

Just to Judge, Mighty to Save

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[0 : 00] A few years ago, Mary and I spent a little bit of time traveling around Europe. It was a post-COVID honeymoon.! We had an absolutely great time. As part of our travels, we traveled through Switzerland. Very much through Switzerland.

The budget didn't quite allow for a lengthy stay. But just traveling through that country was enough to be amazed by it. It was like Scotland on steroids. Bigger mountains, better weather, truly spectacular scenery.

But perhaps you've been yourself and know something of what I'm talking about. It is a truly beautiful place. While we were there, I remember a very brief conversation I had with the receptionist in one of the hotels we stayed at.

Like most receptionists, he said, as I was just checking us out of the hotel, he said, Did you enjoy your stay? And I said, right, yes, everything's been great. We've had a great time.

This place is amazing. And then I said to him, it must be pretty incredible living in a place like this. To which he just shrugged his shoulders and said, you get used to it.

[1 : 14] And that was it. I couldn't quite believe it, right? But there is something of that in all of us, isn't there? When we become familiar with something, but when we expect it, rather than being amazed by it, we can quickly become numb to it, blind to just how amazing a sight we are seeing.

Now, we are stepping into the ten plagues this morning, and we need to be on guard, I think, as we come to this, against being a Swiss receptionist. Don't want to generalize them all.

But as we come to this, right, as we see blood, frogs, gnats, flies, and all the rest, that we don't just come and think, ah, we've seen it before. I know this one.

I remember that from Sunday school. Because through these plagues, the Lord of heaven and earth is making himself known to us. Don't let familiarity dull your sense of wonder at what we see as we go through these plagues together. Last week in chapter 7, we saw the start of chapter 7 there, didn't we?

We saw the kind of the blueprint laid before us. It was projected out of what is coming over the next five chapters. The Lord is making himself known. We read that a couple of times already in those first couple of plagues. That is the thing that is happening across these plagues. And he does that, as we've just read again, doesn't he? Through obedient messengers, through great signs, and through a hard-hearted enemy. We're going to see that again today, and again next week, and again the week after that, and again the week after that. And that is a good thing. That is a good thing. We just sang from Psalm 78, where God promises to unfold the meaning of the parables of old. That is a good psalm to sing as we come to maybe a slightly obscure kind of Old Testament passage that we wonder, how does this apply to us today? It's also a good psalm to sing, though, before we step into this part of Exodus, because it is a psalm that explicitly speaks of the importance of remembering God's mighty acts, and reminds us of the danger of forgetting them, of becoming blind to them. But later on, that same psalm grieves over the way in which Israel provokes God to anger by turning their back on him, because they forgot.

[3 : 49] They forgot that he is the God who can call a plague of frogs from the river and turn dust into gnats. They forgot that he was the God who turned the water of the Egyptians to blood, because they forgot that he was the God of the river and turn dust into the river.

Because they forgot that he was the God of the river and turn dust into the river. They turned away. We need to be a people who remember what God has done in the past so that we would trust and obey him in the present. So we are going to hear that drumbeat throughout this section and deliberately take our time going through them. We're going to do that by taking the first nine plagues three at a time. That is not an arbitrary distinction, that there's good reason for it, that there's a

pattern. Even if you just look there with me, right, verse 15 of chapter 7, the Lord says to Moses, go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out in the winter. Turn over with me to chapter 8, verse 1. Second plague, the Lord says to Moses, go into Pharaoh. Third plague, verse 16, there is no warning to Pharaoh, the plague just comes. Glance down to verse 20, start at the fourth plague, rise up early in the morning. Fifth plague, go into Pharaoh. Sixth plague, no warning at all. The same pattern repeated again for seven, eight, and nine. Go to Pharaoh in the morning, go into Pharaoh, no warning at all.

We are given three threes here before the kind of climactic tenth plague, and that is the pattern we're going to follow over the next few weeks. And as we go, we'll see that while the Lord is making himself known throughout this section, he is also teaching us something a little more specific in each of these kind of mini sections along the way. Now, that is the path that lays before us over the coming weeks. So, this week, as we've just read, we'll look at the first three, where we also see that the Lord is just to judge and mighty to save. He is just to judge because Egypt is an unrighteous and ungodly nation.

