“THAT MY NAME MAY BE PROCLAIMED IN ALL THE EARTH”

Exodus 7:8–10:29

Key Verse: 9:16

“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.”

Who’s in control? Usually we imagine it’s the rich people, or those most clever at manipulation. In varying degrees we ourselves try to control our lives in many ways. When we see flawed or evil people controlling things, we get disillusioned or feel trapped. But who’s in control, really? The famous story of the plagues on Egypt show us that God is the one who’s in control. But what does this really mean? How can we have this conviction? What does God want us to do with this knowledge of who he is? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words.

As we read this section of Exodus, there’s lots of repetition, done usually for emphasis. And a question comes to mind: Why all these plagues? There are ten plagues, and to the Hebrews, ten was a number of completeness. As will be explained a bit later, through these plagues God is executing judgment on all the gods of Egypt (12:12). The Egyptians had a god for everything: the serpent god, the Nile god, the blood god, the frog goddess of fertility, the dust god, the god with the head of a fly, the cow goddess, the bull god, the goddess of health, the goddess of the sky, the goddess of storms and disorder, and the sun god. Through each plague God is saying to the people: “Nope, I’m the God of that, too. In fact, I’m the only real God. You were badly mistaken.”

Another noteworthy part of these plagues is the cast of characters: Aaron, Pharaoh, his servants and magicians, and Moses himself. First, let’s consider Pharaoh, his servants and magicians. In chapter 5 Pharaoh defies Moses and his message from God by ruthlessly crushing the Israelite slaves with even harsher demands and beating their foremen (5:2–21). Pharaoh’s stubbornness and hardness of heart are consistent throughout the plagues. But through these encounters with God, he starts to crack, and by the last plague, he finally caves in, begging, “…and bless me also!” (12:32b) In the end, Pharaoh is the pathetic one. We also notice Pharaoh’s magicians, who at first seem to have some mysterious way of manipulating nature to defeat God’s purpose. Yet, though they can imitate some things, they can’t bring restoration. Very soon, by the third plague of gnats, these magicians give up, recognizing the finger of God (8:19). Finally, in a moment of comic relief, even the magicians get boils all over, just like everybody else, and they can’t even stand before Pharaoh (9:11). It’s foolish to depend on such people.

As we read carefully, we notice that Aaron is significant only in the first three plagues. At first, it’s not Moses but Aaron using his staff to perform the signs and wonders. God is using Aaron to help Moses get started in the work. But who emerges in these plagues is Moses himself. He starts out so weak, so full of self-doubt, saying, “Nobody listens to me, and I have uncircumcised lips.” He needs Aaron’s help to say or do anything. But by the fourth plague, Moses becomes the main actor, and through God’s power he gets stronger and stronger (11:3b) and no longer needs Aaron as a crutch. By listening to God and saying what God says, gradually Moses is endowed with God’s own authority. It shows us how we too can grow out of our weaknesses and become useful to God.

In these plagues we can learn what repentance is. At first Pharaoh is unrepentant. He says “yes” but does “no.” Moses calls him a cheater (8:29). Not repenting is cheating God and others. By the seventh plague of hail, Pharaoh calls for Moses and Aaron and says, “This time I have sinned; the LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Plead with the LORD…” (9:27–28a). He says pretty much the same thing in the next plague (10:16–17). After Pharaoh promises to let the people go, Moses stretches out his hands to the Lord to remove the plague, then Pharaoh and his servants harden their hearts. Moses tells Pharaoh in 9:30: “But as for you and your servants, I know that you do not yet fear the LORD God.” It says something important. Real repentance begins when we learn to fear God. It’s not just admitting wrongs or making promises so we can escape uncomfortable situations. Real repentance isn’t about words. As they say, “Talk is cheap.” Real repentance means changing our ways, acting on what God says and following through with our promises out of reverence for God.

There’s another message in these plagues. Pharaoh’s responses show us why we all stubbornly refuse to believe in God. Like Pharaoh and his servants, we don’t want to change. We like enjoying our Egyptian palaces. We like the way things are. We like using other people. We like exalting ourselves over others. We like depending on what we have instead of on God. We see this attitude especially in the plague of hail. Read 9:31–32. Because they knew they’d have at least these crops later, they were holding out not to listen to God. Like the Egyptians, we depend on whatever resources we think we have instead of on God. Sadly, sometimes God has to strip all our securities away from us, every single one of them, so we can start depending on him truly.

These plagues also show how God protects his people by his grace. Twice it says God makes a distinction between the Egyptians and the Israelites (9:4; 11:7). It’s not because the Israelites are better; it’s only by God’s grace. Read 8:22. God’s purpose in protecting his people in the land of Goshen is to show that he’s the LORD in the midst of the earth. The Israelites do nothing to deserve this. God protects them because he has a plan for them. God in his grace wants to save them and train them, and ultimately, reveal his own glory through them.

