

You Shall Know I AM:

Plagues and the Hard Heart (Exodus 8-10)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on October 7, 2018

Introduction

- ❖ This fall quarter I've been helping lead one of our Sunday School classes called Christianity Explored where we've been watching these videos laying out the basics of the gospel as we're going through the book of Mark. I think the videos are really solid and offer some powerful illustrations for explaining the gospel, and I've been enjoying our table discussions.
 - We also carve out time at the end of each class to cover some FAQs having to do with anything related to the Christian faith or the Bible. These are questions that the students came up with in our first lesson. So each week, I tackle a few really big questions in a short amount of time with as concise of an answer as I can. **One of the questions we looked at the other day had to do with the apparent differences in the depictions of God in the New Testament versus the Old.** The questioner wondered why God (and just the OT in general) comes across as rougher, crueler, and more primitive than what you find in the NT.

- ❖ It was a good question, and a common one. And it got me thinking about Exodus and especially our section today. We're covering a larger section than normal this morning. Instead of having a sermon on each of the ten plagues, we decided to cover the first nine altogether in one sermon and then save an entire sermon for the tenth and final plague. Now last week, we already looked at the first plague where the Nile was turned to blood because it was in chapter 7. This morning we're going to tackle chapters 8-10 in one big swoop and focus our attention in what the plagues as a whole are teaching us.
 - And as I was preparing to answer that particular FAQ, my mind kept going back to the Ten Plagues and how a lot of people have trouble with them. It disturbs them to think that God would send pestilence. Or rain down hail and lightning. Or cover people in darkness and kill their firstborn. It's chapters like these that make people question whether the God of the OT actually is rougher, crueler, and more primitive.
 - Non-Christians react this way but even Christians feel the same. **And if that's you – if you have a hard time with the idea of worshipping a God would send these kinds of plagues – don't be ashamed.** And don't feel like you can't admit that here. Let's all admit that these are tough passages.

- ❖ And that's why I really have to thread the needle. **Because, on one hand, I don't want to water down these passages. I'm not here to justify God's actions.** If my entire sermon was spent trying to get God off the hook, it would be a disservice to you and a dishonor to God. So if these plagues strike a bit of fear in you, then good. I think that's how you're supposed to react when you encounter the Great I AM.
 - **But on the other hand, I don't want to perpetuate this stereotype of the OT God being vindictive and cruel.** And then once you get into the NT, he seems to soften up and become benevolent and gracious. Some would suggest that this either demonstrates the progressive nature of all religions and how they evolve over time, or it proves that, between the OT and NT, we're dealing with two different gods and two different religions.

- ❖ In fact, the first heretic and first heresy the early church had to deal with was a 2nd-century bishop named **Marcion**. He perpetuated this very view – of the OT God as cruel and primitive and to be replaced in Christian worship by the NT God. The early Christians roundly rejected his proposal and deemed it heresy.
 - That’s the kind of error I want us to avoid. **Every time we try to make the teaching of God (or teaching about God) more palatable or relatable or understandable – we risk an imbalance in our theology where we end up in error.** So that’s why I’m trying to thread the needle; to stay on the line; to not fall into error on either side. And to do that, you have to receive all that the Bible teaches – not favoring one set of verses over the other – and to be okay with any tension you find in Scripture.

- ❖ What I’m saying here is that studying the Ten Plagues is no easy task. **We should take great care to let Scripture speak – especially when it speaks in ways that disturb our sensibilities and challenge our preconceived views about God and the way he operates.** We’re not going to muzzle any text. We’re going to hold them all – even if it means holding some in tension.
 - So the way I’m going to tackle three fairly long chapters is by offering three different perspectives on how to read these passages: 1) Reading the plagues historically, 2) Reading the plagues theologically, and 3) Reading the plagues personally.

Reading the Plagues Historically

- ❖ Let’s start by reading the plagues historically. I realize that’s going to be hard for some of you. It’s hard to take these stories seriously – as historical events that actually took place some three thousand years ago. To you, it seems more likely that these stories are mere myth. They’re legendary tales. Like King Arthur and Camelot. They’re beloved stories passed down between generations that transmit important aspects of a people’s culture. They don’t have to be historically factual to be truly meaningful.
 - Many people read Exodus the same way. Perhaps there are a few aspects rooted in history. Maybe ancient Egypt did have a history of a large slave force comprised mostly of Israelites, and maybe there was a leader among the slaves named Moses. And eventually there was a successful slave revolt. But all the fanciful elements of the story are not taken seriously.

- ❖ **I can understand why you might draw a similar conclusion, and that’s why many biblical scholars have gone to great length to explain these plague events by natural causes.** I’ve read a number of elaborate theories tying these phenomena to Egypt’s geography and seasonal patterns. Demonstrating how the plagues are interconnected and how one is the natural cause of the others. Most of these scholars are Christians and still believe God is behind these events, but they’re trying to show how these plagues could’ve occurred without a supernatural intrusion into the created order.