He is mighty to save, unlike the magicians in Egypt. That's what we're going to see along the way. So, let's step into the first plague, figuratively, not literally, otherwise it'd be a bloodbath.

Sorry, that's a terrible pun. Forgive me. Come back with me, though, to chapter 7, 17, sorry, of chapter 7. The first plague and our first point, God is justly judging an unrighteous nation.

[6 : 35] Now, Moses is sent into Pharaoh by the river early in the morning to declare, 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 to blood.

And that is exactly what happens. Aaron stretches out his staff over the water, and the whole river turns into blood.

You might well have heard or hear some people try to kind of explain away the plagues through natural phenomena. Usually, this first one usually begins with kind of a downpour further up the Nile that washes reddish earth into the Nile that kind of eventually makes its way downstream so that it looks like blood.

People offer kind of increasingly far-fetched explanations for the rest of the plagues, too. Now, it is true, isn't it, that God can work through natural means to achieve His purposes.

That is absolutely true. The only problem with that explanation here is that it doesn't remotely fit with what the Bible says. The waters, the rivers, the ponds, and the pools, it all became blood.

[7 : 58] Aaron stretches out his staff, and the river turns into blood instantly. Right, Pharaoh wasn't kind of sitting there for a few hours, was he, watching a reddish tinge slowly appear from upstream.

It immediately became a rank graveyard. The fish died. The Nile stank. Now, you can imagine that would be pretty disgusting, can't you?

Offensive to the senses. But there's more than inconvenience going on here. The Nile was the life source of Egypt. Everything dependent on it.

Think of it like someone knocking out the electricity grid today. Life would grind to a halt, wouldn't it? The economy would collapse. National security would be compromised.

Daily life as we know it would be unlivable. Now, the first plague is not just a nuisance. It would have brought the country to its knees. And maybe we wonder for a moment whether that is really fair.

[9 : 07] We know, don't we, that Pharaoh hardened his heart against God and has brutally enslaved his people. He's definitely not one of the good guys, is he? But what about the average Egyptian?

Should they really be getting caught up in all of this? The answer is simply, perhaps a little uncomfortably, yes.

Myrdo read earlier for us from Romans 1, where Paul makes clear that everyone, through creation that unconscious, knows enough about God knows enough about God to know that he is God and that he is worthy of our worship.

And yet, since the fall, people have deliberately turned their back on him. Myrdo read for us in that passage, claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

An isle was not just the source of life for Egypt. It was the source of many of their gods, where they exchanged the glory of the Creator for images resembling mortal creatures.

[10:24] It's likely why Pharaoh was down at the river first thing in the morning. It's why we get that really kind of distinctive language at the end of verse 19, of vessels of wood and vessels of stone.

That language of wood and stone is Old Testament shorthand for idols, false gods. Later on in chapter 12, the Lord explicitly says that he is bringing these signs against the gods of Egypt. This is an idolatrous nation. It is filled with idolatry, ungodliness, and is a land filled with unrighteousness.

But back in chapter 1, we saw Pharaoh decree a nationwide slaughter of Hebrew baby boys. He commanded every Egyptian to throw every Hebrew baby boy to be thrown into the Nile.

There's not a man who's obeying the Sixth Commandment, is he? But given that Moses' mother had to hide him for three months, it seems that the Egyptian population were obviously playing their part.

[11:37] This was not a nation that ignored Pharaoh's command to kill all these little babies. There was ungodliness, and there was unrighteousness.

And so God is just to judge. His wrath is rightly revealed against such people. A people who worshipped many false gods and tried to eradicate the people of the one true God.

That, I think, is why God turns the river into blood. Right? If he wanted to kind of stop their life source, he could have just dried up the Nile, couldn't he?

There's one thing we learn through these plagues. It's that nothing is beyond God's power. Why did he not just dry up the Nile? Why did he turn it into blood? Pharaoh in chapter 1 wanted a river of blood.

He wanted the river to be a graveyard. A graveyard of blood is exactly what Pharaoh gets.

[12:44] Don't be surprised when God's acts of judgment involve giving people what they thought they wanted. But it's also, isn't it, a declaration of God's supremacy?

