

Knowing God the Hard Way

Exodus: Revelation and Redemption

Exodus 7:8-10:29

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A Hard Text

This morning we come to the famous story of the plagues. My text this morning includes the first nine plagues.

Preaching a passage like this presents a few challenges. For one, it's really long. The nine plagues are spread throughout four chapters. Way more material than we can cover in forty-five minutes. But the length is not the most difficult part. We also see a lot of really hard themes in these chapters. God inflicts pain and suffering on the Egyptians. He brings hard judgment upon them. This is in part because of Pharaoh's hard heart. But then we're told repeatedly that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Does this call God's goodness into question?

This is a hard text. So how should we proceed? How can we bring focus to this hard text? Let me suggest a way forward. I want to begin with the question "Why?" Why is this text here? What is the overarching purpose of the plagues? And why does God drag them out? One plague—the plague on the firstborn—would've been enough to get the job done! Why did God send ten plagues? Any why is God's judgment so hard? Why?

Thankfully, we have a really clear answer to all of these questions. Actually, there's one answer to all of these questions. And that answer is repeated throughout our long passage this morning at least five times. This one answer will help bring focus to this passage and clarity to our questions.

What's the purpose behind the plagues? The first nine plagues are organized into three cycles of three plagues each. And at the beginning of each cycle we're given a reason for the plagues. Look at the reason in the first plague in chapter 7, 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 into blood.'"¹ Then in the beginning of the second cycle, in the fourth plague, we read something similar. Look at chapter 8, verse 22: "But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth." Again, at the beginning of the third cycle, in the seventh plague, the plague of hail, we read in chapter 9, verse 14: "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."

God goes on to say to Pharaoh that he could've completely dominated Egypt by this time, but he delayed for a very specific reason (v. 15). Look at verse 16: "But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth."

If you want to know the reason for the plagues, we're given it very clearly. If you want to know why God sent ten plagues instead of just one, or why God hardened Pharaoh's heart, we're given a

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

reason. It's so the whole earth would come to know God. So that the whole earth would come to know there is no one like God.

This truth is very relevant for us today. Of all of the things we need in this life, we have no greater need than to know God. There are many other so-called gods vying for our attention. As we said last week, there are other idols that enslave us. But our greatest need is to come to know God as the only true God. And to know that there is no one like him! Everybody in this room needs to know this God. Everybody on the earth needs to know this God. Egypt needed to know this God. Pharaoh needed to know this God. And Israel needed to know this God. I want you to catch that.

Israel's biggest need wasn't deliverance from Egypt. It wasn't freedom from slavery. Their biggest need was to come to know the LORD.² If Israel's biggest need was simply to be rescued from a human oppressor, God could've done that in a much more efficient way. But God chose ten plagues because he knew that was the only way they would come to know him truly.

If it took God ten plagues to teach the lesson, we must need to know a lot to come to know God rightly. So, what is it specifically that we need to come to know from these four chapters if we want to know God? There are basically two things we need to come to know: One, God is sovereign over all things, and two, how to come into a right relationship with the sovereign God.

I want to spend the rest of our time this morning unpacking these two things we need to know by surveying these four chapters.

OUR SOVEREIGN GOD

Let's begin with the first point. And by the way, we'll spend most of our time this morning on this point. Here it is: We need to know God is sovereign over all things.

He's sovereign over creation. That much is seen by the way God uses miracles in the created order to bring about the plagues. But I'm not going to focus on that this morning. I want to focus on two other areas of God's sovereignty. He's sovereign over all other gods, and he's sovereign over all other rulers.

God is over all other gods.

God is sovereign over all other gods. If you're not familiar with ancient Egyptian history, this point may not be obvious at first glance. But many scholars believe each of the plagues is a direct assault on the pantheon of gods in ancient Egypt.³

Think of the first plague. God turns the water of the Nile into blood (7:14-25). The Nile was actually considered a goddess. And it was worshiped as a goddess. Why? Because the Egyptians believed the Nile gave them life. And there's a sense in which that was true. In the desert, the only place anything would grow was around the Nile. But there's another sense in which this was false idolatry. What God wants us to know is he alone is the life-giver. Attributing life to anything in God's creation is a failure to know the creator. And so, God turns their idol of life into a symbol of death.

