

God's Purpose in the Plagues

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Introduction

Good morning, Church! We have a lot to cover this morning and so we're going to jump right in. Exodus 9:8-35 is our passage. I'll give you a minute to turn there.

We're studying the sixth and seventh plagues. Exodus 9, beginning in verse 8. I'll read the text out loud and then we'll pray. This is God's Word:

Read

Pray

The title of our series is Exodus: Saved for God's Glory. We borrowed that phrase from the tagline to Philip Graham Ryken's commentary on Exodus, so it's not unique to our church. But I firmly believe it's the best short summary of the point of Exodus I've ever heard.

God is saving His people for His glory and the passage we just read is one of the best illustrations of that reality in the entire book.

God's purpose in the plagues is that He would be glorified not just by the Israelites, but the Egyptians, too.

God's purpose is to display His glory. That's the headline for today's message. We'll see that purpose demonstrated in four ways as we walk through the text, but let me say a word about glory before we jump in.

Because the word glory isn't in the passage we just read, is it? I don't ever want to read my own ideas into a passage. We generally practice expository preaching here at First Baptist. That, in its simplest sense, means the point of the passage is the point of the sermon. What we say needs to be the same thing God said. That protects us from all manner of theological and practical errors.

I sometimes hear sermons where the preacher will take a text and use it as a jumping off point for talking about whatever is on his mind and his point is so far removed from the actual text that if Moses, or Paul, or Matthew heard the sermon preached from the passage they wrote they'd be very confused. If I ever do that, please pull me aside and say, "Hey, you did the thing you said you don't want to do."

The word glory isn't in this passage, but the glory of God is both described and displayed by the verses we just read.

God's glory is a hard thing to define. Paul Tripp, a pastor and author who lives in Philadelphia, gave a very brief and helpful definition of God's glory:

The doctrine of God's glory encompasses the greatness, beauty, and perfection of all that he is.

(<https://www.paultripp.com/articles/posts/the-doctrine-of-glory-article>)

God's glory is who He is. His nature displayed as He creates and interacts with His creation. **God's purpose in the plagues is to display His glory.**

Look at verse 13 again:

13 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Get up early in the morning and present yourself to Pharaoh. Tell him: This is what the Lord, the God of the Hebrews says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. 14 For this time I am about to send all my plagues against you, your officials, and your people. Then you will know there is no one like me on the whole earth. 15 By now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague, and you would have been obliterated from the earth. 16 However, I have let you live for this purpose: to show you my power and to make my name known on the whole earth.

We see two purposes in those verses and they both lead to God being glorified. God's people free to worship Him and Egypt knowing that Yahweh is the one true God, not Pharaoh or any of the other Egyptian collection of false gods.

That is the purpose of this whole section of Exodus we're studying this year, it's the overarching theme of the entire book of Exodus, and you could state it as the purpose of all of Scripture and you wouldn't be wrong. God is gloried by the people He saves and recognized by those who reject Him.

That's why Paul can write in Philippians 2:10-11:

so that at the name of Jesus

every knee will bow—

in heaven and on earth

and under the earth—

and every tongue will confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

Those who belong to God and those who don't will one day recognize His glory. For Egypt, that day is coming. If you ever wondered what the purpose of your life is, now you know. You weren't put here to make a living, to start a family, or to follow your dreams—though none of those things are inherently wrong. You were put here for the glory of God.

God's purpose in the plagues is to reveal His glory both to Israel and to Egypt. We see that revealed in three ways in these two plagues today:

God defeats those who oppose Him; God deals mercifully with creation; God is sovereign over the hearts of men.

Some of those, you'll notice, are recurring themes as we've studied the plagues but they're teased out in new and helpful ways today. First,

God defeats those who oppose Him

Look at verse 6 again:

8 Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Take handfuls of furnace soot, and Moses is to throw it toward heaven in the sight of Pharaoh. 9 It will become fine dust over the entire land of Egypt. It will become festering boils on people and animals throughout the land of Egypt." 10 So they took furnace soot and stood before Pharaoh. Moses threw it toward heaven, and it became festering boils on people and animals. 11 The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils were on the magicians as well as on all the Egyptians.

This is a very significant plague for a couple of reasons. Throughout this account, Moses has been serving as a sort of proxy for God. God tells him what to do and he carries it out. The magicians have been serving as a proxy for Pharaoh. Pharaoh commands them to respond to Moses, and they do.

We've already seen them defeated, haven't we? The fact that they lose isn't new. They've already tapped out. They've said "something stronger than our demonic magic is at work here."

There are a couple of things that happen in this plague, though, that make it stand out as a final knockout blow against Pharaoh's magicians and reminds us that God will defeat those who oppose Him.