He is supreme over, in control of, has authority over, the very life source of this nation. He is supreme over the supposed gods of Egypt.

And he is just to bring these acts of judgment down on them. It's not a very comfortable thought, is it? But it's a very important reality to remember.

God's wrath is righteous because people are not. And God's righteous wrath will come crashing down in a particular way on those who oppose God and oppress his people.

I don't think this is to serve so much as a kind of warning to the Israelites on the edge of the promised land, as it is actually something of an assurance. That though the enemies of God's people might seem for a time to flourish, the days of those enemies are numbered.

[13:58] And there is a day when all the enemies of Christ's church will be destroyed. The devil and his servants, every seed of a serpent, will face another river of blood.

But we live in a very kind of sheltered society here, don't we? We don't have many worries as a church family. But I don't think we want to underestimate the assurance that this is to brothers and sisters across the world who really do suffer in ways that we can't comprehend, at the hands of wicked people who want to see the church of Christ destroyed.

In Revelation 16, we are given a picture of what is coming in the future, not a momentary judgment on a single nation, but a picture of the worldwide judgment on all of the enemies of God's redeemed people.

And listen to the language that is used here. Let me just read a little bit from Revelation 16. God writes, The third angel poured out his bowl, that is the bowls of God's wrath.

He poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became bloods. And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was.

[15:19] For you brought these judgments. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve.

And I heard the altar saying, Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments. Led by the serpent king, Egypt was an ungodly and unrighteous nation that was shedding the blood of his people.

Even today, the serpent continues to work to destroy the church, to tempt its members away from the flock, to discourage the growth of the gospel, to distract disciples from the work of ministry, at its worst to massacre God's people.

You don't have to go digging that deep into the news to see what Christians in some parts of the world face. But the wrath of God is kindled, and he is just to one day judge those who deliberately

oppose him.

So the Lord makes himself known through a plague of blood, and a just judgment on unrighteousness. Secondly, come the frogs, where we see regret and respite, but no repentance. [16:46] Maybe you're a fan of amphibians, but even if the presence of a frog pleases you, you can't have too much of a good thing, can't you? And they can definitely get a little too close to home.

A frog in a pond is one thing. A frog in the sink is quite another. Well, rightly, don't we? We kind of treasure the sanctuary and security, the comfort of our own homes.

They are our refuge, the place we go to rest. The denial turning to blood was really bad news for the Egyptians, but it was primarily a problem out there.

The frogs come from the Nile into every single little nook and cranny of every Egyptian's home.

Verse 3 of chapter 8, In your house, in your bedroom, on your bed, in your ovens, in your kneading bowls, right?

Nowhere is untouched. Frogs might sound somewhat harmless, but honestly, imagine going home to that. Right? You open the fridge, there's hundreds of slimy little amphibians jumping over everything.

[17:56] You slam the door shut, you open the cupboard, every bowl is full of frogs. You run to the bedroom for respite, but every step you take, you are squelching on something slimy. You pull back the duvet covers to hide from it all, and there's no room for you because the bed's already full.

It's grim, isn't it? It is the stuff of nightmares. And I think we do see that. What we think, don't we, well, I think a river of blood sounds worse than a lot of frogs, but I think we understand what is worse by Pharaoh's reaction.

Much more than the blood, this one begins to get under his skin. Right? The blood was out there. He could send his many slaves to go and dig him a new well, but there is no getting away from the frogs.

So he calls Moses and Aaron back in verse 8 and remarkably asks them to plea with the Lord. The Lord is making himself known, isn't he?

Back in chapter 5, Pharaoh was asking, who is this Lord? Now he's asking for his help. We might think that there is some progression here in Pharaoh.

[19:11] Maybe his heart is starting to soften towards the Lord. But as we read on, it turns out, doesn't it, that is not the case. Because while Pharaoh regrets the consequences of his actions, he does not repent of his actions.

And there is a big difference between the two. He hates his circumstances, not his sin. And he is ready to say anything in order to get rid of the frogs, even if it means getting this Moses guy to come and pray on his behalf.

The land stinks. The river stinks. The land of Egypt is putrid. Pharaoh is desperate for some relief. But what happens when the frogs go?

