

You Shall Know I AM:
God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment (Exodus 7)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on September 30, 2018

Introduction

- ❖ One of the advantages of going through a series on Exodus is that it's familiar to most of us. Even if we've never read it ourselves from the pages of Scripture, we know the gist of the story because it's been portrayed in film a number of times. There's the classic "The Ten Commandments" by Cecile B. DeMille, or Disney's "The Prince of Egypt", or more recent renditions like Ridley Scott's. Maybe scenes from some of these films have crossed your mind as we've been going through the book. That could be helpful.
 - But it could also be harmful. Those portrayals might help you better see things from Moses's perspective or maybe Pharaoh's. It might help you better understand their reactions and intentions. **But the problem is that most films fail to portray the central characters and the central drama of the book.** You see, Exodus is a ultimately not about a battle between Moses and Pharaoh or between Israel and Egypt. **It's ultimately centered on a cosmic conflict between God and false gods – between the LORD of creation and lords of chaos.**

- ❖ You're not going to get this Godward perspective from anything coming out of Hollywood. You're going to get something from a man-ward point of view. **Which I think leads us towards a tendency to moralize the story.**
 - We read into the Ten Plagues a lesson about what happens to those who harden their hearts and refuse to listen to God. We treat Pharaoh as a negative example of how to respond to God's commands. Or we make it about Moses and how to deal with our own insecurities or how to deal with adversities – with the Pharaohs in our own lives.

- ❖ But instead of asking, "What does this story have to do with us?" – our first impulse should be to be ask, "**What does this story tell us about God?**" What do we learn about him? I would argue that these next chapters on the Ten Plagues are making a theological point about God. They're not just raw displays of God's power or terrifying flashes of his anger. **The plagues are *not* just punishments. They're a polemic against the so-called gods of Egypt.**
 - In fact, calling them *plagues* is probably what confuses the issue. I know they're identified as plagues in a couple of places (cf. 11:1), but they're also called *signs*, like in chapter 7:3 (cf. 10:1). So yes, they're plagues and there's a punitive aspect to them.
 - **But instead of seeing them merely as plagues, my point is that we should see them as *proofs* – signs that prove something about the God of Israel and the so-called gods of Egypt.** Each of these ten (actually eleven) proofs are intentional confrontations with idols that the Egyptians have been putting their hope and security in. **And God keeps exposing their falseness and proves his God-ness.**

- ❖ If you think about it, all of this could have been over in an instant. God didn't have to go through all ten or eleven proofs. **If God's sole purpose was to free his people, it would've taken only one encounter.** Moses and Aaron would've shown up, delivered their message, and Pharaoh's mind would've been changed. God can make that happen.

- ❖ The fact that he willed for there to be multiple encounters and multiple proofs tells us that God was *not* merely focused on delivering his people. He had another purpose in mind. **And what I'm going to argue today is that his purpose was to make himself known to the nations – to put on display something about himself, namely his own glory.**
- ❖ Too often our focus is on *our* deliverance, *our* salvation, and we miss the fact that in the very same acts of deliverance – God has *his* glory in mind. **As he's rescuing us, he's glorifying himself.** As he's saving us, he's displaying for us the glory and power of his great name.
 - We need a Godward reorientation of our focus, so we don't just wonder what this text has to do with us – but we ask what does this text teach us about God? What about the LORD is on display in this passage? That's what I want to answer. I see three things that I want to share with you.

God Displays His Glory in Acts of Salvation and Judgment

- ❖ The first thing we see in vv1-7 is how God displays his glory in acts of both salvation and judgment. In this point, I want to make the case that God is committed to glorifying his name by saving and by judging – and how both actions happen simultaneously. That is, his acts of deliverance are at the same time acts of judgment. **As his hand is rescuing, it is simultaneously punishing – and all of it is coordinated to bring him maximum glory.**
 - Let me show you this. By chapter 7, Moses and Aaron have already approached Pharaoh and delivered God's message to let his people go. Pharaoh flat out refused. Scripture says his heart was hard. But if we look carefully at chapter 7:3, it's hard because God made it that way. God is the one saying he will harden Pharaoh's heart.
- ❖ Now back in chapter 4, we've already considered this theologically challenging concept of God hardening someone's heart, and we'll consider it more in next week's passage because it keeps coming up. **But I want to stress the Bible's instance that – though it's clear God hardened Pharaoh's heart – Scripture also says Pharaoh hardened his own heart.** Both are equally true and compatible statements. God is sovereign over how our hearts respond to his Word, and yet we're individually responsible for how we respond.
- ❖ **The point I want you to see here is that God clearly intended for Pharaoh to not listen and for him to say no.** If God could harden his heart, he could've easily softened it. But it was his intent for Pharaoh *not* to listen. But why? For what purpose? Look at v3, "*But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you.*" Here's why. Here's what's going to happen, "*Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them.*"
 - **So why did God ordain for there to be multiple "great acts of judgment" – versus delivering his people in one fell swoop by just making Pharaoh listen?** V5 says so that "*the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD*". So that everyone will recognize the glory of his name.

