

Heavyweight Champion of the World

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[0:00] So much about the future. Most mornings I take the dog out for a walk, and I listen quite often to the Rest is History podcasts.

! I'm still hooked, those of you who have heard that before. One of the recent series they did was on the fall of Carthage, which was a follow-on to one that they'd done on Hannibal's war in Italy. He famously led the elephants over the Alps. They said on the podcast that Hannibal's battle plans are still studied by students today at West Point Military Academy in America because they won him such great victories.

Hannibal was able to wipe out the up-and-coming superpower of Rome again and again and again. Not just win battles, but camp out in their backyard for years and years and annihilate Roman legions pretty much whenever he felt like it.

The most powerful military on earth today learns lessons from victories won over 2,000 years ago because they have gone down in history's Hall of Fame.

[1:15] This morning we're coming to a victory like that, but bigger. The seventh, eighth, and ninth rounds of what I hope by now we're seeing is truly a fight for the ages.

Both opponents are still going, but it's clear now which way the fight is going to go. One is stumbling into the ring, wildly thrashing, beating the air.

The other is biding his time, effortlessly landing blow after blow after blow. One looks like he needs to throw in the towel, but is too stubborn to do it.

The other will finish off his opponent when he decides the world has seen enough of his power.

These opponents are, of course, Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and the Lord God of heaven.

Pharaoh is fighting to keep God's son in slavery. The Lord is fighting to set his son, his people, go. But there is something much bigger than that even going on.

[2:21] See, once God's people are free, well, what then? Picture it, a child growing up in horrendous slavery, finally brought home by dad.

What does dad want now more than anything? A relationship. To be known, to be trusted by his child.

There was a story like that in the news this week. Perhaps you saw it. A woman held as a slave in a house for 25 years. Thankfully, she was released. She was found and released.

She lives now with a foster family. Her new foster mom said she wasn't used to love. It was really hard, even giving her hugs. She wasn't used to things like that.

But within the week, she turned around and started being loving. That's what the Lord wants from this battle, isn't it? Not only to set his son free, but for them to know him, for them to be able to count on his love, for him to be able to bring them home to himself and come and dwell with them in his loving presence.

[3:35] And he wants the world to know who they're up against if they ever set themselves against him and against his son in the way that Egypt did then. Now, this is all ancient history, right?

Exodus maybe feels very, very remote to us. But just look down at chapter 10, verse 2. Why does the Lord tell Pharaoh he's winning these rounds in the ring?

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've done among them, that you may know that I am the Lord.

So with every round that passes, we, countless generations later, are supposed to hear this news and grow ever more confident that the Lord really is truly the one and only God, that he has no rival in heaven or on earth.

And therefore, we are able to trust him completely to do what he has promised us and save us. This is a much bigger deal than anything you could listen to on the rest of history.

[4:50] The fall of Carthage, the Norman Conquest, the Battle of Britain, it's a battle that will echo down not only through history, but through eternity. It's a lesson from history that is here to teach us about our future, all of us.

Salvation and judgment, eternal rescue, or eternal ruin. The question for each of us is, where do we personally stand with this great and awesome Lord today?

So let's see what these next three rounds are here to show us then, beginning with round seven, striking the heart. Now, we've seen the plague strike land and water, people and animals, but now these plagues are hitting a far more specific target.

Last Sunday, JT helpfully asked, what's new in this set of plagues that we haven't seen before?

Well, the Lord actually tells us, he says to Pharaoh in verse 14, let my people go that they may serve me for this time, this time, I will send all my plagues on you yourself.

Or if you glance down and you've got your extra good glasses on, you can see your tiny footnote says, on your heart and on your servants and your people, that you may know there's none like me in all the earth.

[6:18] Pharaoh's heart. We've seen that's a big player, actually, in these plagues. How many times have we read, he hardened his heart, his heart was hardened.

Most recently, the Lord hardened his heart. Like the Wizard of Oz, behind the giant, stern, and intimidating face of Pharaoh is a much smaller, weaker man, pulling the levers.