Remember, God is the only one who deserves glory. These magicians worked for their own glory and for the glory of their god, Pharaoh. Any glory given to anyone other than God is stolen. The Israelites don't worship Moses. The new testament church didn't bow down before Paul. No one deserves glory except for God and He will punish those who attempt to rob His glory.

One commentator helpfully noted that: To understand how completely God humiliated Pharaoh's magicians, it helps to know that by throwing ashes into the air, Moses was doing something that Egyptian priests often did. It was customary for Pharaoh's priests to take sacrificial ashes and cast them into the air as a sign of blessing.

Ryken, Philip Graham. Exodus (ESV Edition): Saved for God's Glory (Preaching the Word) (pp. 246-247). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

What the priests did as a sign of blessing, God turned into a curse. What they thought was saving them now came very close to killing them.

If you place your confidence in anything other than the one true God, He will oppose you and that's not the side you ever want to find yourself on.

The substance of the plague is helpful for us to look at, as well, because this isn't the only time that God uses boils for His glory, is it?

Listen to Job 2

6 "Very well," the Lord told Satan, "he is in your power; only spare his life." 7 So Satan left the Lord's presence and infected Job with terrible boils from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. 8 Then Job took a piece of broken pottery to scrape himself while he sat among the ashes.

God allows an affliction very similar to this plague into Job's life. We're not specifically told if the Israelites living in Egypt were spared this plague or not. I think you could reasonably read the text either way, but we are reminded by this very specific affliction that sometimes God spares His people suffering and sometimes He doesn't—but either way it's for their good and His glory.

That should be very comforting for us. God used boils in the process of breaking Egypt and freeing His people so that they could be redeemed for His glory. He used boils in Job's life as a way to prove the tested genuineness of his faith and in the end, Job was more blessed than he was in the beginning.

If you're here and you belong to Jesus today, you've never felt a pain that was pointless. You've never shed a tear that God didn't have a plan to use for your good and His glory. That's an exceedingly hard truth to come to terms with when you're suffering, but it's reality.

This plague seemed to cover the Egyptians with sores from their head to their feet. It must have been excruciatingly painful. Some of you who are within the sound of my voice experience extreme pain every day of your life. I don't know why God has ordained that circumstance for you, but I know it's not wasted.

God's people never suffer in vain. God always uses suffering for His glory and, ultimately, for our good. We may never see that on this side of eternity, but we trust it's true.

Some of us make an idol of our health. It's not a bad thing to live a healthy life, in fact I think the Bible teaches that we should take good care of our bodies. But, even if our motive starts off in a good place we can still allow pursuit of healthy living to become an idol.

We can become so obsessed with our health and with our appearance that we begin worshiping ourselves, and church, that's extremely dangerous. Live healthy, but don't let your health become an idol.

I want to be healthy, but I like to say that I eat like I'm going to heaven. "Sugar will kill you." I know where I'm going, give me the cookie.

Physical suffering and physical fitness are ways that we display God's glory in our lives. God displayed His glory in Egypt as He defeated Pharaoh's magicians. We also see God's glory in the way He displays His mercy.

God displays His mercy.

When we think of what Egypt has gone through, it might be difficult at first glance to think of it as merciful. The Nile turned to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, dead livestock, boils, and now a truly unprecedented hail storm. You sometimes hear about 100 year floods, or 500 year floods, these events that are possibly—but extremely rare. This storm was so severe it seemed impossible, it was a miracle after all.

Verse 24: The hail, with lightning flashing through it, was so severe that nothing like it had occurred in the land of Egypt since it had become a nation.

This was God, again, defeating the false gods of Egypt. They had a god of the sky, a goddess of rain, and a goddess of storms. None of them could do anything like this.

A hail storm like nothing that had occurred in the land of Egypt. The closest thing to this may have happened right here in Missouri, believe it or not. On April 10, 2001 a hailstorm moved through the I-70 corridor from Kansas City to St. Louis and is believed to be the costliest hailstorm in US history. Hailstones as large as 3 inches rained down all across the state. According to the National Weather Service:

Known Missouri insurance claims consist of 120,000 home claims, 65,000 auto claims, and 8,000 commercial claims. It is believed nearly every home and business in northern St. Louis County suffered hail damage. All of the SUVs parked outside at the Ford Motor Company assembly plant in Hazelwood were damaged (hundreds), while in the adjacent community of Florissant, every home was estimated to have received damage. Twenty-four commercial and military aircraft at Lambert St. Louis International Airport were also damaged. Uninsured losses are unknown.

https://www.weather.gov/lsx/04_10_2001

That's devastating. And it doesn't hold a candle to what happened in Egypt. Yet, let's not miss this, it's described as an act of mercy in the text.