- ❖ And notice he says they shall know my name, “*when I stretch out my hand*”. Picture with me two sides to his hand. **Picture the palm side of the hand bringing out the people of Israel, and the backside of the hand stretched out against Egypt.** He's saving with one side and judging with the other. And that's how the Egyptians will know that he's the LORD. That's how God displays his glory. This is why I titled the sermon the way I did. God demonstrates his glory *in salvation through judgment*.
 - Some theologians argue that that is the melodic line of the entire Bible. Just as every song contains a melodic line that carries through the piece and ties every section together – **in the same way, the Bible has a melodic line connecting every chapter in all 66 books.** And that tune is the glory of God. The entire narrative of Scripture sings God's redemption, and **in every work of redemption he's doing three things simultaneously: a) he's saving, b) he's judging, and c) he's glorifying himself.**

- ❖ Let me read out of **Psalm 106**, which is a psalm that chronicles the events of Exodus. In vv7-8, it gets to the part where the Israelites arrive at the Red Sea and turn on Moses and God. They think it's a trap, and they're about to be slaughtered by the Egyptian army. It says, “*Our fathers, when they were in Egypt, did not consider your wondrous works; they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love, but rebelled by the sea, at the Red Sea. Yet he saved them for his name's sake, that he might make known his mighty power.*”
 - It was for his name's sake. He saved his people by parting the waters and judged their adversaries by covering them with those same waters. **And he did it all so that all might know the mighty power of his name.** So that all would recognize that the most powerful military force on the planet is still no match for the Great I AM.

- ❖ This melodic line continues to play throughout Scripture. Just consider the next major act of salvation and judgment in the OT. **It's the next great exile of God's people – the Babylonian exile.** In this instance, it's God's people who are the object of both his judging and saving. The exile was judgment for their constant idolatry, but he didn't cut them off entirely. He saved a remnant and returned them back to rebuild their land.
 - Listen to why he did this. This is **Isaiah 48:9-11**, “*⁹For my name's sake I defer my anger; for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. ¹⁰Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. ¹¹For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.*”

- ❖ Do you see what motivates God? He doesn't want his name profaned among the nations. His people were defaming his name by their idolatry, so he judged them. He refined them in the furnace of affliction. **But he didn't snuff them out – no matter how much they deserved it.** He didn't cut them off completely. Why? For my name's sake. For the sake of my praise. For my own sake. How should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.

- ❖ Friends, once you can hear this melodic line, once you're familiar with this tune in the OT, then you can better understand and appreciate what God does in the NT and especially what he does in the gospel. **It's important to recognize how the same act of salvation can be an act of judgment – otherwise you're not going to understand what God did on the cross.**
 - Jesus died on the cross to forgive you of your sins. That's true. But the only reason your sins can be forgiven is because, on the cross, Jesus was judged with the judgment you deserve. **God never just forgives sin. He always judges sin.** He doesn't minimize sin. He doesn't sweep it under the rug and let bygones be bygones.

- ❖ **God only forgives your sins because, through Christ, he bore your sins on the cross. He was judged, deemed guilty, and died a sinner's death.** He who knew no sin became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). **The cross is a symbol of salvation for us because it was a place of judgment for Christ because of our sins.** That's how God is glorified as just and the justifier of those who trust in Jesus (Rom. 3:26).
 - If God simply forgave and turned a blind eye to the evil we've done, then someone could accuse him of being unjust, of being partial and biased. He's letting the guilty walk. But that's not our God. Our God is glorious. He saves *through* judgment. He shows mercy *and* preserves justice. No one can accuse him of lacking mercy and compassion, and no one can accuse him of lacking equity and righteousness.

