What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

It was the writer A. W. Tozer around the turn of the 20th century, who famously quipped. "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." This one line has endured the test of time because of its truth. What comes to mind when you think about God is quite possibly the most important thing about you. Tozer would go on just a few paragraphs later to talk about why that is the reality.

> **For this reason, the gravest question before the church is always God himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend, by a secret law of the soul, to move toward our mental image of God. A.W. Tozer**

We move towards our mental image of God. The view that you have of God gives shape to the whole of your life. What we have found through the Book of Exodus is that it is the book in which God introduces his name, which is a shorthand for the whole character of who is God. It is God introducing himself to the world, specifically to a bunch of people who seem to have forgotten who God is. The question that's been at the very forefront of these first chapters of Exodus is "Who are you, God?" It's the question Moses asked just a couple weeks ago. It's the question that Pharaoh will also ask.

Who is the Lord? I wanted to circle back to Exodus 5 because this section, from chapter 5 through chapter 13, is one whole unit. But at some point, you have to get lunch, so we can't preach all of that in one go. What comes to mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you. Let's parachute back into the text. Moses is standing before Pharaoh, and at this point in history, Pharaoh is the most powerful man to have ever lived and also the most evil man to have ever lived. This is the picture that we see of Pharaoh through the Book of Exodus. He's at the pinnacle of his power, the pinnacle of his evil. We've already seen him as a genocidal maniac who was trying to kill all of the Hebrew boys who were born. So that was the framing story in which we learn about this guy, Moses.

Moses goes through this whole wandering journey. About 80 years later we arrive at Exodus 5, and Moses has now been sent back to confront Pharaoh with the message of God. He has, in some ways, wrestled with the question, "Who are you God?" Now he comes back before Pharaoh.

> **Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness.'" Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go." Exodus 5:1-2**

A few things about Pharaoh. He's asking who is the Lord. Most of us in the modern world come at that question more like he is a secular atheist, and we think that Pharaoh just needs to be convinced of the belief of God. That's because that's the default setting for us in the modern world. But that's not the default setting for Pharaoh in his world. He's coming at this question not as a secular atheist but as a religious pluralist. The Egyptians had plenty of gods. They had all sorts of different gods.

So, Pharaoh asked who the Lord was, and it was not about knowing if God existed. Pharaoh asks, who do you think this God is? He wanted to know if they thought this God was more powerful than him. "Who is Yahweh that I, Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the world (he viewed himself as divine), who is that God that I should obey him?" It's more accusatory. What you come to think about when you think about God is the most important thing about you. And for Pharaoh, if what comes to mind when he thinks about God is himself, this poses God not as some rival God even, but as an intrusion, a threat to his very standing.

So, for him, he wants to know if Moses thinks he is beneath this God. The Book of Exodus is about revealing God's name to people who have forgotten him. Pharaoh has forgotten who God is, or at least isn't acquainted with it in the way that the Israelite people are. It's this framing of Exodus 5 that sets the stage for the plagues, particularly Pharaoh's hard heart, which we will look at today.

This is one of the more complicated, difficult texts that we'll come across in the Book of Exodus. It's given me a run for my own money. I usually spend about a week on these sermons. This one's taken two weeks. So we're going to get into the weeds a little, but it's important because some of the questions asked bring us back to Tozer's statement. What comes to mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you. The reality is we can read this story and come to all sorts of different conclusions about who God is.

We can ask questions that we impose on the text from all sorts of different places. Like what is free will? What does sovereignty mean? Did Pharaoh even have a say in this? It seems like God hardened his heart. But at other times it says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. What's going on there? Who is culpable of these plagues and the things that unravel in these next few chapters?

This story is important because it deeply shapes what you think about God. What comes to mind when you think about God is the most

important thing about you. So, let's flip to our teaching text in Exodus 7. We're going to start in verse 8. Moses and Aaron both came before Pharaoh. God is saying that Pharaoh's going to ask for a sign. He's going to need some proof of God.