15 By now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague, and you would have been obliterated from the earth. 16 However, I have let you live for this purpose: to show you my power and to make my name known on the whole earth

God, even as He's in the midst of judging an unrepentant and evil nation, remains merciful.

God could have started the judgment of Egypt by simply wiping Pharaoh out at the very beginning; but He doesn't do that. God could have sent this plague without warning; but He doesn't do that, either. God shows compassion on Egypt by allowing them to bring in their livestock.

The plagues are amazing because on the one hand we see God executing His judgment against an unrepentant and evil nation. On the other, we see His mercy, His compassion, and His patience displayed in remarkable ways.

He's rescuing His people and pouring out His wrath all with the same action. God is great at killing two birds with one stone and it's really a sign of His sovereignty.

God Reigns Sovereign

God displays His sovereignty over nature. Sovereignty, we talked about last week, means that God is always in control, He created the world for His glory and directs it for His purpose.

He not only causes a miraculous storm, but it stops exactly when He decides it should stop. I'm reminded of Jesus on the stormy sea commanding the storm to knock it off. God's sovereignty is such that we can know He's sovereign, yet still not fully fathom how truly powerful and capable He is.

While Egypt is being destroyed, God's people are kept safe. Egypt's crops and livestock were decimated by this plague. You might think back to last week and recall that all of Egypt's livestock had already died in the last plague, right?

If you caught that, you're paying attention and I'm glad. Either last week's plague only affected the animals in the field, the ones put up in barns were spared, or the Egyptians commandeered much of Israel's livestock and now call them their own. Either way, we know they had livestock again later in chapter 9, but it was destroyed again.

But, it's not God's sovereign reign over nature we need to spend the most time on, it's His sovereign reign over the hearts of men.

We learn a lot about how salvation works by studying Pharaoh.

18 times the narrative mentions the hardness of Pharaoh's heart:

Ex 4:21 **I will harden his heart** so that he will not let the people go.

Ex 7:3 But **I will harden Pharaoh's** heart

Ex 7:13 **Yet Pharaoh's heart was hardened,**

Ex 7:22 **Pharaoh's heart was hardened,**

Ex 8:15 **But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart** Ex 8:19 **But Pharaoh's heart was hardened,**

Ex 8:32 **But Pharaoh hardened his heart**

Ex 9:7 **But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened**

Ex 9:12 **And the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart**

Ex 9:34 **But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned again and hardened his heart**

Ex 9:35 **Pharaoh's heart was hardened**

Ex 10:1 **I have hardened his heart**

Ex 10:20 **But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart,**

Ex 10:27 **But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart,**

Ex 11:10 **yet the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart**

Ex 14:4 **"Thus I will harden Pharaoh's heart,**

Ex 14:8 **The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh**

Ex 14:17 **I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians**

That last one doesn't mention Pharaoh specifically, but all the Egyptians, so we'll count it as a bonus. 18 times the hardness of Pharaoh's heart is pointed out in the text. 10 times, we're told God cause Pharaoh's hard heart. 5 times the cause is ambiguous. We're just told his heart was hard, we're not told the cause. Three times, Pharaoh hardened it himself.

How does this work? Whose fault is it Pharaoh is condemned here? These passages help a great deal in our understanding of God's Sovereignty and human responsibility.

We know God is sovereign over salvation. No one gets saved unless God first calls them.

Ephesians 1 tells us:

4 For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him. 5 He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace that he lavished on us in the Beloved One.

In salvation, God always makes the first move. If you belong to Jesus Christ, He chose to save you before the foundation of the world. We're not going to choose God if He doesn't first choose you. Jesus Himself said:

44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up on the last day. (John 6:44)

No one will come to Christ unless the Father, through the Holy Spirit, draws you. This is one of the fundamental disagreements between our Biblical worldview and our secular culture. The culture believes people were made good and should be able to follow their hearts, do what feels right to them, and lead happy lives.

The Bible does affirm that humanity was created good, but we're tainted by sin, we each individually earn the wrath of a good and Holy God by sinfully rebelling against Him. Because our sin holds us in bondage, we're unable to seek God. We'll never be saved unless God acts to save us.

You say, you're just a Calvinist who doesn't believe in free will. That's not true! I believe in free will because the Bible believes in free will. You have free will to choose God on your own, you're just so sinful that it'll never happen.

Romans 3:

10 as it is written:

There is no one righteous, not even one.

11 There is no one who understands;

there is no one who seeks God.

12 All have turned away;

all alike have become worthless.

There is no one who does what is good,

not even one.

No one seeks God. God seeks people. The Holy Spirit brings dead people to life and it's through the power of that same Holy Spirit that we're enabled to seek God.

The Bible places the responsibility for Pharaoh—and for all those who sin—on their own heads. Pharaoh's evil earned his own condemnation.

