

# The God who judges

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Thanks, Dustin. The last few weeks we've been taking this kind of quick view over Exodus.

I'm keen to kind of keep on moving through at a pace so that we see the big picture and don't get kind of missed the wood for the trees. So that does mean we're covering some fairly big sections. It does mean we're reading some fairly long chunks.

But hopefully, even as we're reading those, it's enjoyable. It's a great kind of narrative. It's an incredible gripping story that we're making our way through. One sporting figure who I've always found fairly fascinating is Muhammad Ali.

He's widely regarded as probably the best boxer ever. A lot of people would say he's the greatest sportsman ever. Certainly a view that he held. I am the greatest, he was famous for saying.

And there was a lot to him as a person. He was a very witty and clever man. He was a very outspoken person. He was very politically active. He had incredible principles which he stuck to rigidly.

[ 1 : 0 4 ] His life is this kind of fascinating story, all sorts of details. But ultimately, the reason he's remembered is because he won. The reason he's remembered is because he defeated his opponents time and time again.

It's because he backed up his claims to be the greatest, ultimately with victory over anyone who would try and deny him that title, who would deny that claim.

He won. What we're going to see in Exodus in these chapters this morning is that God wins. That God shows who he is, that he is the greatest.

Not just through what he says, but through what he does. And ultimately through this victory over those who would stand against him. And we see that here in the complete defeat of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt.

The complete defeat of the nation of Egypt, who are kind of the heavyweight superpower of the day. And so that's what we're going to be looking at this morning. A quick reminder of the story so far.

[ 2 : 0 5 ] Last Sunday, we saw God telling Moses that he was going to send him to Pharaoh to bring the people of Israel out of slavery. And Moses, to be fair, wasn't that keen on this idea.

And yet eventually, he agreed with God. After God having to time and time and time again stress that it didn't matter what Moses was able to do. It didn't matter how strong or capable Moses was.

It was what God was going to do. That he was sufficient and that he was with Moses. And so we're skipping ahead a couple of chapters to fill in the gap. Chapter 5, Moses with his brother Aaron.

Then go to Pharaoh and they say this. Verse 1, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let my people go. And Pharaoh's response is kind of a flat out no.

Pharaoh says, who is the Lord? I don't know the Lord. I will not let Israel go. And really the passage that we're looking at, the section we're looking at this morning, is God's response to what Pharaoh says there.

[ 3 : 08 ] Because by the end of the plagues that God sends, God and the whole of Egypt will know exactly who the Lord is. Pharaoh will know the Lord.

Verse 5 of chapter 7 that we just read, 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.

How's he going to do this? Well, God says, verse 4, he's going to bring his people out of Egypt by great acts of judgment. And the plagues that we're looking at are these acts of judgment.

A more literal translation actually than plagues is blows or strikes. It is kind of like this boxing match where God is going head to head with Egypt and he's going to defeat Egypt and show that he is the greatest.

He's going to do that by showing his judgment on Egypt. And it's only through that judgment on one hand that there's going to then be rescue for God's people on the other. But before we dig into this, before we really think about these plagues, these blows, I want us to just pause there for a minute on this idea of a God who judges, a God of judgment.

[ 4 : 22 ] Perhaps that's a kind of, as I say that, you can feel yourself kind of tense up a little bit. It's not an idea that we're that comfortable with. If you're here this morning, I suppose kind of exploring Christianity, trying to find out a bit more about what the Bible teaches, about what the Bible says God is like, well, your instant response might be to say, well, this isn't really the kind of God that I would like to believe in.

This isn't really the kind of God that I'm after. Or perhaps if you are a Christian, you might feel happy speaking with people about a God of love, a God who is faithful, a God who is sufficient in all times.

But actually, the idea of a God who judges, it's something that we're not quite as keen to bring up in conversation. I want to kind of identify that.

You know, that's a real issue that we face. And hopefully as we get through this morning, we're going to be able to deal with this issue, to try and make sense of that. And yet as we start, I do want us to try and see that ultimately we recognize that judgment is needed in life for there to be justice.

Let me just give one example of this before we dig in. We've spoken a fair bit in the last few months about international justice mission. They do incredible work rescuing people from modern-day slavery all over the world.

[ 5 : 38 ] And we had the concert before Christmas where Andy Bevan came and spoke to us a bit more about their work. You might have been here the Sunday before the concert. We played a video that they'd sent through.

And one of the first things this video said was this. In describing their work, it said, slavery won't come to an end until criminals know that they won't get away with it.

So we partner with police to arrest and prosecute criminals. I remember thinking as you kind of watched the video, and it was quite early on, you know, why major on that?

