

Exodus 7:1-6

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[0 : 00] Well, I don't know if you've ever seen those old-fashioned films, the war films, which show those World War II sea battles.

Often they're written, aren't they? And they're totally one-sided. And you get a moment of climax at the end of the film, where the bad guys are totally surrounded by the good guys.

And the captain of the good guys' ships, he's usually an Englishman, isn't he, with a stiff upper lip, he orders the warning shots to be fired over to the enemy ships, in the hope that they will surrender before they are forced to unleash their full arsenal of firepower.

It's a plea, isn't it, for sanity from the overwhelming victors towards the enemy. Well, chapter 7 begins a new section in the book of Exodus. We've been looking at this book over the last few weeks here on a Tuesday lunchtime.

And it's probably one of the most famous parts of the Bible, isn't it? It begins the account of the ten plagues of Egypt. And you can read about those in chapters 7 to 10 of Exodus.

[1 : 20] But as you think about those plagues, I want you to think about them as God's warning shots to a nation, to a pharaoh who is defiant in the face of God.

And the warnings, the plagues, they get progressively worse and worse, until at the end you have the Passover, don't you? And the death of the firstborn son in every family.

And what I want us to do over these few minutes now is to take a bit of a bird's eye view of this battle of the plagues in chapters 7 to 10. And to do that, we're going to use the passage that Steve read out for us there, in chapter 7, as a way in, as a kind of summary passage.

Because in it, we can see two of the big main themes that are repeated throughout the passages about the plagues.

Now, one writer says that these chapters 7 to 10 are about the hand and the heart. And I think that's really helpful.

[2 : 31] Those two words are mentioned in the passage that we read together, aren't they? Just have a look at verse 3. Just drop your eye down to verse 5 as well.

Now, those two ideas, God's hand and Pharaoh's heart, are important.

They're repeated over and over again in the next three or four chapters. You know, I did a quick count and I counted 16 uses of the word hand and 20 uses of the word heart, speaking about Pharaoh's heart.

So with each warning shot of these plagues in chapters 7 to 10, you've got God's hand stretched out over the land and Pharaoh's heart hardening in resistance, in defiance.

So I want us to look at three things, just to pick up from, as an overview really, three things today. First off, by the Lord's hand, we know the Lord's rule.

[4 : 03] By the Lord's hand, we know the Lord's rule. Now, have a quick look at chapter 7, verse 1. It says there, doesn't it, The Lord said to Moses, see, I've made you like God to Pharaoh.

And your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. I've made you like God, he says to Moses. So we've got to assume, haven't we, in the next few chapters, that what Moses does with his hands is the channel through which God's hand works.

He uses Moses as a go-between, as an intermediary, to perform the work of his hand. So let me reel off for you, you don't need to turn to these, let me reel off for you some of the times where the hand of God is mentioned as Moses uses his hand.

Chapter 7, verse 17, By this shall they know that I am the Lord with the staff that is in my hand. I shall strike the water and shall turn it into blood.

That's the staff that is in Moses' hand. You see, the two are put together. Chapter 8, verse 5, Stretch out your hand, Moses, with the staff over the river, over the canals, over the pools, and

make frogs come up.

[5 : 23] 9, verse 29, Moses said, I will stretch out my hands to the Lord and the thunder will cease. 10, verse 21, Stretch out your hand towards heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt.

So you see, Moses' hand at work is the Lord's hand through these plagues. Now what's interesting is that we're told that the purpose of the plagues is that the Egyptians will know the Lord.

Just look at chapter 7, verse 5 again. The Israelites will know that I am the Lord when I stretch my hand against Egypt.

And there's another example in chapter 9, if you just listen to it, verse 14. For this time, I'll send all my plagues on you yourself, Pharaoh, so that you may know there is none like me in all the earth. So the Nile turns to blood in chapter 7. He covers the land in frogs, then gnats and flies in chapter 8. He causes the livestock to die, and boils break out over all the people.

[6 : 40] There's this great typhoon of hail in chapter 9. Then the locust infestation. And in chapter 10, this strange, unnatural darkness that comes over the land during the day.

And all of these plagues, all of these events, say to Pharaoh, I am the Lord who rules. Those events stress to him, don't they, the complete power and rule of the Lord.

All power is under him. All of the natural realm is in God's control. So don't think that these plagues are just sort of natural disasters that all happen at the same time and it's a bit of chance.