Pharaoh, verse 15, when Pharaoh saw that there was respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as Pharaoh had said, as the Lord had said.

Pharaoh remembers the Lord when he regrets that there are frogs. But as soon as there is respite, he is ready to forget.

[20:31] He wants salvation without repentance. He wants the benefits without belief. But bargaining with God is not the way into a relationship with God.

We'll all be familiar with the attitude. Maybe it's been your own in the past. Maybe it's yours today. One that says to God, if you do X, then I'll do Y.

If you get me through these exams, then I'll start to really trust you. If you can take away this illness, then I'll give my life to Jesus. Do not confuse with regret, regret with repentance.

Do not think that bargaining with God is a genuine way into a relationship with God. A soft heart of repentance is one that turns to God first and then asks for his help.

A hard heart that only regrets, that only hates the circumstances and not the sin, is one that demands God's help first, and then on that condition, promises obedience later.

[22:00] But that heart never truly turns to God, does it? It is exactly what Pharaoh does here. It does exactly what Pharaoh does here.

As soon as there is respite, amnesia follows. I've got what I wanted. No need to go to God anymore.

That is Pharaoh. And if that is you too, then you need to see that even if that attitude seems to bring moments of respite, as it did for Pharaoh, the regret will only grow, and lasting peace will never come.

Do not demand that God sort your life out before you turn to him. Turn to him now. Repent now. Believe in the Lord Jesus now.

And then by all means, ask for his help in whatever circumstance you find yourself struggling through. But never make your obedience to his word dependent on his obedience to your word.

[23 : 09] He is God. He is the Lord. And we are not. He is righteous. And we are not.

We do not come with an equal hand to the table. We don't even come with empty hands before him. We come with hands full of sin and nothing else. And yet when we come to him knowing that is all we bring, he will welcome us in, soften our hearts, and make us his own.

Sadly, that was never true of Pharaoh. He came only with regret, not repentance, and as soon as there was respite, he carried on his merry way without a care in the world. And so things would only get worse.

And they did get worse. This time without any warning. Third plague there in verse 16, our final point this morning. Then the Lord said to Moses, say to Aaron, stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth so that it may become gnats over all the land of Egypt.

Gnats. Here we see in this plague that while God's people have powerful enemies, they are powerless to save. One commentator I read this week slightly rudely called this the Scottish plague.

[24 : 31] Suggesting it was the equivalent of an average August on the West Coast. It was obviously a bit tongue-in-cheek. Because as awful as a swarm of midges are, this is much worse.

Think midges, but so dense you can't even see through them. And there is no getting away from them. Right? They are not only in your house, they are on your skin.

All the dust of the earth became gnats in all the land of Egypt. Worse than midges, everywhere, all the time. Right? I don't know about you, I get itchy just thinking about it.

And again, we see, don't we, something of the progression here. From the river of blood out there to the frogs in the home, and now, end of verse 18, gnats on every man and beast.

Right? Out there, in here, on me. Things are already going from nuisance to nightmare. But what really stands out about this plague is what the magicians can't do.

[25 : 39] We've kind of glossed over the magicians thus far, really so that we can take it all together here at the end, because that is, I think, the key thing that strings across these three, first three plagues.

We met them briefly last week in the serpent showdown, that after each of the plagues so far, Pharaoh has been summoning, hasn't he, his star players to go up against the Lord and his messengers.

And before this point, right before this third plague, the two sides have seemed maybe uncomfortably evenly matched. The presence of these magicians is a clear indication, isn't it, that this is every bit as much a spiritual battle as a physical one, but so far, they seem to have been up to the task.

In the first plague, Aaron stretched out his staff to turn the water into blood, but remarkably, in verse 22 of chapter 7, the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts.

Same thing with the frogs, verse 7 of chapter 8. The magicians did the same by their secret arts and made frogs come up on the land of Egypt. these idol worshippers, these servants of the serpent king, they are not to be messed with.

[27 : 04] Right? They are not comic book villains. They are genuinely powerful spiritual forces, and they are not for good. But as powerful as they are, they are not nearly as powerful as the Lord.

