is the great truth that the oppressive schemes of Pharaoh and of every Pharaoh who's come since then, all those oppressive schemes will not have the final word that in justice and slavery and evil, God will put it all to rights with perfect justice and with perfect judgment.

And that is good news. When the Psalms tell us of God's return as king to judge, do you know how the scene is pictured? The trees are clapping their hands and the oceans are roaring in praise because God's finally going to release creation from the evil that has infested it.

[36 : 09] God's judgment is good news for the world. The days of evil are numbered. But the pointed question is, is God's judgment good news for me?

Because friends, I see my heart and it is so often on the side of selfishness and wrong and so often callous to the suffering of others and so often greedy for my own comforts.

God's judgmental. And when God's justice is revealed, what hope is there? Not just for me, but for you. Where will you and I find shelter?

And you have to see that that's a problem that runs throughout the Old Testament. God again and again and again promises to judge, to rescue the world from darkness.

But the question remains, what fallen human being would be left to stand when the light shines in? And the answer finally comes in the New Testament.

[37 : 25] God comes in human flesh. The true and rightful judge of all walks among us. But in the most surprising and in the moment confusing turn of events, the judge of all creation salvation is judged.

We've read earlier that Jesus saves us from the wrath to come. How does he do it, friends? How does Jesus save us from the wrath to come?

From darkness and death. He does it by going into the darkness for us. You see, those three days of darkness in Egypt, that ninth plague, does it not point us ahead to the cross where for three hours of darkness, the Son of God died in the place of sinners, going into the darkness of God's judgment so that we don't have to.

Christ died and rose again to rescue all of those and everyone who would turn from their sins and believe in him. God magnifies his name most supremely at the cross for it's there that his judgment and his salvation meet so that his enemies might become his beloved friends so that we can all find shelter, so that we can all know protection.

And when you see that, when you see that, and when you know that, and when you come to take hold of him by faith, suddenly, you don't need to obsess about your name being great anymore.

[39 : 25] When your heart is captured by who he is and what he's done, suddenly you're freed from having to make a name for yourself because instead, you want his name to look great.

That's what drives you. Finally, you're worshiping the one thing worthy of all our praise. Now the reality is, friends, that maybe the Lord will give you success in the world's eyes.

Maybe he won't. At the end of the day, all of that is in his hands. Our little match will flicker one way or the other, but his torch is going to burn bright for all eternity.

And our desire is to be close to his heat and to bask in his light and to know that there, that is freedom. That is the worship for which we were made.

His is the name that is worthy of making great. We want to magnify his name, not ours. And we want to make him known in all the earth.

[40 : 41] We want his mark to be left on our communities and on our families and in our neighborhoods. And if we leave a mark, so be it. But we want his name to be known.

And we want it to be known as great. Let's pray. And now, Lord Jesus, we pray that you would do just that.

You would help us by your Holy Spirit to make your name great in our actions, in our thoughts, in our words and deeds. Lord, help us, depending on your grace, to make much of you as a church, to make much of you as students, to make much of you in our workplaces, to make much of you with our neighbors and our friends.

Lord, free us from the obsession of pride and the love of praise and help us to be lost in you, lost in wonder, love, and praise.

We pray this in Jesus' name, Father. Amen.