

Exodus: What We Mean When We Say God
Part 6: Slow to Anger - *Ten “Strikes”* and You’re Out
Exodus 7-11

By Pastor David Fields

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“The First Mourning” by William-Adolphe Bouguereau, 1888.

This painting graphically depicts the grief of Adam and Eve as they hold Abel, their son who has been murdered by Cain – their other son.

The sin of Adam and Eve in the garden has passed on to their progeny “a biblically certified and empirically demonstrable bias toward evil,” as Cornelius Plantinga put it.

Exodus 7-11: The Ten “Strikes”

A river of blood. Frogs infesting the land. Gnats rising from the dust. Flies ‘swarming.’ The livestock of the Egyptians dying. Boils – a skin infection – on the Egyptians. Hail that destroys life. Locusts that decimate crops. Deep darkness you can feel. The death of the firstborn.

The ten “strikes” are God’s judgment on evil through acts of de-creation which reveal *Yahweh* as the ruler over all creation and point to his ultimate victory.

“But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you...” – Exodus 7:3-4a

Hard-Heartedness: God’s sovereignty and human responsibility

The word we often translate “harden” could just as easily be rendered “strengthen” or “toughen.” This tells us that God isn’t turning Pharaoh’s heart into something it wasn’t already. Rather, it means *the heart Pharaoh already has*, his evil and arrogance, God will give him over to his “Pharaoh-ness”.

Once the events of the “strikes” starts, of the ten times we hear this language of “hardening”, the first six times it is Pharaoh himself who does the hardening. Only after the fifth plague do we see mention that God hardens his heart.

We might be wondering: so, who really hardens Pharaoh’s heart? Is it God or is it Pharaoh? The answer is yes. Yes. God is acting and directing to achieve his good purposes. And yes, Pharaoh is fully responsible for his evil acts.

I. Why Does God Send These “Strikes”?

“Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with *mighty acts of judgment* I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites. ⁵ And the Egyptians *will know that I am the LORD* when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and *bring the Israelites out of it*. – Exodus 7:4b-5

1. The Ten Strikes are “Mighty Acts of Judgment”

The first of the “strikes” has the water of the Nile River turned to blood – a symbol of death. Do you hear the resonance from the Cain and Abel story? Abel’s blood cries out from the ground...the blood of these baby boys cries out from the river. And the last strike, that the “firstborn males of each household” would die is a direct response to the death of these Hebrew baby boys. There is a one-to-one correspondence here.

God could have simply ended Pharaoh and all Egypt. It is within his power and prerogative. But he doesn’t. He merciful. He wants his name to be known to the ends of the earth (Exodus 9:15-16).

As one scholar says: “God’s purposes in these events are not focused simply on the redemption of Israel. God’s purposes span the world. God is acting in such a public way so that God’s good news can be proclaimed to everyone (see Rom 9:17).” - Terence Fretheim

There are “Off-Ramps” all along the story

“Give an order now to bring your livestock and everything you have in the field to a place of shelter, because the hail will fall on every person and animal that has not been brought in and is still out in the field, and they will die.” – Exodus 9:19

There’s the off-ramp. Yes, judgment is coming, but for those who listen to the Lord and respond in faith, there is salvation. Look at the response in v.20:

“Those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the Lord hurried to bring their slaves and their livestock inside. But those who ignored the word of the Lord left their slaves and livestock in the field.” – Exodus 9:20

God is merciful. But how tragic for those who will not listen to his voice...who continue to harden their hearts.

2. These “strikes” are intended to reveal that this God, Israel’s God *Yahweh*, is the one and only, the True God.

The Pharaohs have substituted themselves into the place of God, and acted in anti-creational ways, as though they have the power of life and death, as though they can defy the living and

true God. This is meant to unravel the pretenders to god-like-ness. No. They need to know the true God.

3. God delivers his people so they can *serve him* and *fulfill their mission*.

Through Israel that God will send his own Son, Jesus – God in the flesh – to ultimately conquer evil.

“In the end, the arrogance and wickedness of sinful humanity will not win the day. It will be humbled, defeated, and finally destroyed by the God whose purposes for creation and humanity will be redemptively and triumphantly fulfilled.” - Christopher Wright

Psalm 146:9: “The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.”

Point 1: God’s judgment of evil here signals that he cares about how his human creatures act; how we act. We are called to join in God’s work of caring for the foreigner, orphan, and widow (James 1:27).

II. **What are these Plagues or Strikes?**

“Each of these plagues is related to the Biblical idea of de-creation; how God is holding the order of the universe together. But when people plant their flag in violence and oppression, he will let it all go. And it’s intense because this isn’t merely a showdown with one single corrupt ruler. This narrative is painted as a showdown with evil itself.

Pharaoh and Egypt represent the height of human oppression and rebellion partnered with spiritual rebellion. And so when God brings these ten acts of de-creation on Pharaoh and Egypt, God says it’s a judgment against Pharaoh and the ‘gods’.” – Tim Mackie and Jon Collins, The Bible Project podcast

Point 2: When we live outside of God’s design, when we chose to act apart from God’s ways, when we try to define life on our terms, with self-at-the-centre, the fall-out is always, in some way, “anti-creation.”

III. **What does this say about God?**

“The Lord. The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness...” – Exodus 34:6

God is *slow* to anger. That’s to say God is patient. He gives lots of warnings in this text. There are as many off-ramps as there are acts of de-creation. And God does not delight in death. Listen to Ezekiel 33:11: “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.” - Ezekiel 33:11

What is God's heart? For life! His aim is that we chose to turn away from wickedness. But wickedness will have no place in God's good future.

God is slow to **anger**. But he *does* get angry – and rightly so. If God were not angry at injustice, he would not be good or loving. He would not be worthy of our love and trust.