We have seven more plagues to come, and yet already by round three, they are out cold on the canvas. Verse 18, chapter 8, the magicians tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, but they could not.

They are powerful, but not nearly as powerful as the Lord. There are other spiritual forces at work in our world, but none of them are a match for God.

And so we, as his people, right, we should not take that lightly. We should not laugh about the presence of other spiritual forces in this world, but we need not fear because our God is immeasurably more powerful.

So by the third plague, the magicians have been outgunned, but from the very first plague, as relatively powerful as they have proven themselves to be, they have been powerless to save, unable to rescue.

[28 : 30] Because for all the signs, all the really kind of incredible signs that they have managed to replicate, did you kind of pick up on the irony as we were going through? What are they doing in the first and second plague?

Right, Aaron turns the water of Egypt into blood as an act of judgment on Egypt. Pharaoh summons his magicians to respond to this sign, and what do they do?

More blood. I don't know exactly what Pharaoh was thinking, but I guess he was hoping the Egyptians would make less blood. That would have been nice, wouldn't it?

A week later, the land is teeming with frogs. Pharaoh cannot bear it. In come the magicians. What can you do for me, magicians? How about more frogs?

It is a display of genuine power, but it is a power that is helpless to save. The rest of that second plague really highlighted that, didn't it? Who does Pharaoh go to to get rid of the frogs?

[29 : 47] He's not summoning the magicians, he is summoning Moses. Because while there are powerful forces at work, there is only one who is able to save, one who is able to rescue from the judgment that has come.

the Lord is just to judge, and he is mighty to save. And he will save those who come before him humbly, with soft hearts, not making demands of him, but coming in repentance before him.

We read, didn't we, a little bit from Revelation 16, there is a greater judgment to come. But he relents from that judgment for a season.

The Lord delays the day of judgment so that as many people as possible would know now that he is the Lord. That they would turn from their idols and turn to him.

2 Peter 3, 9, the Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

[31 : 10] He alone is mighty to save. And we know, don't we, that he has saved even through a just judgment.

judgment. We might not oppose God and his people in the way that the Egyptians did, but we know, as Romans chapter 1 tells us, that we are not righteous.

We deserve a just judgment, and yet we need not fear it, because the God who is able to save has been just to take that judgment upon himself.

God came to us in Jesus, not in judgment, but in mercy, that the God's righteous wrath might be laid on his shoulders and not our own.

On the cross of Calvary, God justly judges our unrighteousness and mightily saves us, that we might not live in fear of his wrath, but in the joy of salvation.

[32 : 19] It is good for us to look back at the judgment and salvation we see in Exodus, to see how God really did set his people free through these amazing signs and wonders. But more than anything, these signs and wonders were to point the people then forward to the cross, to the moment in history where God's people were saved and his great enemies defeated, where Satan was ruined once and for all and death destroyed in an empty tomb.

That is who the Lord has revealed himself to be, just to judge, mighty to save, who will judge and overwhelm those who stand firmly opposed to him, but will save those who turn to him by taking the judgment upon himself.

the only just judge of all the earth, the only one powerful enough to save us from the judgment we deserve. So, let us not lose sight of the wonder, not only of what God has done here in Exodus, but of what God has done for us on the cross, so that we, together as his people, brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ, would marvel at what he has done, would remember what he has done, would see that he has made himself known through it, and praise his glorious name, as he has made himself known.

Let us pray that we would do that together as a church family before we close together by singing our final hymn. Amen. Amen. Father, we thank you and praise you that you are the one who has worked so powerfully through history.

Lord, we fall before you as the just judge of all the earth, as the one who is just to judge unrighteousness and ungodliness, who is just to judge those who oppose you and your church.

[34 : 39] But Lord, we also recognize in your just judgment that you would be just to judge us in our sin. But Lord, we rejoice that you have softened our hearts and called us to you in repentance and belief, and that you have shown yourself mighty to save by removing the judgment from us and placing it on your son, Jesus Christ.

We marvel at what you have done in and through him. We rejoice that in his death and the cross and his resurrection, he has defeated sin and death once and for all. Lord, let us wonder at what he has done.

Let us marvel at the amazing gospel of Jesus Christ, that we might never lose the wonder of the cross. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.