No, if you can remember, actually back in chapter 3, God speaks to Moses and says to him what is going to happen. And he says to him, I will stretch out my hand, again, and strike Egypt with all the wonders.

That I will do in it. After that, he'll let you go. Now the word wonders there is used in the Bible to speak about supernatural things.

[7 : 53] Things that go beyond our usual naturalistic scientific explanations. Things that come from outside of human and earthly causes.

So these plagues in chapters 7-10 were wonderful things. They would freak you out. They were designed to make you stand up and say this is not normal.

This is the work of the Lord. They were unnatural disasters. And throughout, it is God's hand doing it in such a way as to show that the Lord rules.

Now, handmade stuff is always a lot better, isn't it, if you go into shops. Handmade products are always way more expensive. If you go down to the Ealing Farmers Market on the first, I think it's the first Saturday of the month, you pay three times as much for handmade cheese, don't you, as you do from Sainsbury's next door.

I guess because it's got a personal mark on it, hasn't it? It's got a character to it. It's handmade. It's got added value in that sense.

[9 : 11] And it's God's hand that brings these plagues. They've got his personal mark on them so that they will know that the Lord rules.

The magicians in the magic circle in Egypt, they have to eventually admit that even they are out of their depth, even though they're in the line of supernatural things.

Listen to what they say in chapter 8, verse 19. The magician said to Pharaoh, this is the finger of God. What do we use one finger for?

I don't know. Just trying to think about this. Pressing a doorbell, maybe. Pressing buttons. Flicking things, isn't it? Things that don't take a lot of effort, we use a finger for.

And it's one finger, one little flick of the finger, is all it takes to bring a cloud of gnats over the land to wreak havoc, to dumbfound the magicians, to break the norms.

[10 : 19] Because the Lord rules. He can do that. So by the Lord's hand, we know the Lord's rule throughout these plagues.

But second, second thing to notice, is that by Pharaoh's heart, we know the Pharaoh's rebellion. By Pharaoh's heart, we know the Pharaoh's rebellion.

Now I'd like us to spend a bit of time just thinking a little bit about what looks like a contradiction with Pharaoh's heart. It's the second of those two big themes in the plagues, isn't it?

As the evidence mounts up against Pharaoh that the Lord really does rule, he has chance after chance, doesn't he, of admitting that.

Why are there so many plagues? I don't know if you've ever wondered that. Why are there nine plagues and then the Passover? Is it because when the Lord wants to show that he rules, he wants

to show himself as a God who loves to bring pain and destruction on human beings and he loves to undo his creation?

[11 : 37] Well of course it doesn't mean that. No, it shows, doesn't it, actually his mercy. That he gives chance after chance to Pharaoh to change his mind before the Passover.

In chapter 9 verse 15 he says, Do you know what Pharaoh? I could have put my hand out and struck you and your people with pestilence by now and you would have been cut off from the earth. But he doesn't do that straight away. He holds back his judgment for a time. Yet, Pharaoh keeps hardening his heart, doesn't he?

7.22 Pharaoh's heart remained hardened and he wouldn't listen. He turned and went to his house and didn't take it to heart. 8.15 When he saw there was respite he hardened his heart.

8.32 Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also and didn't let the people go. You know, 10 times we read that he hardens his heart with chance after chance after chance.

[12 : 49] Now it feels like, doesn't it, as Pharaoh makes these decisions he is leading himself down this road of rebellion towards God that eventually he won't be able to turn back on.

I'll change my mind next time he thinks. But the decisions that we make over time are decisions that can often form us, aren't they?

They can lead to other decisions and those decisions lead to decisions and then down the line those things form habits and those habits form character in us.

and we're made like that as human beings. We get the privilege of being able to contribute to our own character to make these decisions.

Sometimes it takes a long time, doesn't it, for a series of choices to produce those fixed traits and characteristics within us.

[13 : 56] Sometimes, though, one choice is enough. What we don't know is the point of no return, do we? We can never say, we can never be confident and say, I can risk one more choice to rebel against God today and I'll still have the freedom to change my mind tomorrow.

That was Pharaoh's mistake, wasn't it? But what about Pharaoh's heart? Because what is slightly confusing about his heart is that God is involved in the decisions he makes.

Have a look again, I know we've done a lot of flicking around, you're being very patient. Have a look again at chapter 7 verse 3. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, God says.

Now that is strange, isn't it? Who is responsible then for Pharaoh's disobedience? Just as many times in these three chapters as it says that Pharaoh hardened his heart, it also says that God hardened his heart.