His heart, the real man behind the mask, Pharaoh himself. And so now the Lord says, he is no longer dealing with the mask, but with the man, your heart.

And that could go in one of two ways. One way or another, the Lord will bring Pharaoh down. But will it be to humble him or to humiliate him?

The Lord is clear here that it will be to humiliate him. Listen to verse 15 and 16. For by now, he says, I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you'd have been cut off from the earth.

[7:27] But for this purpose, I've raised you up to show you my power so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.

This is why it's still going, so that the Lord can display his greatness and power. One of the lessons we find really hard in this bit of Exodus is that the Lord says he displays his glory in both salvation and judgment.

We would love to think, wouldn't we, that what the Lord really means here is that he'll make his name great by bringing Pharaoh to his knees in repentance. But friends, it is clear that what this means is that the Lord will make his name great by making his great enemy, Pharaoh, lick the dust. Pharaoh has set himself on this collision course. We'll see that again in a minute. But the Lord is not trying to turn him back now. He is letting him freefall, crash and burn for his own glory.

Contrast that with the way his word strikes the heart of Pharaoh's servants, though, in verse 20. The Lord tells Pharaoh in his court he's going to send the biggest hailstorm since records began.

[8:48] He even warns them, get everyone inside so they are not destroyed. Then we read, whoever feared the word of the Lord among the servants of Pharaoh hurried his slaves and livestock into the houses.

But whoever did not pay attention to you or literally take to heart the word of the Lord left his slaves and livestock in the field. So last time we saw the Lord kind of draw this line of distinction between Israel and Egypt.

He wanted everyone to see that he is able to both at the same time rescue the godly from trials and keep the unrighteous under judgment.

But now the Lord begins to draw the line in a different place, deep in Pharaoh's half of the court. See, the distinction here is no longer only an ethnic line, Israel versus Egypt, but a heart line, a spiritual line.

Who takes to heart his word, his warning? See his immense grace in that even Pharaoh's closest allies can still at this point humble themselves, turn from serving the serpent king, and serve the king of heaven instead.

[10:10] Even as we near the end game, Pharaoh's cabinet ministers, if you like, are given time to cross the floor and join the opposition before the final wipeout.

We are confronted here, aren't we, by both the kindness and the severity of God. Can we see that? His harshness, that's his word, towards those who ignore him, and his kindness towards those who take to heart his word and act on it.

That question echoes down to us, doesn't it, through the ages. Are we taking to heart the word of the Lord? His warnings about the coming judgment, much worse than a hailstorm, but above all, his word about his judgment falling 2,000 years ago on Christ upon the cross.

He warns us today not to take our things inside, but to hide ourselves in Christ and be saved from the great coming storm of his anger against our sins.

There is a way not to be undone by his plagues. And it's here, it's to listen to his word, believe it, and act on it, to hurry ourselves like Pharaoh's servants to shelter and refuge in Christ.

[11:41] You'd have had to be mad to ignore Moses' warning about the hailstorm. How much more to ignore the Lord Jesus' warning that no one comes to God except through him?

But as for the serpent king, there is now no turning back. It would be as unthinkable as, for example, Keir Starmer becoming a Tory or Donald Trump becoming a Democrat.

They would never do it in a million years. And so, when the Lord sinks Egypt, Pharaoh is tied to the mast. He will go down with the ship. If we're tempted to feel sorry for Pharaoh, we shouldn't.

I watched in the week a few videos of some horrendous hailstorms. Hailstones literally bigger than tennis balls, smashing straight through car windows, people running for cover.

I mean, get hit by one of those and you might not make it. Exodus stresses, this is a hailstorm unlike anything that we can see on YouTube. Hail and fire flashing continually in the midst of the hail.

[12:47] Very heavy hail, such as had never been seen in the land of Egypt. It struck everything in the field. Everything. Man and beast, plants, trees. If he'd ignored the warning, surely this would convince you that you are in over your head.