Why tell us about that? Why not just kind of show us the happy faces of kind of rescued children and rescued families? Well, the point is, and the reason why that is such a big emphasis of their work, is that International Justice Mission recognizes that without justice, that without those criminals facing judgment and punishment, then ultimately there's not going to be any lasting rescue.

There's not going to be any change in circumstance for the good. Freedom comes with judgment. And that whole package is good news. That whole package comes together time and time again in the Bible.

[ 6 : 50 ] And so I hope as we dig into this, we're not going to make any apologies for the fact that, you know, we are thinking about God judging this morning. God himself doesn't make apologies for that. He says, that's what I'm going to do.

And yet I hope as we even just think of that simple example there, it perhaps gives us the space to approach this subject and not thinking, oh, what an incredibly old-fashioned thing, what an incredibly terrible thing.

Perhaps maybe even starting to think, well, maybe that's a good thing. And I hope that's what we're going to see as we work through these plagues. So as Dustin said, there are 10 plagues in total.

We're going to focus on the first nine. The last one kind of stands apart a bit. We'll look at that next week. Basically going all the way through chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10. And these first nine plagues come in three sets of three, three kind of rounds of three plagues.

And there's a pattern, you see, that introduces them. The first one of each set, God says to Moses to meet Pharaoh in the morning. If you've got your Bibles open, you'll see that there, chapter 7, verse 14.

[ 7 : 53 ] The second plague of each set is introduced simply by the formula, then the Lord said to Moses, go into Pharaoh. You see that, chapter 8, verse 1. And then in the third plague of each set, there's no warning to Pharaoh.

God just sends Moses. See that in chapter 8, verse 16. And so we read through that first set, that first round of three plagues. That pattern repeats itself two more times.

As Dustin said, we're not going to read all the way through. But if we did, we'd see that pattern repeat itself two more times, giving these three rounds of three plagues, each with its own emphasis, each teaching us something specific.

So let's now dig in and have a look. Okay, round one. The first three plagues, water turned to blood and frogs and gnats.

And the emphasis of this round is that God's judgment shows his unique power. God's judgment shows his unique power. These signs are there to show God's power over Pharaoh, over Egypt, over all the gods of Egypt, so that the whole of Egypt will know the unique power of God.

[ 9 : 03 ] And we see that right from the off. God is going for the jugular as he attacks the river Nile, the life source of Egypt. One book puts it this way, an attack on the Nile was nothing less than an attack on Egypt itself.

The Nile wasn't just kind of like a river, as we think about it. The Nile was worshipped as a god. And yet here, the true god turns that water to blood.

He shows his unique power over that false god. And then that's actually the same with the frogs. The Egyptian goddess of fertility was called Heh, who was represented by a frog.

And you'll still see that on kind of pictures of ancient Egyptian artwork. And so the second plague, it's kind of like God saying, you know, you like frogs? I'll give you frogs. You know, these false gods are nothing compared to God.

He can create them just like that. And there's frogs everywhere. Imagine it, you pour your cereal, there's a frog in your bowl, a cup of tea, there's a frog in your mug, there's frogs in your bed, there are frogs everywhere you step.

[ 10 : 06 ] It's disgusting. And then Pharaoh's magicians, verse 7, well, they get involved. Well, they're able to make more frogs, which is not massively helpful at the time. But note that the point is that only God can take the frogs away.

And he does it at this specific time so that there's no doubt about who's done that. The second plague, and then following on from the frogs, gnats. If you've been to the west coast of Scotland during the mid-season, you've kind of got a small taste of what this is like.

Again, a miserable situation. And the significance here is that whereas these kind of court magicians, the Egyptians, have in some ways been able to match or copy, turning the water to blood, and making some of these frogs, well, here, verse 18, that they can't do that.

They cannot match. They cannot reproduce this. They have to admit to Pharaoh, this is the finger of God. And so by the end of round one, even, they've had to admit that this is a unique power which is beyond them.

These magicians drop out of the picture. They're left trailing in the wake of God's unique power. And yet what's Pharaoh's response? We'll have a look at the end of verse 19 there, but Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them as the Lord had said.

[ 11 : 31 ] It's a response that we'd see time and time again through these plagues. Sometimes it's going to look as if Pharaoh's given in, that he's agreed, but ultimately, in the end, each time, we're going to read that Pharaoh's heart is hardened.

He refuses to do what God says. And the idea here is really interesting, actually. Sometimes we read that Pharaoh hardens his heart. Sometimes we read that it's God who hardens Pharaoh's heart.