We also notice a pattern in these plagues. The plagues come in threes: plagues 1–3, plagues 4–6, and plagues 7–9. It’s three squared. To the Hebrews, the number 3 represents God’s harmony and his presence. In the first two plagues of this pattern, God speaks to his servants, and they, in turn, challenge Pharaoh, “Let my people go, that they may serve me” (7:14–16; 8:1,20; 9:1,13; 10:3). But in the third plague of this pattern—plagues 3,6 and 9—God just tells Moses to initiate the plague. It shows how God sends his judgment in waves: the first two, along with his word of warning, and the third, with no warning. We also notice how these plagues increase in severity, from water, to dust, to creatures, to humans, to the sun itself.

The plague of hail is especially a model. At first, when Moses gave them God’s word, the Israelites didn’t listen, “…because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery” (6:9). Pharaoh and the Egyptians don’t listen because of their pride (10:3). But throughout this section we see repeated phrases: “The LORD said to Moses”; “Thus says the LORD”; and “…as the LORD had said” or “spoken.” Through the plagues God demonstrates that his word always comes true. It’s why we all need to believe his word, even if it doesn’t seem to be real right now, and take action based on his word, by faith. Read 9:18–21. Two key expressions here are “fear the word of the LORD” and “pay attention.” Anyone can do this, Israelite or Egyptian. Anyone who truly believes God’s word is saved from the plague of hail. It’s a prelude to the last plague on the firstborn. During that plague, anyone who follows God’s instructions and puts a lamb’s blood on the doorframe of their house is spared and escapes the destruction of Egypt. It points to how anyone can be saved by holding on to the words of Jesus (cf. Jn5:24). It’s easy to think we’re okay if we just hear God’s word at church or in a Bible study. That’s self-deception; we’ve got to actually do what it says (Jas1:22).

Most of all, through these plagues God reveals who he is. He repeatedly says, “…you shall know that I am the LORD” (7:17; 8:10,22; 9:29; 10:2; cf. 14:4,18; 16:6,12; 18:11; 29:46). These plagues show us vividly that he’s the living Creator who has almighty power. The author uses many of the same words and concepts as in the creation stories at the beginning of Genesis. As Creator, he has the power of life and death. He’s the Sovereign Lord of all things in the earth and waters, in nature and in the sky. He’s still present on earth and among us. He’s also the God who knows and protects his people. These plagues prove that no power can stand against him. No person can stop his purpose, no matter how great they think they are, or how much they stubbornly resist.

Read 9:14–16. God could have snuffed out Egypt in an instant like a bug. But God *lets* Pharaoh repeatedly resist him. It’s so that God can demonstrate to the whole earth who he really is. God uses even his worst enemies to reveal his own glory. God uses all things to reveal himself. Faith in this one true God, our only LORD, our Almighty Creator, makes us different. This faith makes us strong out of weakness (Heb11:34). This faith gives us the victory that overcomes the world (1Jn5:4b). It’s not just a faith for the Israelites. Read verse 16 again. God wants all people on earth to know him. He wants us to proclaim his name in all the earth. It means in all the places where he’s not known, all the dark and dangerous and overlooked and resistant places, to all those who don’t seem to matter to anyone else.

Today there are so many false “gods,” so many things or people we worship or put our trust in or our hope in or find security in. So what’s our real security? Is it ourselves, our abilities and skills? Is it strong people in our lives who make us feel safe and secure? Is it our possessions, our latest gadgets, jobs, money, or reputation? Even good things can become bad if they’re replacing God in our lives. We can be holding on to our friendships, children, experiences or achievements instead of God himself. To be our God, he’s got to have first place in our hearts and lives. Does he?

Another question is: are we really proclaiming God’s name to people? It’s not just about talk. There’s a famous saying: “Preach the gospel at all times and if necessary, use words.” We proclaim God’s name first of all as we ourselves live by faith in him. We proclaim God’s name as we live godly lives in an ungodly world. But we also do need to actually speak to people about God. What if all believers are totally silent and never say anything about their faith? We all need to speak up for God. We don’t have to share our own ideas. People need to hear about who God is through the stories of the Bible. This is why we pray to be Bible teachers and to raise Bible teachers. People have so many wrong concepts of God, based on bits and pieces of stories taken out of context, and many human ideas which are only partially true. As believers, we’ve got to share the full story of who God is. Ultimately, it’s the story of Jesus, God who became human in order to reveal who he really is (Jn1:14; Heb1:1–3).

These stories of the plagues may leave us with the impression that God loves to punish. But God doesn’t want to just punish people. He wants to save. He’s willing to save anyone who will listen. He wants us to turn from false gods and really turn to him. When we turn to God and really listen, he can make us strong. He will dwell among us and protect us. And we’ll know him deeper and better. He’ll use even us to proclaim his name and help many others also.