Throw in the towel, surrender, bow down. He even says that he will. What a confession, we think. This time I have sinned, he says. The Lord is in the right.

I and my people are in the wrong. Victory at last. But no. Not even now. When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned yet again and hardened his heart and did not let the people go.

Why is he carrying on? Why is he persisting? For what? Well, verse 31 gives us this telltale detail. It seems incidental, but think about it. The flax and barley were struck down because the barley was in here and the flax was in bud. But the wheat and emmer were not struck down because they're late in coming up.

[14:00] Do you see it? What's he thinking? Pharaoh is not repenting. He's stalling. He's buying time. Call off the hail and in a few months he thinks we can restock the grain stores and fight on as if nothing had changed.

We've called him the serpent king in our series for a reason. He is a cold-blooded, slippery deceiver. He thinks he can outsmart God by pretending to give in only to turn around once the danger's passed and say, tricked ye.

And verse 34 is clear that that was all him. He hardened his heart against the Lord. Brothers and sisters, we see far more going on in the world now than ever before.

We open the news app and like Ben led us in prayer, we see so much, don't we? So much that is wrong and out of our control. Bombs dropping, war, terror.

We see people in high places making decisions that will affect us all. We hear warnings, don't we, of climate crisis, population collapse, nuclear war, sectarianism.

[15:17] We see churches closed, burned down around the world, Christians kidnapped, imprisoned. And the very same news sites that tell us all that hold out hope like this.

0.1% growth in the economy in the last quarter. 2% off your income tax, public inquiries and reports that will take a decade and sit on a shelf gathering dust.

In the face of such rampant sin and evil that we see, is that really where our hope lies? In things that we can see. We hope in it, don't we, because we feel helpless and we can't bear to be hopeless, but God targeting the heart of Pharaoh reminds us where our hope really lies in this world.

It is in the unseen power and sovereignty of the Lord to whom the whole earth belongs. Friends, we can trust the Lord with the hearts of kings and rulers, the hearts of presidents and prime ministers. We can trust him even with the activity of darkness, the devil, sin, death, everything that sets itself against him and against his son.

[16:41] We are not in control, are we, of what the powerful do and decide, whether that's in this world or in the spiritual realm. We're not in control, but he is. He doesn't always do what we wish he would do.

But in this, we can be confident and secure in the knowledge that he is working out his eternal purposes, his great rescue plan through it all in salvation and judgment, in rescue and ruin, in belief and unbelief.

We know that it is all heading towards his promised end for his own glory, because he holds the hearts of all people, great and small, in his almighty hands.

Do you know there is none like him? Do you know that the earth is his? Do you know the Lord? Why would we resist such a God and not take to heart his word today?

Well, the bell rings and we are out of chapter 9 and into chapter 10 and round 8, no contests. The eighth plague is where it becomes clear that Pharaoh's gamble is the equivalent of someone who's lost everything on bad bets!

[18:05] And is trying desperately to win it back with ever more reckless bad bets. And that is ultimately what the Lord wants. He's drawing Pharaoh, isn't he, into an ever-tightening net by giving him over to his desires, hardening his heart, so that God's supreme victory will be remembered for generations.

Essentially, that, I think, is what this plague is about, the utter humiliation of Pharaoh as he is defeated by the Lord for the eighth time in a row so that we will never, ever forget his power and greatness and pass it down through the generations.

Again, I watched this week videos of locust swarms. The most unnerving thing that I found out, actually, is that when they hatch, locusts can only hop along the ground.

It's only when they've eaten enough that they grow wings, and at that point they start flying. So it's as if, like, at a certain point they kind of level up, and at that point there is no stopping them.

David Attenborough told me that there are billions of locusts that fill 40 miles worth of sky, and, like a giant lawnmower, will eat everything green in its path.