That leaves us with a question, well, who is it? What's going on? And the point is this, and it's a big point, it's an important point, that Pharaoh is completely responsible for his actions.

Pharaoh is completely responsible for bringing these judgments upon himself and his nation for refusing to listen, refusing to do what's right. And yet, at the same time, God's at work.

It's not that God's unable to change Pharaoh's heart as if he doesn't somehow have the power, but it's in fact that God is using this stubbornness to show his unique power. And so Pharaoh's completely responsible for his actions, and yet through that stubbornness and God's judgment on that, we see God's unique power, the focus of this first round of plagues.

[ 12 : 47 ] So then what does this unique power, what difference does that make to us today as we read through these plagues? The point of this first section is not to say, you know, you better behave or there'll be frogs in your bed or anything like that.

The point of this is that there is a God of unique, incomparable power, that nothing comes close to him. And in some ways, how are we supposed to respond to that?

Well, it's not necessarily about what we do, but perhaps we're just supposed to say, wow, what a God that is. He's not a kind of a cuddly, fluffy God.

This opening round blows away that image of God as like an old grandpa sitting up on a cloud, kind of doddering about. The God of the Bible, the whole Bible, it's ferocious.

It's terrifying. It's like the great line from the lion, the witch, and the wardrobe where they're describing Aslan. Aslan is coming. Aslan, who they put their hopes in.

[ 13 : 45 ] And the little girl Lucy says, well, is he quite safe? And one of the main characters says, of course he isn't safe, but he's good. And that's the same with God.

This is not a God who we kind of mess around with. This is not a God who we try and fit into our agenda, but he is a good God and a God who we bow down to and worship.

And yet that's the very thing that Pharaoh refuses to do. And so this judgment continues and that brings us into round two. Round two, plagues four, five, and six.

They start there in verse 20 of chapter eight. Again, God sending Moses to Pharaoh in the morning. And firstly, is that a huge swarm of flies which fill the sky and the houses and cover the land.

And then the death of livestock, of horses, donkeys, camels, herds, and flocks. And then thirdly, the sixth plague is boils and soars all over people's bodies across the land.

[ 14 : 49 ] Again, it's a serious judgment. Again, it's a dire situation. Again, we see God's unique power. The world has never seen anything like this before, but the focus of round two is this, that God's judgment doesn't fall on his people.

We see in round two that God makes a distinction. And so in all these plagues, it's explicitly mentioned that God's people are spared. God's people are set apart.

So there are swarms of flies everywhere. And yet look at verse 22. But on that day, God says, I will set apart the land of Goshen where my people dwell, that no swarms of flies shall be there.

I will put a division between my people and your people. And so flies are kind of knee-deep all over the country, and yet not in this area called Goshen where the Israelites stay.

They're out having a barbecue. They're having a great time. They're spared this judgment. And it's the same with the livestock who die. They lie dead in the field across Egypt, but chapter 9, verse 4, the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt so that nothing of all that belongs to the people of Israel shall die.

[ 16 : 04 ] And that's what happened. God made that distinction. Now the sixth plague, who did these boils affect in chapter 9, verse 11? Well, we see that Moses is still standing.

And yet we read, the boils came upon the magicians and upon all the Egyptians. Again, it's not indiscriminate, but God's people are spared.

The big point in round 2 is that God's judgment doesn't fall on God's people. Again, if we think about that today, it's not uncommon for us to hear people slagging off God.

I think more and more the kind of people's question that people ask about God and that you perhaps face is moved on from, you know, does God exist to more, well, is God even good anyway?

People have this idea that, you know, it's very easy to come across articles or books where people will speak about God as a bully or as a moral monster or as kind of irrationally angry or unjust or unfair.

[ 17 : 05 ] Actually, this picture in Exodus, round 2, is to show that none of that is the case. This is not a thoughtless anger. The picture we get here in round 2 is of a father's love for his children, a father who will do anything to protect his children from harm.

That's what we said at the beginning, that this judgment is not some kind of nasty thing. This is not a God to be ashamed of. It is through this judgment on wickedness that God's people are protected, that ultimately God's people are free.

There's a purpose to this judgment. There is justice behind this judgment. This judgment delivers God's people. And so still sometimes for us today, it might feel if you're a Christian, if you're thinking about Christianity, it might feel that the whole world is going on and it doesn't take long to see that a Christian way of life kind of follow what the Bible says is not kind of the in thing to do.

It's not the thing that's kind of endorsed by kind of celebrities or mentioned at gigs and concerts. But there's pressure. There's opposition.

The great encouragement that we see here is that God always remembers his people. That God always acts to protect his people. And ultimately, it is only through judgment that God is going to be able to get rid of the wickedness and evil and rescue those who are his.