- ❖ God saves. He judges. And he glorifies himself. **That's the melodic line of Scripture being strummed loudly here in our chapter.** Until you can hear it, the rest of Scripture won't sound familiar. In fact, it might sound chaotic, like a cacophonous noise. But if you can recognize this melodic line – of God glorifying himself in salvation through judgment – then you can be reading about the Exodus or the Exile or the Cross or the Second Coming and Final Judgment – and it all starts to make sense and all starts to fit together.

God Displays His Authority Over the Highest Earthly Power

- ❖ In fact, it makes sense of the next part of our story. If we keep reading in vv8-13, we see this encounter of Moses and Aaron, on one hand, and Pharaoh and his court magicians, on the other. Let's go back to our big question, "What do we learn about God?" What aspect of his glory is on display here? We can answer like this – this is our second point – **here God is displaying his authority over the highest earthly power.**
 - Let's summarize what happened. At this point, Pharaoh's heart is hard, and he's asking Moses and Aaron to prove themselves by working a miracle. Moses is instructed by the LORD to tell Aaron to perform the same sign they did for the Israelites back in chapter 4. The miracle where the staff becomes a serpent.

- ❖ Let's pick up in v10, *"¹⁰So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. ¹¹Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. ¹²For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents."*

- ❖ Now I read a lot this week about whether these magicians actually performed a similar miracle. Maybe it was just sleight of hand like modern day magicians. Or I read about how snake charmers are able to pinch some nerve on the neck of a snake and cause it to go stiff and look like a staff, and that's how some commentators try to explain what the magicians did. Some would even say that's what Aaron did.
 - I think all these naturalistic explanations are beside the point. I think it's clear that it really was Aaron's staff that transformed into a snake. Which from a theistic perspective – where a Creator God made everything out of nothing – this is small potatoes. And I'm open to acknowledging that the Egyptian magicians were able to do the same thing – explained by some kind of demonic power.
 - But the point of the story is what happens next. Look at v12 and see what happens to the staffs that have become serpents. *“But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs.”* That's the point. It's about God's authority over Pharaoh's.

- ❖ In ancient Egypt, serpents were common symbols of royal authority. **So having God's serpent swallow Pharaoh's serpent is an open challenge to Pharaoh's authority.** It's like throwing the gauntlet down. It would be like walking into the Oval Office with a bald eagle in your arms and then strangling it in the president's face. Or kicking a beaver in front of Canada's Prime Minister. It's an open challenge – not just to the man but to the entire nation.
 - There's also a bit of foreshadowing going on because that same word for “swallowed” shows up again later in chapter 15:12 where it's describing the Egyptian army being swallowed up by the Red Sea. **So turning this staff into a snake is not a parlor trick.** It's an indictment against Pharaoh. And it's a warning of judgment to come.

- ❖ **Church, this passage reminds us that we worship and serve the King of kings and Lord of lords.** Who's not beholden to any earthly powers. The nations rage and the peoples plot in vain. While *“he who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.”* (Ps. 2:4)
 - **Daniel 2:21** affirms the LORD's sovereignty when it says, *“He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings.”* **Romans 13:1** reinforces that when it says, *“For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”* **Proverbs 21:1** states, *“The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.”*

- ❖ Friends, I think the Lord, in his good providence, planned for this passage and this point to be made this morning – considering the kind of week we went through as a nation. **There was so much attention focused this week on our nation's capital, on one branch of government, on one judicial bench, on one job opening, on one confirmation process.**
 - We heard an emotional and credible allegation as well as an emotional and credible defense. But my focus is not on who's more believable. My focus is on the fact that all this attention, all this fighting, all of this divisiveness stems from the outsized importance (the inordinate influence) of one particular seat on the Supreme Court. **We, as a nation, have way too much riding on one swing vote.** Too much authority has been invested in one person.

- ❖ **That's why we, as Christians, must be reminded that our Authority sits in heaven, on an even greater bench, in a much more supreme court, high and exalted above all earthly powers.** While the nation rages over this issue – agitated and distraught over either losing this nomination or seeing it pushed through –
 - **Christians need to be the ones who respond to this moment, with concern and consideration, but ultimately with a quiet confidence that our hope, our peace, and our joy does *not* rest in whoever sits on that bench in Washington.** Our Judge reigns on high, and one day he'll swallow up all competing claims of authority.
 - No matter how this situation shakes out, I won't lose an ounce of sleep, and I won't lose my mind on social media. Because my God reigns over Pharaoh and over the highest of earthly powers.