[19:21] And so we think Pharaoh's game is now up. The late crops that he'd banked on after the hail are going to be food for insects. They'll eat whatever was left to you after the hail, says Moses.

Hearing that, Pharaoh's servants turn to him and say, surely you're not going to keep going. Surely it's over. How long is this man going to be a snare to us?

Let the men go that they may serve the Lord their God. Do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined? Pharaoh, I'm sorry, they say, but you're being an idiot now.

Give it up. That's a pretty humiliating thing to hear, isn't it, from your cabinet if you're the leader of a country. Even more so if you're meant to be a god, semi-divine.

So Pharaoh does get Moses and Aaron back in, but unbelievably, Pharaoh is still trying to do a deal. Who's all going, he asks. Moses replies, well, everyone, young and old, flocks and herds, all of us.

[20:28] And isn't this a remarkable reply, as if to confirm his utter blindness. How about this for irony, 10 verse 10. Pharaoh said to them, the Lord be with you if ever I let you and your little ones go.

Famous last words. Before the plagues, when all he had to go on was Moses and Aaron's message, he said, didn't he, I do not know the Lord. Incredibly, it seems, even after all of this, he still doesn't.

He still doesn't recognize God. Does he really not yet know that the Lord is with Moses? He has no excuse, does he? But so deep now is his hardness of heart that his is a kind of double ignorance. He doesn't know the Lord and he doesn't know that he doesn't know the Lord because he is sure that the Lord isn't with his people when he really is in a really big way.

He thinks he's being clever, trying to drive a hard bargain when everyone else around him can see he's completely washed up. It's a bit like the owners of a bankrupt business meeting with the buyers and asking for ten times the price of the company.

[21:48] It's so humiliating, not only because it's so desperate, but because they can't even recognize how desperate it is that they would even ask for that. Having dragged Moses and Aaron back to negotiate, Pharaoh now drives them out again and indeed the locusts come just as promised.

They covered the face of the whole land so that the land was darkened. They ate all the plants in the land, all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left. Not a green thing remained in all the land of Egypt.

The economy is vanquished in a single swarm of locusts. Egypt is now upon its knees helpless at God's mercy.

Pharaoh is reduced to groveling. He gives his best fake apology yet, doesn't he? I've sinned against the Lord your God and against you. Now therefore forgive my sin.

Please only this once. Plead with the Lord your God only to remove this death from me. Again, it sounds great, doesn't it? But is it real?

[22:57] Does it last? No. When the locusts are gone, the Lord hardened his heart and he didn't let the people go. If it was about giving Pharaoh chances, well, he's had enough by now, hasn't he, to do the right thing?

But remember that this battle is really about the Lord taking his time to prove to Israel and Egypt who he really is. and it's clear that the message hasn't yet sunk in and it will take even more rounds in the ring for them to truly know and recognize him as Lord.

Now you'd be forgiven for not having memorized and recited the ten plagues every day in Sunday school or at home in family worship. These are hardly, are they, the top of the list of memory verses that we would have learned maybe as children or we learn now if we read our Bibles?

But I wonder is part of what we pass down to our children or to younger Christians the Bible's testimony to the Lord's greatness and power so that future generations will truly know him.

Remember, that's the point of this plague. Paul writes in Colossians 2 that God took the record of our sin and disposed of it by nailing it to the cross in the death of Christ and in doing so, Paul says, he disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him.

[24:38] It looked to all the world like Christ had failed but it was the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places who that day were covered in shame because Christ had taken all their weapons and ammunition off of them and spent it all on himself.

They have now no record of guilt left to fire at us, his people, because he nailed it all to himself upon the cross. Think of it, he used the very weapon that they thought would finish him off to overcome and overthrow them.

And when God raised Christ from the dead, we read in Ephesians 1 that he seated him at his right hand in heavenly places far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come and he put all things under his feet.

Total victory. Unrivalled power. No contest. Brothers and sisters, do we really know that and remember and speak about and pass on just how great and glorious the Lord truly is?