I counted about ten times again. So who is responsible when people rebel against God like Pharaoh?

[15 : 26] Is it really our choice? Or is God just controlling us like robots? When people reject God, isn't that just because he's in control and we haven't really got a choice?

Well, I'd want to say that the Bible most certainly gives the answer no to that question. now let's think about this by using an example of something else that God did in these places.

Think about the hail in chapter nine. Now we're talking about tennis ball sized hail here, this is serious stuff. Now one way of describing the hail storm in chapter nine would be to say that on the evening beforehand, ice globules formed in the sky, increased in size as more water vapour froze around them and when they became too heavy to be sustained by upward air currents, they fell as hail stones.

That's one way of describing it, isn't it? That's the kind of natural way of describing it and that would be fine. But hear how Moses described it in verse 18 of chapter nine.

Behold, about this time tomorrow I will cause very heavy hail to fall, such as never been in Egypt from the day it was founded till now.

[16 : 54] Now by saying that we don't get the details of how it will happen, do we? But Moses isn't denying that God will act in accordance with his natural mechanisms that he's put into creation.

But Moses is cut past the second cause, doesn't he, of all those scientific things, to the first cause, who is the Lord. Now if we can go with that, if we can get that into our minds a bit, for the physical world, well do you see, it also applies to the moral world.

The Lord's way of ruling isn't taken away when we learn that we have responsibility. for the decisions that we actually do make.

But from the perspective of the Lord, as moral ruler, there comes a moment that only he knows about, where the hardness of a person's heart has reached that point of no return. And he imposes upon them the justly due consequence of what his own choices have made him. To give him over to the decisions that he's made.

[18:18] Now it's our privilege as human beings to have this responsibility. But the price that we pay is that every choice for good or for ill goes to fashion our characters and make us answerable to the Lord.

Now if you haven't understood any of what I've just said, I don't blame you. It's quite complex stuff isn't it? And I can't claim to understand it totally. But the one thing that we need to come away with isn't it, from Pharaoh, is that we cannot rebel from God forever.

And keep hoping that tomorrow will be different. The Lord is patient, isn't he? And he gives us chance after chance after chance.

He's far more patient than any of us in this room. So today, if you do hear his voice, don't harden your heart like Pharaoh.

Now if this is all sounding a bit heavy going, I want us to just finish really quickly with a bit of good news. The Lord's hand shows us he is the just ruler, father, and Pharaoh's heart shows his rebellion, he's set in his ways, so the hand, the heart.

[19:39] But then we also see the Lord's haven in these chapters, the Lord's haven. Now just think about who's doing all the work in chapters 7 to 10.

As far as the people of God are concerned, they are actually pretty useless. Maybe go home and read about them yourself later. It's only really Moses and Aaron who are standing alone among the people of God against Pharaoh.

In fact, the last thing that the people of God were recorded as saying was their complaint against Moses in chapter 5. Listen to what they said. The Lord look on you, Moses, and be your judge, because you've made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh.

They're not actually that supportive, are they, of Moses and Aaron. They are not the most deserving of God's freedom, are they?

They're effectively saying to him, this whole enterprise, trying to escape from Egypt, it's been a total disaster and we don't want any part of it. And actually, maybe they deserve what they've asked for, to be left to stew in their ingratitude.

[21:05] But the Lord, nonetheless, uses his power not only to bring judgment on evil and wrong in the land, but to provide a safe haven for his people from the calamity.

Let me read some examples. 8, verse 22. On that day I'll set apart the land of Goshen where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there.

9, 6 to 7. All the livestock of the Egyptians died, but not one of the livestock of the people of Israel died.

9, 26. Only in the land of Goshen where the people of Israel were, was there no hail. You see, God provided a safe haven, even from the ungrateful, hard-hearted people like the Israelites.

So you see, it tells us, doesn't it, not to be defeatist about the decisions we make and have made in the past if they've been wrong. We've all stuffed up, haven't we, in various ways.

[22:25] We've all done that. And we've all been hard-hearted towards the Lord. But we can go to his haven, just like the Israelites.

We can go to the Lord Jesus. We can make the right decision today and be safe from God's judgment. We can trust in him today, even if we've made bad decisions in the past.

We can recognise the warning shots of calamity that we see in the world all around us and be different to Pharaoh by admitting that yes, the Lord really does rule.

Let's pray as we can.