God Displays His Control Over the Source of Life Itself

- ❖ So this encounter with Pharaoh is the first of eleven proofs, but as we get into vv14-25, we're introduced to the first of the commonly-identified Ten Plagues – where the Nile is turned into blood. But our point has been to see this also as a proof, a sign, that displays something about God. And this is what we see in this story – this is our third point – **we see God display his control over the very source of life itself.**
 - As I mentioned, the central characters in the book of Exodus are not Moses and Pharaoh but God and false gods. It's a confrontation between the Lord of Creation and lords of chaos. And that battle commences in v14 to on the banks of the Nile.
- ❖ God tells Moses that Pharaoh's heart is hard and he's not going to let you all go, so go find him in the morning by the Nile. Perhaps he was going for a morning bath. Well, not anymore. Plans are about to change. Let's pick up in v17. This is Moses speaking to Pharaoh the very words of God, *"¹⁷Thus 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. ¹⁸The fish in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile."*
 - **Again, a lot has been written offering naturalistic explanations for this.** Some point out that in Hebrew the word "blood" could just be referring to the color (blood red). So it could be referring to a natural and not uncommon phenomenon that occurs in the Nile where, in certain areas, an overabundance of reddish sediment collects, produces an inhospitable environment where a particular toxic algae grows, killing all the fish life and making the water undrinkable and unusable.
- ❖ But even if there is a naturalistic explanation, it's beside the point. **The point is that this phenomenon occurred at the command of God.** This was no coincidence. God told Moses to strike the Nile with his staff, and at that very moment the phenomenon occurred. It's still an act of God. If God were to cause an earthquake, it's not any less of a divine act just because earthquakes naturally occur. The point is that God did this, and he did it with a point in mind. And that point is clearly spelled out in v17. Again it's to glorify himself. By this you shall know I am the LORD.

- ❖ This is a showdown between the one true God of Creation and the false gods of Egypt. To the ancient Egyptians, the Nile was more than just a river, just a source of fish and water. **Their lives and livelihoods were utterly dependent upon the Nile, so the river itself was worshipped and revered as a god – who holds power over the very source of life.**
 - So think about the message God is sending to Pharaoh and the rest of Egypt. You worship the Nile? You think it's the source of life? I'm going to strike it and it's going to bleed. Everything inside the Nile will die, and it will not be able to sustain your lives, much less your livelihoods.

- ❖ This is God confronting the idols of a society. **Challenging the false gods in which a people have assigned so much power, so much influence and control.** God is exposing their emptiness, their powerlessness, their inability to keep their promises to you. I hope you see how this "plague" is actually grace to us. It's out of the kindness of his mercy that he shows a people the emptiness of their idols and proves to us his own weightiness, his own glory. This is why I like to call them proofs and not just plagues.

- ❖ Now if I had to evaluate our society today, I would say the Nile we're worshipping is definitely digital. We've assigned way too much power to technology, to the accessibility of information, to the speed of communication. **So much of our lives and livelihoods revolve around a powerful device that fits in our pockets and around the information and ease of communication that it provides.** Now just like the Nile, technology can be a good thing. It contributes to human flourishing. But just like the Nile, once a people begin to worship and revere a good thing, it easily devolves into a god-like thing, into an idol.
 - **For many of us, our lives revolve around our phones, or our social media presence, or the entertainment we're streaming onto our devices.** I think God is performing the same kind of sign today – trying to expose the emptiness of our idols. Demonstrating that life – a truly fulfilled life – is not going to come from that device or from anyone or anything on the other end of it. It's the lesson he tried to teach the ancient Egyptians. True life is not coming from the Nile.
 - There's only one true source of life. **You can have the world – the Egyptian can have everything that streams from the Nile; you can have everything that streams from the cloud – but without God, you have nothing.**

- ❖ The LORD once used a miracle on the Nile to prove that point. But there's an even greater miracle in the pages of Scripture making the same point – an even clearer sign of God's control over life itself. It's the sign of the empty tomb. It's the miracle of the Resurrection.
 - **If Jesus is still alive today, then he has demonstrated mastery over life itself.** We spend so much of our days seeking to enhance our lives – to fulfill it, to preserve it, to prolong it. **But it's all in vain if we don't have the Risen Lord in our lives.**
 - Don't be like those Egyptians at the end of the chapter still desperately digging for Nile water. Oblivious to the point of this miracle (proof). Acknowledge instead the glory and power of this God and receive his Son Jesus. He's the resurrection and the life; everyone who believes in him shall never die.