I wonder, do we know today that if our trust is in Jesus Christ crucified and risen, we are more than conquerors, more than conquerors through him who loved us, that God gave him as head over all things to the church, that our God is the God of everything.

[26:32] He's fought for us, he's won for us, he's saved us by his invincible power friends, there is nowhere more safe in this world or the world to come than in the care of the Lord who sent the most powerful man and nation on earth crashing down to the canvas as if he was a fleck of dust or a drop of sweat.

There is nowhere more safe for us to be than in the care of the Lord who has humiliated the devil, broken the power of sin and conquered death by dying and rising again.

Brothers and sisters, let us rejoice in his greatness and power. Let's teach it to our children and grandchildren about his glory. Let's pass on this good news of his victory that the Lord reigns over all things in heaven and on earth for us who believe.

and so we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. In the final analysis, at the end of days, no one can win against us, the Lord's people, because no one can win against the Lord our God.

And so we hear the bell ring a final time in our passage and it's on to a much briefer round nine, blacking out. As we're used to by now, the third blow of three doesn't come with a warning, it just hits, this time darkness, a darkness to be felt.

[28:09] They did not see one another nor did anyone get up from his place for three days. I didn't bother searching for a video of that, didn't think there'd be much to see. But think of the kind of darkness that you get deep in a cave or a mine, if you've ever done that, underground and the torches go off, a darkness you can feel.

Something that's been just under the surface of all the plagues almost is this sense in which they are kind of undoing the fabric of creation. God said, let there be dry land, but frogs invaded from the water and covered the land.

God said, let the waters above be separated from the waters below, by a gap, the air, but then the hail filled the gap and undid what God had said.

God said, let there be light, and now there is utter darkness. The Lord is not only out to defeat, but to dissolve Egypt, to decreate it, to return it to being formless and empty, dark and watery.

It's truly terrifying. It's a foreshadowing of the judgment to come on the day when the Lord returns. But all the people of Israel had light where they lived.

[29:30] See, the difference between being on the Lord's side and being against him is literally night and day. Why would you choose to sit and suffer in the darkness when you could move into the light?

Pharaoh is still pretending there are shades of gray here, still closing his eyes to the darkness he lives in as if that would have helped. His last ditch attempt is to offer that all the people can go, but all the flocks and herds stay behind.

Moses points out how unreasonable that is. How can they worship the Lord without proper sacrifices? We must take them to serve the Lord. We worship God on his terms, not yours.

But the truly scary thing about this last plague is that there is a darkness deeper than the darkness that Pharaoh felt, the darkness inside his own heart.

He sends Moses away with a death threat, take care never to see my face again, and that is the last he hears from the Lord until he blacks out on the canvas.

[30:43] brothers and sisters, friends, do not do it. Move into the light. Do not give in to the darkness.

And yet it is not quite the last word, is it? If we can believe it, the worst is still to come, a final plague threatened. The battle over firstborn sons is going to hit home for Pharaoh and his people in a very real way.

Pharaoh will keep resisting, but his servants will surrender, his people will begin to defect, and God's people will walk free as more than conquerors through him who loved them, sharing in the spoils of their great God's great victory.

glory. All that to come next time in the book of Exodus. Let's come before our great God in prayer. Let us pray.

O Lord and God, we praise you.

[31:57] There is none like you. The earth belongs to you. You alone, O Lord, or we can barely comprehend or even imagine the extent of your sovereignty over this world.

Lord, we doubt it so often, and we do not live, Lord, as if, as is true, you hold the whole world in your hands.

Let all things happen for your glory and to guide the earth towards your purpose end. Help us, Lord, we pray, to trust you. Help our faith to grow in you and rest in you.

Lord, we have seen your greatness and power in history, not only in the Exodus, but in your Son, Jesus. Help us, we pray, never to lose sight of your great victory and power, your majesty and glory.
Help us to make much of you, even as we ourselves become less. And we pray in Jesus' name.
Amen.