And so, as this story tells us, God's "wrath" is a real thing. It's *how humans experience his justice*. God's wrath is not God being grumpy or flying off the handle in a rage. No.

God's wrath: God's measured and settled opposition to anything that distorts or destroys his good creation.

God's judgment can be...

Present/Active

a) Sometimes – like in this story of the ten strikes – judgment comes in the **present**, and in an **active** way. But that's very uncommon in the Bible.

Present/Passive

b) God's just judgment is sometimes **passive** and in the **present**. What we often call "natural consequences" fall into this category. God has built the world to work in a certain way – for our relationships to work in a certain way, and when we step outside that we can expect things to unravel.

- Proverbs 16:28: "...a gossip separates close friends."
- Romans 1:18-32: God "*gave them over* to a depraved mind..."

"God says, "Okay, have it your way." He takes his hand of blessing and covering over your life, steps back and says, "You're on your own now. Good luck. And your body is torn apart by drugs. The scandal breaks. You get fired for cheating. Your kids grow up to hate you. Your marriage is wrecked by an affair." – John Mark Comer

Wrath in this mode is when God give you what you ask for when you ask for him to take a hike.

Future/Active

c) There is an **active** and **future** judgment to come. This is called "The Day of the Lord" in the Bible and is when every person will have to give account for the choices we have made (2 Peter 3:10).

Future/Passive

d) The reality of living as fallen creatures in a fallen world, is that every one of us will face death – a **passive, future** reality for us all.

God's heart behind judgment is not to destroy but to restore the world to "right-relatedness." As the rest of the story unfolds, we see that God's aim is to heal the world; to restore the world to goodness (see Romans 8; Rev 21-22).

III. How do we respond?

Jesus says: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they life and have it to the full." – John 10:10b

Just like the Plague narrative, where there is three days of deep darkness, "darkness that can be felt" says the text, before the final "strike" of death of the firstborn, so when Jesus is hung on a cross, the skies went dark for three hours before his death. And Jesus will spend "three days" in darkness – laying dead in a tomb.

And yet, that's not the end. Jesus is raised again in victory.

1. Our Maker is unmade to remake us. Jesus deals death the deathblow to give us life. Our response? Take the off-ramp! Put your life in Jesus' hands. Trust in his work for you.
2. Keep your heart soft to God. Do not wall ourselves off to the Voice of God, and his transformative work.

"I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." – Ezekiel 36:26b.

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." – Hebrews 4:7, quoting Psalm 95:7-8

3. Believing in God's just judgment means we can truly forgive and love our enemies, and not seek revenge.

In Romans 12, Paul writes: "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord [...] Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good." - Romans 12:19; 21

Extra Notes on the "Echoes of the Creation Narrative" in the Plagues as "De-Creation":

- In Genesis One there is a pattern – two sets of three. Set one is days 1 through 3, where God "forms" spaces. Time – like, day and night; Waters above and below; and then dry land with vegetation. Set two is days 4 through 6, where God "fills" each of those corresponding spaces. Then day seven stands apart as the day of rest – the climax and conclusion, where God rests. The plagues form a pattern that mirrors this – three sets of three, with the 10th set apart as the climax and conclusion, where God delivers his

people. But it is also an “anti-creation” as it involves human death as well, the reversal of day 6 in Genesis.

- The first of each “set” is “in the morning”, which echoes off day one of the Creation story.
- As the three days of “darkness” collapses God’s first words of Creation “Let there be light”, now is, essentially, “let there be darkness” – “darkness that can be felt.” (Ex 10:21).

For many more, see the Bible Project podcast on the plagues in their “Exodus Scroll” series. See also any good commentary on Exodus, like: Christopher Wright, *The Story of God Commentary: Exodus* (2021); Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *The Expositors Bible Commentary: Exodus* (1990).

Life Group Discussion:

Open Up

When you hear the word “judgment” what connotations come to mind? (Positive? Negative? Mixed?) Why do you think that is?

What about the word justice? Is that any different for you? Why do you think that is?

Dig In

1. This section of Exodus can be hard, since it deals with the subjects of judgment, as well as justice and release and liberation. But we also saw that God specifically how God gives “off-ramps”, and some people seemed to take these. Read the section that describes the “plague” or “strike” of hail in **Exodus 9:13-35**.
 - a. What repeated themes do you see in this text?
 - b. How is God’s mercy evident?
 - c. How does the “off-ramp” to the people (9:19-20) mirror the message of the Gospel?
2. These “strikes” are a “signal act” – meaning, they point beyond this event to the larger reality of God’s defeat of evil. Chris Wright puts it like this: “In the end, the arrogance and wickedness of sinful humanity will not win the day. It will be humbled, defeated, and finally destroyed by the God whose purposes for creation and humanity will be redemptively and triumphantly fulfilled.” - Christopher Wright

How does this “big picture” view of the plagues encourage and/or challenge you?

3. In the message, we talked about a few key implications from the text. Read and discuss which of these you most need to embrace this week:

- a. **Our Maker is unmade to remake us. Jesus deals death the deathblow to give us life.** Our response? **Take the off-ramp!** Put your life in Jesus' hands. Trust in his work for you.
- b. **Keep your heart soft to God. Do not to wall ourselves off to the voice of God, and his transformative work.** "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." – Hebrews 4:7, quoting Psalm 95:7-8.
- c. **Believing in God's just judgment means we can truly forgive and love our enemies, and not seek revenge.** In Romans 12, Paul writes: "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord." And he finishes with: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." - Romans 12:19; 21

Prayer: Take time to pray for any specific requests from your group. Pray also for any of the areas you wanted to open yourself up to more for God's work in you. Pray for our city and neighbours as we move toward Holy Week – that hearts would be open to hear and respond to Jesus and his love.