²Allen Ross and John N. Oswalt, *Genesis, Exodus*: Cornerstone Biblical Commentary

³I was first introduced to this idea from my Old Testament professor, K. Lawson Younger.

Listen to how John Oswalt puts it:

From beginning to end, that is the message of the plagues. Whatever we worship in place of the one God cannot give us life; it can only give us death. This is the reason the Nile was turned to blood and not fruit juice. This was not just a carnival stunt in which Yahweh would perform amazing feats. Everything the Egyptians had worshiped as a source of life was really only death apart from the good hand of life's creator, and Yahweh was about to prove that in multiple ways.⁴

The second plague was also a judgment on Egypt's false gods. The goddess of childbirth was depicted in Egyptian art with the head of a frog.⁵ Frogs were sacred in Egypt. Frogs are amphibians. They can live in two worlds at once—in water and on land. The Egyptians saw frogs as a way to have life now in this world and in the afterworld. But again, only God gives us living breath. And only God can give eternal life.⁶

I don't have time, and you probably don't have the patience, for me to walk through each of the plagues and show you their connection to Egypt's false gods. Let me just make a few quick connections. The Egyptians believed there was life-giving power in gnats and flies. And some of their gods were depicted as flies, or cows. But the LORD used gnats and flies to bring pain, not life. And he killed the livestock they revered. Egypt had a number of gods who were supposed to protect their crops from things like hail and locusts. But the gods they worshiped were impotent against Yahweh's hand!

Egypt believed the highest God was Ra, the sun god. Pharaoh himself was considered to be the son of the sun god.⁷ In the first eight plagues the other gods were outmatched by Yahweh, but the most powerful and popular god had not yet been challenged. Surely the mighty sun, the giver of life, could give Yahweh a run for his money. But even Ra failed. Even Ra was powerless before the LORD.⁸

This comes out in the ninth plague. Look at chapter 10, verses 22-23: "So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the people of Israel had light where they lived."

You get the point. The Egyptian gods were powerless against the Almighty God. The purpose of the plagues was having its effect. It was becoming so clear that there is no one like the LORD our God (8:7).

This is also seen in the magicians. Pharaoh had summoned magicians to duplicate the signs of Moses and Aaron. Following the first two signs, the magicians were able to replicate them to some degree. But it's interesting to note that they couldn't counteract the miracles God was doing.⁹ They couldn't make the Nile turn back into water. They couldn't do away with the frogs. And by the time we get to the third plague, the magicians couldn't replicate the signs at all.

Look at chapter 8, verses 18-19: "The magicians tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, but they could not. So there were gnats on man and beast. Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the

⁴ Oswalt

⁵ Peter Enns, *Exodus*. The NIV Application Commentary

⁶ Oswalt

⁷ Enns

⁸ Oswalt

⁹ Oswalt

finger of God.’ But the Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD said.”

The so-called gods of the Egyptians couldn’t give life. And the magicians couldn’t give life. Only the LORD can give life. And the LORD can take away life. We need to come to know this about God!

But what does all of this have to do with us? We’re not worshiping the false gods of the Egyptian pantheon. Or are we? No, we’re not worshiping Seth or Isis or Ra. But are we looking to things like these gods to give us life? Not just physical life, but a sense of purpose and significance?

Idolatry didn’t leave the building when our culture entered modernity. It simply changed its face. People still worship idols.

An idol is anything we look to other than God to provide things that only God can provide. It’s looking to temporal things, created things, to answer ultimate questions that only the Creator can answer.

What false idols do you look to to give you life? Is it your work? Do you believe that your work is like the Nile? That you couldn’t live without it? Is it your health? Do you worship your health like Isis, the goddess of healing? Is it your family? Or is it your possessions? Or porn? Do you worship these things like a fertility god?

We all have our idols. How should we deal with them? Let me suggest three steps. The first step is simply to identify them. What are your idols? Name them. Second, we have to unmask them. We have to come to see that these idols cannot give us life. Only the sovereign God who’s over all can give us life, both the breath of life and eternal life. There is none like him! Finally, we need to allow God to take them away from us. In fact, if you want to come to know him truly and fully, all of the idols in your life need to be crushed. If God is sovereign over all other gods, then all we need is him!

God is over all other rulers.

You also need to know that God is sovereign over all other rulers. The ultimate false god in Egypt was the Pharaoh.