- ❖ So like we said last week, it's argued that the **Nile** didn't turn into literal blood but the color *blood red*, and it was explained by a natural phenomenon that occasionally occurs in the Nile where, in certain areas, an overabundance of reddish sediment collects, allowing particular toxic algae to grow, which causes a mass death of fish and makes the Nile undrinkable.
 - The next plague, an **invasion of frogs**, is explained by the frogs being driven out of the Nile due to the inhospitable environment caused by the toxic algae. And the reason they all suddenly die off is because they were infected with a bacterial disease (most likely anthrax) due to their exposure to the rotting fish.

- ❖ And then the third and fourth plagues, the **invasion of gnats and flies**, can be explained by these bug having incubated in corpses of these rotted frogs. The fifth plague of **pestilence killing livestock** and the sixth plague of an **outbreak of festering boils** are both attributed to disease spread by the gnats and flies.
 - The seventh plague of a **hailstorm** might be unique in its degree of destructiveness but hailstorms are not peculiar to this region. The same could be said of **locust invasions**, the eighth plague. And that **darkness** in the ninth plague is typically attributed to a powerful sandstorm that lasted three days. They point to what it says in chapter 10:21 that it was "*a darkness to be felt*".

- ❖ So there have been attempts to provide plausible, naturalistic explanations for these plagues. And some of them are convincing. It might help anyone who struggles with the miraculous. **But in the end, even if these plagues can be explained by natural causes, that doesn't rule out God's hand behind it all.**
 - But here is where we have to thread that needle. We don't want to overly stress natural causes to the point that we ignore what Scripture says and minimize God's role in presiding over these events. **These plagues may be natural phenomena, but the point is that they commence and cease at the word of the LORD.**

- ❖ For example, if you look in chapter 8:8, Pharaoh asks Moses and Aaron to plead with the LORD to take away the frogs and he'll let the people go. **In v9 Moses is so bold as to let Pharaoh pick the time for Moses to make that prayer.** "*Moses said to Pharaoh, "Be pleased to command me when I am to plead for you and for your servants and for your people, that the frogs be cut off from you and your houses and be left only in the Nile."*" (8:10) And Pharaoh says, "Tomorrow." And that's what Moses does. He waits until the next day to make the prayer and God does it. All the frogs immediately die out.
 - And if you consider the third plague involving gnats, it says in chapter 8:16 that the LORD instructs for Aaron to use his staff to strike the dust of the earth, and the dust becomes gnats in all the land of Egypt. And then in v18, the Egyptian magicians fail to replicate results. Earlier when it came to the blood and frogs, the magicians reproduced something similar, but now they're at a loss. This is a God thing.
 - **So the text itself is pointing to a supernatural cause.** Let's not ignore what the text actually says in order to force a more naturalistic explanation. These plagues are all connected to forces of nature, but they're still acts of God.

- ❖ And these plagues, along with all the events in the book of Exodus, are presented as acts of God that actually took place in time and space. **They're not presented as legendary tales, but as events that happened in history.** And that makes a difference.
 - If these passages are meant to be read as parables that teach a moral lesson, then their rootedness in history makes no difference. **But the text presents itself not as ahistorical parables but as records of God's redemptive acts to be retold to future generations.** Listen to chapter 10:1-2. The LORD says he plans to show these Ten Plagues (Signs), *“and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the LORD.”*
- ❖ Centuries later, when Israel found itself in exile once again, this time in Babylon, they derived hope and comfort from these stories of the Exodus – not because they're parables that convey meaningful lessons – but because they're reminders of how God literally rescued their forefathers and how he's merciful and faithful to rescue them again. For the Israelites, it made a world of difference to read these stories as historical events.

Reading the Plagues Theologically

- ❖ So that's one perspective I want to offer – reading the plagues historically. Now let's consider a second perspective. Let's read these plagues theologically. One of the main points I made last week is how these plagues were not just random displays of divine power – as if God were merely flexing his muscles, trying to punish Egypt or to prove his might. **We emphasized how each of these plagues were pointed theological messages.** I would argue that a number of theological messages were being conveyed. Let me point out a couple.
- ❖ **One of those messages is that the God of Israel has no rivals.** The LORD was essentially picking on the so-called gods of the land. The Egyptians worshipped the Nile as the source of life, so he struck it and made it bleed and reek of death. They worshipped a fertility goddess named Heqet who was depicted with the head of a frog, so this frog invasion was a way of giving the people over to their idolatries. And killing off those frogs proves God's power.
 - And turning the dust of the earth into gnats could be a swipe at Geb, the Egyptian god of the earth/ground. Killing the cattle was probably an insult to Hathor, a goddess typically depicted as a cow. And commentators agree that the ninth plague was definitely a direct challenge to sun worship and the cult of Ra, the Egyptian sun god.
 - So the LORD is making it clear that he alone is God, that he has no rivals. In chapter 9:14, he says it clearly. This is right before the hailstorm. Moses tells Pharaoh that the Lord says, *“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.”*