[ 18 : 41 ] So round two emphasizes this separation that God makes a distinction. God's judgment doesn't fall on his people. And perhaps that leaves us asking the question.

Perhaps that makes you think, well, how is that fair? Again, we come back to that question, well, what about those who aren't God's people? And really, that's where round three comes in here. And the emphasis here is that God's judgment invites others to repent.

And the point of this round is that this category of God's people who avoid judgment, who are protected through judgment, is not a closed shop. It's not a kind of limited offer.

But it's an offer that's open to everyone. And so we see that here. The first plague in this set is hail. And this isn't just the kind of hail that, you know, stings your ears a little bit.

Verse 18 of chapter 9, this says it's the kind of hail that has never been seen before. The kind of hail that destroys crops and livestock. But in the midst of the warning of this judgment, before this judgment falls, there's this invitation to the Egyptians in verse 19.

[ 19 : 53 ] So get your livestock and all that you have in the field into safe shelter. Look, you can avoid this judgment before it's too late, God tells the people.

And we read that some of the Egyptians do that. Those who feared the Lord followed this advice. They brought their livestock in and they were protected. They avoided this judgment. And the next plague, plague eight, locusts.

Again, they bring devastation to the country. I think they kind of finish off anything that's not already been destroyed. But here again, there's the reminder to Pharaoh that it doesn't have to be like this.

And incredibly, this time even, verse seven, it comes from his own servants. They say basically, let the people go. This judgment is ruining us and we can stop it.

And we see Pharaoh almost concedes, but still, he won't quite let all of God's people go. And so this plague comes. And the point is that this judgment doesn't have to fall on these people.

[ 20 : 53 ] time and time again, God offers a way out. And yet, because of Pharaoh's hardness of heart, because of his refusal to come over to God's side, to submit to him, it does fall.

And he feels the full force of that. And we began by saying how this idea of judgment, it perhaps makes us feel uneasy. I hope this passage kind of shows us that actually judgment is needed for justice to be done.

For a world free from evil, we need judgment to fall on that evil. It is necessary, it's essential. And yet, we see here that God offers a way out.

There's an invitation to all people to move over to God's side. And so, rather than crushing him, this judgment frees them. Now, really, this brings us to the ninth plague, the final plague of round three, darkness.

darkness. Darkness all over the land for three days. Verse 21 describes it as the kind of darkness you could feel. It's as if almost nothing is left of Egypt.

[ 22 : 03 ] It's the ultimate sign of judgment. But still, Pharaoh refuses. Even though he's seen the power of God through this judgment, even though he's seen how God protects his people from judgment, even though he's had this invitation from God to submit to him and bring this judgment to an end, still Pharaoh's hard is hard.

Still, he refuses. And we'll see the consequences of that next week. And yet, there is another time in the Bible where we read about darkness falling over the whole land.

This time, not for three days, but for three hours. And that is at the cross as we look forward to the New Testament. as we read in the Gospel of Mark that as Jesus breathed his last, as he was crucified, darkness fell over the land.

And again, that darkness was a sign of judgment. At this time, the ultimate judgment as the punishment which we all deserve, the punishment for the many things that we've done wrong, fell on Jesus.

And that is the ultimate way that this judgment invites us to repent, to turn to God. That's the way that this offer to avoid this judgment and become God's people is made possible.

[ 23 : 27 ] It's not by trying really hard. It's not by being really good people. It's not that kind of bad people deserve punishment, but nice people like us are okay. No, we become God's people.

Those people he protects, he fights for, he rescues, he rescues only by accepting that there on the cross, Jesus faced the judgment that we deserve. He took that in our place.

So we see that God is a God who judges. God has to be a God who judges for there to be justice. He has to deal with the evil in the world. But again, evil is not just kind of out there.

There's parts of that in all of us. And so what's the solution? Well, it's that God takes that judgment on himself to rescue us if we put our trust in Jesus.

God's desire for judgment, for justice, that can never be separated from his incredible love, a God of love. Because we see that most clearly at the cross where he took that judgment for us.

[ 24 : 34 ] It's at the cross where we see that unique power of God. God's judgment because in the resurrection we see his power even over death itself. It's at the cross where we see that God's judgment doesn't fall on his people because he takes that judgment on himself for us.

It's at the cross where we see that invitation which there is for all people to avoid that judgment. Because that price has been paid, that offer is there to come and submit to God, to be his people, to put our hope in Jesus and all that he has done for us.

The punishment, the judgment that he has taken on our behalf so that through him we can be free. Thank you.