Ever since the fall, people have been rejecting the authority of God by rejecting his word. Pharaoh illustrates this perfectly. We’re told ten times in Exodus that Pharaoh hardened his heart or that his heart was hardened. And four of those occurrences add that “he wouldn’t listen.” Pharaoh’s hard heart was in part a rejection of God’s word. But why wouldn’t he listen to God?

One of the fundamental points of the plagues is to show that Pharaoh is not “I am.” He was not God. But he believed he was. He had exalted himself, instead of God. In chapter 9, verse 17, the LORD says to him, “You are still exalting yourself against my people and will not let them go.” Pharaoh believed he had absolute freedom to make whatever choices he wished. He was dependent on nothing and nobody. But that was not true. Like the rest of creation, he was subject to God.¹⁰

Pharaoh thinks he’s all that. He thinks he can hold out on God. Remember what God said about him? “I have raised you up” (9:16). God is over Pharaoh. And to make the point abundantly clear, we’re even told ten times that God was the one who hardened Pharaoh’s heart (e.g. 4:21; 9:12).

¹⁰ Oswalt

Now this is the really hard part of the passage! If God hardened his heart, then is Pharaoh responsible for having a hard heart? And if God hardened Pharaoh's heart then are the plagues even just? This is a difficult question. And I know you've been waiting for my answer! There is so much that could be said. But I simply want to make two points.

First, God's sovereignty does not violate our free will. Just because God hardened Pharaoh's heart that does not mean that Pharaoh acted against his will. Remember that there are twenty references to Pharaoh's hard heart. And only half of them speak of God hardening his heart. It wasn't as though he was soft before, but then God hardened him. Pharaoh's heart was already hard.

God is sovereign over all things, even over human hearts. And so, before the plagues even began, we were told that God would harden Pharaoh's heart (4:21), so we would know who was in control of this whole thing! Pharaoh may think he's in control. He may think he's God. But as readers of Exodus, we know that he's not. God had control not only over the plagues. He had control of Pharaoh's heart.

But that wasn't so that God could make Pharaoh act against his will. It was so God could direct things in the way he wanted them to go. And how did God direct things in the way he wanted them to go without violating Pharaoh's will? James Boice says it's like Romans 1.¹¹ In Romans 1 we read of people who will not honor God as the true God or worship him and be thankful to him as the Creator (1:21). We're told that they exchanged the glory of God for idols (1:23). They exchanged the truth for a lie and worshiped created things rather than the Creator (1:25). Sound familiar?

And so what did God do? We're told he gave them up to the lusts of their hearts (1:24). He gave them up to dishonorable passions (1:26). He gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done (1:28). Sound familiar? They were already hard toward God, but then God gave them up to an even greater hardness. I think that's kind of what's going on in Exodus. Pharaoh didn't honor God as God. He was hard! And so God gave him up to greater hardness to accomplish his purposes of making himself known!

Friends, God is the one who is sovereign over human hearts. God is ultimately responsible for Pharaoh's hard heart. But Pharaoh is also responsible. He didn't act against his will.

The second point I want to make is that God's judgment is always just. Pharaoh wasn't simply a pawn in God's hand. Pharaoh was a gross sinner. He exalted himself. He didn't honor God. He didn't render him thanks. All kings are put in place by God. And they all have the responsibility to rule with righteousness, to seek justice, and to shun oppression. Pharaoh's hardening and the plagues are an intolerance of Pharaoh's oppression of his people. God will not tolerate injustice.¹²

God does not owe anyone mercy. The only thing he owes is justice. And God's judgment is always just. God shows that he is the LORD over all gods by visiting justice against Pharaoh and Egypt. But he shows his love by giving mercy to Israel.¹³

And friends, that's what I want to talk about now. God's judgment is not the most perplexing thing in this passage. The most perplexing thing is God's mercy. His mercy is more! The question isn't why God judged Pharaoh. The question is why God saved Israel. It's not why God brought Egypt

¹¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive & Readable Theology*

¹² Cf. W. Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus*, New Studies in Biblical Theology

¹³ James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*

down. It's why he lifted Israel up. The last we heard of the people of Israel was their grumbling. And aligning themselves with Pharaoh. They certainly didn't deserve God's salvation. And none of us do either.