- ❖ **Another theological message being conveyed by these plagues has to do with the consequences of disobedience.** When we disobey God, there are certainly eternal consequences to face after we die, but there are also consequences in the present. **When we disobey, we unleash forces of de-creation and chaos into our lives and into the world.**
 - That's why God chose signs and wonders so closely tied to forces of nature, to elements of creation. If all God wanted to do was change Pharaoh's mind by making his presence known, then he could've come up with something more spectacular. He could've made a hand appear out of thin air and write a message on the wall to let my people go (he did that in Daniel). Or with the snap of a finger, a entire host of angels could've instantly appeared all with flaming swords in hand.
 - **But instead, God chose to use signs that were so natural that they risked being mistaken merely as natural disasters.** Why go this route? Why choose plagues so tied to forces of nature?

- ❖ It's because he has a theological message to convey. Biblical scholars have noted how these plague events line up with the six days of creation and how what's happening in Exodus 7-10 is essentially an undoing of Genesis 1-2. **In Genesis, God brought order out of chaos, but here in Exodus, the creation order is unraveling.** It's chaos out of order. That's why these plagues have been described as acts of de-creation.
 - In the first and second plagues, there's a direct attack on the Nile where both fish and frogs die, which is an undoing of the fifth day of creation. Commentators point out how key terms harken back to Genesis 1. For example, in chapter 8:3, it says the Nile will "*swarm*" with frogs, and in v21 God says he'll send "*swarms*" of flies on you. That harkens back to Day Five of creation where living creatures are said to swarm the waters and flying things swarm about the earth (Gen. 1:20). **But now the swarming leads *not* to greater beauty and order but to chaos and destruction.**
 - There are other examples. The fifth plague of pestilence killing livestock is a reversal of the sixth day of creation where beasts of the earth are given life. The seventh and eighth plagues of hail and locusts destroy vegetation in contrast to the third day of creation where vegetation sprouts across the earth. And the ninth plague of darkness is a direct reversal of the first day of creation where God separates the light from darkness.

- ❖ **This is a reversal of the creation order.** Man was made in the image of God and given dominion over creation (Gen. 1:28). **But now in Exodus, creation is taking dominion over man.** Animals are invading and taking over the land. Elements of creation are either failing or causing mass destruction.
 - What's the theological message behind all this? **These plagues are teaching us that there are natural consequences to our disobedience.** When we disobey, we don't just incur God's wrath. **We unleash forces of de-creation and disorder into our lives and into the world.** Here's an illustration: Imagine your cholesterol level is through the roof, and your doctor tells you to stop eating red meat. Now you could ignore your doctor's orders. You can disobey.

- ❖ What are the consequences? **Sure, you'll displease your doctor, but you also unleash forces of de-creation in regards to your health.** Instead of leading to greater order and flourishing of life – your poor dietary habits will lead you to greater disorder and possibly death. You might get a heart attack and die.
 - You have to realize your doctor is *not* trying to keep you from fun but to keep you from harming yourself. **Those orders are given in accordance with your nature – with how you were created.** They're intended for your flourishing. To ignore them, to disobey them, is self-harm. **You're unleashing forces of de-creation and destruction into your life.**

- ❖ So now consider God as the Great Physician – who knows how you tick better than any doctor because he created you. And in the same way, his commands accord with your nature – with how you were designed. So they're intended for your flourishing. Obedience to God leads to greater life; while disobedience leads to self-harm, to self-destruction.
 - Let's think of some examples. **We see, in Scripture, God's commands for sexual intimacy to be experienced and enjoyed only in the confines of marriage between a husband and wife.** And that's because it accords with our nature. We were designed to enjoy intimacy within the covenant of marriage. To ignore that design – to disobey this created order – is to unleash forces of de-creation into your life.

- ❖ But you might not even realize what it's doing to you. **Because you're not being confronted by an angel or some undeniably supernatural act of judgment, you might conclude your sin is not that serious.** But that's a failure to recognize the forces of de-creation. All the anxiety, insecurity, and frustration in your relationship are the natural consequences of your disobedience. Repenting of your actions and reserving that kind of intimacy within marriage won't just please God – it'll result in greater peace, security, and satisfaction in that romantic relationship of yours. Because that's part of God's created order.