God, in His sovereignty knew that. He still gave Pharaoh opportunity after opportunity to repent. We've seen that, haven't we? But Pharaoh's sin blinded him.

His foolish rebellion against the God of Israel purchased his condemnation. Your pursuit of holiness, your pursuit of God's will for your life does not purchase your salvation. Jesus purchased your salvation at the resurrection, and because of His work we're able to be saved.

The bible makes it clear that God is sovereign over salvation, but man is responsible for his own sin. There is tension there. There is mystery there. But, God left that tension in Scripture on purpose. It should cause us to think, cause us to wrestle with our own salvation.

It helps me to think of it this way: If you end up in hell, it's your own fault. If you end up in heaven, it's God's fault.

Everyone, everywhere is called on to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ—to truly repent and live a life of obedience to Him.

Listen to this exchange between Pharaoh and Moses:

27 Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron. "I have sinned this time," he said to them. "The Lord is the righteous one, and I and my people are the guilty ones. 28 Make an appeal to the Lord. There has been enough of God's thunder and hail. I will let you go; you don't need to stay any longer."

29 Moses said to him, "When I have left the city, I will spread out my hands to the Lord. The thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, so that you may know the earth belongs to the Lord. 30 But as for you and your officials, I know that you still do not fear the Lord God."

Today's text leaves us with the reminder that God will not accept lip service and empty promises. He demands obedience. The last truth from this text we need to grab hold of today is that:

God rejects empty promises

Pharaoh, at least partly, recognizes the issue. He says 'I've sinned this time.' He neglects to mention all the other evils he's committed, but at least he acknowledges his sin.

Recognizing you're a sinner is an important step. You're never going to be found until you realize that you're lost.

But, it turns out Pharaoh's recognition of his sin and his repentance were false. They were merely lip service and Moses roots it out right away. I know that you still do not fear the Lord God.

I saw this way too many times when I was in student ministry. We'd go to a camp or a retreat and a kid would walk an aisle, cry some tears, and go home and do the exact same junk they were doing before they came. It was so bad that we just quit taking kids to youth camp because that's not how a relationship with God works.

Hear me church: your assurance of salvation should come from present relationship with God not past promises to God. There's no biblical category for a Christian who makes a decision when they're 12, gets baptized, never grows in Christ, and never attends church. I'm not saying that person is not a Christian because I know some of your testimonies begin in a very similar manner. But what I am saying is there is no Biblical pattern for that kind of lifestyle.

If Pharaoh had made the confession he made, I'm afraid a lot of baptist churches would have baptized him and made him a member! His obedience was in word only, not in deed.

James 1:22 ***But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 Because if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like someone looking at his own face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of person he was. 25 But the one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer who works—this person will be blessed in what he does.***

As we read about Pharaoh's heart condition through these plagues it should cause us to examine ourselves. In 2 Corinthians 13:5 Paul tells his readers to 'Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith.'

So, church, is your life marked by a pattern of obedience? I don't mean have you completely ceased sinning. Think improvement, not perfection. Is the trajectory of your life trending toward becoming more like Jesus Christ or less like Him?

Pharaoh is a warning. God gave him opportunity after opportunity to repent. Look at verse 34 again:

34 When Pharaoh saw that the rain, hail, and thunder had ceased, he sinned again and hardened his heart, he and his officials. 35 So Pharaoh's heart was hard. . .

This is an important verse. This is the last time Pharaoh hardens his heart. After this, we're only told that God hardens Pharaoh's heart. God is patient, but we'd be foolish to test his patience.

If you're here and you belong to Christ, the takeaway from today's message is to trust His sovereignty. No matter the circumstances of your life, you have a loving God who reigns sovereign over them.

Remember, Israel is still making bricks. Their lives haven't gotten any better at all since Moses showed up, in fact, they've gotten worse. But, better days are on the horizon. Christian, rejoice in God's good providence in your life.

If you're here and you don't belong to Christ—maybe everyone else thinks you do. Maybe everyone thinks you're fine. But you know your own heart and you know better. You can fool me, but you can't fool God.

Repent of your sins, place your faith in Jesus Christ as your only hope in life and death, and God will save you.

You were put on this planet to glorify God. We see two examples in the text of people groups who glorify God, one by worshiping Him and one by being the object of His wrath.

Romans 9:14 ***What should we say then? Is there injustice with God? Absolutely not! 15 For he tells Moses, I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. 16 So then, it does not depend on human will or effort but on God who shows mercy. 17 For the Scripture tells Pharaoh, I raised you up for this reason so that I may display my power in you and that my name may be proclaimed in the whole earth. 18 So then, he has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and he hardens whom he wants to harden.***

God will save those He chooses to save and He has put you in this room today to hear the good news of His gospel. Christian, rejoice in your salvation. Lost person, trust Christ today.

Let's pray.