Pharaoh's sin was great. But we're all sinners. And we all deserve the just judgment of a holy God. We've all turned to idols. We've all exalted ourselves. And we all deserve judgment. And that brings me to my final point.

A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

How do we come into a right relationship with God? We know that there's nothing we can do to earn God's salvation. It's strictly based on his sovereign grace. Later in Deuteronomy God tells Israel it wasn't because of their greatness or their good works that he saved them. No, he tells them they were rebellious through and through. It was because of his love for them. They were an object of his mercy. But although that is true and foundational, we also see that those who are right with God rightly respond to his word.

I've already demonstrated that Pharaoh's pride and hardness of heart were seen in his unwillingness to listen to God's word. If he would've listened to God's word, the plagues would've stopped (cf. 8:2). But Pharaoh didn't listen to God's word.

There was a point in the plagues where he acknowledges God's word. In chapter 9, verse 27, after the plague of hail, he says to Moses and Aaron, "This time I have sinned; the LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong." This seemed like a move in the right direction for Pharaoh. He acknowledges God determines what's right and wrong. And he acknowledges he's in the wrong. But merely knowing what's right and wrong and even admitting that you're wrong is not the same thing as submitting to God's word.¹⁴ We know how the story continues. As soon as the storm stopped we're told, "He sinned yet again and hardened his heart."

Friends, God's word not only tells us what's right. It not only tells us we're wrong. It also tells us to repent. And repentance involves more than simply knowing something. Repentance involves an act of the will. It involves a humble surrender to God. But Pharaoh hated the thought of surrender. He couldn't trust God. And so he wouldn't repent. He wanted to maintain control.

How crazy is that! Listen! We may think we're in control, but we're kidding ourselves. If this passage hasn't shown us yet, I don't know what will. God is sovereign over all. It's an illusion to believe that we're in control. And it's a fool's errand to resist God's sovereignty. Those who won't submit to God and his word will be judged.

The only people who receive God's mercy are those who place their faith in God's word and who repent of their sins and humble themselves before God. And the Israelites do just that in our passage next week.¹⁵

Early on the Israelites also struggle to believe. They struggle to submit to God's word. They don't believe they'll ever make it out of Egypt. But at the end of the plagues we do see them repenting and

¹⁴ Oswalt

¹⁵ Moses is also an example of someone who submits to God's word throughout this passage (cf. 7:6, 10).

believing. They actually prove their repentance by submitting to God's word. What do I mean by that?

In chapter 11, they're told the tenth plague is coming. The angel of death will pass through all of Egypt and strike down the firstborn of every household. But if they will take the blood of a lamb and smear it on their door, God will pass over those houses; their firstborn will be spared. At this point, the Israelites believe God's word. And they act in accordance with that word. They prove their repentance of unbelief through obedience.

Earlier we asked whether or not God's judgment was just. And we saw that it was. But what about God's mercy? Was it just? He didn't spare the Egyptians because they deserved judgment. But he did spare the Israelites even though they deserved judgment. Is that right? Is God's mercy just? Yes! It's just. Because there was a death that was paid. The death of a lamb. There was a substitute sacrifice provided. And it was merciful because it wasn't something earned. It was received by faith in God's word and repentance.¹⁶

So do you see the difference between those who are under judgment and those who are under mercy? All who have a right relationship with God will respond rightly to God's word. They will respond in faith and repentance.

Some people say Christianity is all about having a relationship with God; it's not about religion. And I get the point. But there's something a little off with the statement. You see we all have a relationship with God. The question is what's our relationship like? How do we relate to God? Do we relate to God in defiance, like Pharaoh? Or in submission? And how does God relate to us? Is it in judgment? Or in mercy?

There's no greater need that we have than to know God. To have a right relationship with him. But because we're all sinners, we need to first be redeemed, reconciled, and restored.¹⁷ And the only way to be restored to relationship with God is through faith and repentance.

But for us it's not faith in the Passover. For us it's faith in Jesus Christ! The one who humbled himself. And was obedient to God's word. The one who served as our substitute and died on the cross for our sins.

This is God's word in the gospel. All who believe this word, who trust in Christ—who prove their faith through repentance—they will be objects of God's mercy instead of his wrath.

How will you respond to God's word today?

¹⁶ Hamilton

¹⁷ Oswalt