- ❖ Here's another example. God made us to work. Adam was given a job to tend the Garden. But worship, not work, was meant to be central. The worship of God is the top priority.
 - **So if you fall into a pattern of overworking – putting work on the top, placing it above your health, above your family, above God – then you're unleashing those same destructive forces.** You're probably not going to see a hand writing on the wall, telling you to go home. So you might not realize that you're under judgment. The disorder in your home life. The deterioration in your health. The disintegration in your spiritual life. Those are acts of God. Repenting and re-prioritizing will restore the health of your spiritual life, your home life, and your own body.

- ❖ **Friends, if we ignore this theological message, we risk being in a situation where we're under judgment for disobedience but even don't realize it.** God's sending you signs and wonders, but they're too natural for you to even notice. Perhaps those troubles and hardships you're facing – the ones you assumed were just natural consequences – are actually signs from God. He's sending a message to you – to turn from your ways and turn back to him.

Reading the Plagues Personally

- ❖ This leads to our third perspective for reading the plagues. We've read the plagues historically, theologically, and now let's read them personally. This is where I want us to bring these passages even closer to home.
 - I want to zero in on chapter 8 and Pharaoh's reaction to the invasion of frogs in v8. Let me read it to you, "*Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, "Plead with the Lord to take away the frogs from me and from my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the Lord."*"

- ❖ **What I find fascinating is how Pharaoh now knows who God is and addresses him by his proper name.** Remember back in chapter 5 when the name, Yahweh, meant nothing to him? "*Who is the LORD?*", he asked (5:2). But now he knows. **He recognizes that these plagues are not merely natural events or magic tricks.** His court magicians are able to replicate the sign and produce more frogs. But they couldn't do what he needed them to do, which was not to make more frogs but to get rid of them. So Pharaoh acknowledges God's power, which is why he asks for prayer. He believes now in the power of prayer!

- ❖ **But there's a huge difference between true spirituality and mere superstition.** You can believe in a higher power, in a Creator God. You can believe in the power of prayer. You can know a lot about God, but until he's your LORD, until you trust in him and surrender to him as your Lord and Savior – you're just dabbling in superstition.
 - Notice what Pharaoh asks Moses and Aaron to pray for. **He just wants to be rid of the frogs. He wants immediate relief.** He's just dealing with symptoms while ignoring the cause – the root problem.
 - And we do the same, when we treat our faith as mere superstition. When we pray or worship as just means to relieve our troubles. **It's like negotiating with God.** I'll concede to these demands if you bring me relief. I'll surrender these aspects of my life. But there are limits. I still want a degree of control. Come on, Lord, let's come to an agreement.

- ❖ That's what we see Pharaoh trying to do. In chapter 8:25-29 as the flies are buzzing about, he tries to negotiate with God. He tells Moses, "You can go sacrifice to the LORD but just stay within the borders." **But God won't have it – there's no negotiating with him.**
 - Later on in chapter 10:8 during the locust invasion, Pharaoh tries again with a compromise. All the men of Israel can go, just leave behind the women and children. And then as the land is covered in darkness, in chapter 10:24, he tries again, "You can all go as long as you leave behind your animals." But God's not having it. **When it comes to the Great I AM, there's no negotiating. There's only submitting.**

- ❖ Friends, this is where we need to do some self-reflection. Does our relationship with the LORD basically amount to a negotiation? Where we're trying to cut a deal so that he removes the nuisances in our lives, the pain, the suffering, the symptomatic issues?

- ❖ A lot of times we act like Pharaoh. We just want to be rid of the frogs and gnats. We just want the boils to go away or the hail to stop. And once they do, once God brings relief, we go back to ignoring him and disobeying him.
 - But that proves we don't understand Christianity. The gospel offers relief – not just to your troubles on the surface – but relief to the root of your problems. And it has to do with the hardness of our hearts.

- ❖ **Just like Pharaoh, we all start off with a hard heart towards God.** We don't want to do what he says. We don't like submitting to his Word, so we disobey. Now in our previous point, I stressed how our disobedience unleashes forces of de-creation and destruction in our lives. It was an important point to make since many of us only associate disobedience with incurring God's wrath and judgment – and not realizing the harm we do to ourselves.
 - But let's not kid ourselves. **If we're talking about the root of our problems – then God's wrath and judgment are still it.** That's affirmed in our passage. As these plagues increase and intensify, they ended with darkness over the land (a biblical image for God's anger) and concluded with the death of Egypt's firstborn sons.

- ❖ But the darkness and death were meant to foreshadow another display of wrath and judgment, **when another unexpected darkness descended upon the land and concluded with the death of another firstborn Son** (Mk. 15:33, 37). But there's good news in this story. Because this darkness (and the anger it represents) wasn't directed at sinners like us but at a Substitute who was bearing the sins of others as he hung on the cross. And though this death was something sinners like us deserve, it was a Savior who died for us.
 - Perhaps the LORD is calling you to receive his Son Jesus – because he wants to get to the root of your troubles. Maybe this morning God's going to exchange your hard heart for a new heart of faith. Let me go to God and ask him to do just that for you.