> **The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "When Pharaoh says to you, 'Perform a miracle,' then say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh,' and it will become a snake." So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts: Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Exodus 7:8-12**

Pharaoh asked for a sign, and there are about a thousand different things I would have come up with before, "throw your staff, it'll be a snake, and then pick it back up." There's a sense in which that's weird. That's strange. Why this image? Why the snake in particular? One of my hopes is that throughout this book, and all through our teaching, we demonstrate the brilliance of the biblical authors. We have such a recency bias that we don't give them the credit for the intellect that they had. And they're brilliant. They don't just randomly decide things. It wasn't like God randomly chose the snake thing. It was intentional.

So why this image? To answer that, let's go back to Exodus 4, where you see this same story beforehand, but this time not before Pharaoh, but God before Moses. It's in that place we find the reason why, in particular, a snake was used, or at least another allusion to it.

> **Moses answered, "What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, 'The Lord did not appear to you'?" Then the Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?" "A staff," he replied. The Lord said, "Throw it on the ground." Moses threw it on the ground and it became a snake, and he ran from it. Then the Lord said to him, "Reach out your hand and take it by the tail." So Moses reached out and took hold of the snake and it turned back into a staff in his hand. "This," said the Lord, "is so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has appeared to you." Exodus 4:1-5**

There's something in this image in which God says this is so that they may believe. What is it about the snake that will do that? Notice that he links it to their heritage by saying the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He brings it back to that larger story. For us, as an attentive reader, we should be wondering where else do snakes appear in the biblical narrative up to this point?

Of course, Genesis 3. We go all the way back to that image at the beginning of Genesis, the story about the origin of not only just creation and how we begin to conceive of God but of who we are. It's the story that answers those big questions of all of life. It's here that God says there's something about the snake that we're drawing out from here.

If you recall, God creates in Genesis 1 and 2 the world with its flourishing shalom; its goodness overlaps all of the created order. But then we get to Genesis 3 and there is an intrusion of a snake that is the embodiment of all that is evil. Evil enters the world and reeks havoc all throughout the created order.

It's this snake that is the source of all evil, and what's interesting is that there are two Hebrew words for the word snake. In Exodus 4, the account of Moses saying to God, what if the people, the Israelites, don't believe me? The word for snake is *nahas*. It means serpent or snake. It is the exact same word that's used in Genesis 3:1. It's a clear illusion. It's the biblical writer in Exodus saying, "Hey, nudge, nudge, wink, wink. Remember that snake." However, in Exodus 7, the author uses a different word for snake—*tannin*. This is the word that links to Genesis 1:21. It's interesting because you don't read it in there as snake. You see it more as a serpent, dragon, or sea monster. It's linked to ocean imagery.

In the ancient biblical imagination, the ocean was the source of all chaos. And so in Genesis 1:21, God is separating the chaos, the water from the land. It's in this imagery that God says, "Throw your staff down, it will become a snake." And God, in both instances, references each one and says, when you take it, it will turn back into a staff. This is how they will know you. What's his point? His point is him demonstrating that I am God, Yahweh, who has the power and the authority over both evil embodied in the serpent and chaos of the waters. What we see in the story to come is that what happens in the plagues is creation becomes undone, and chaos is released into the world. But the whole time, it's this image of the snake in which Moses reaches down, picks it up, and it becomes a staff again. It says, "You, Moses, are matched with my mighty hand and have power over all of that."

This is the framework. This is the story that's setting the stage for what we come to think about when we think about God, because as we've said, that's an important thing. It's here, this image that God chooses to reveal himself. So, let's go back to Exodus 7. Here's where the plagues begin.

> **Yet Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is unyielding; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning as he goes out to the river. Confront him on the bank of the Nile, and take in your hand the staff that was changed into a snake. Then say to him, 'The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness. But until now you have not listened. Exodus 7:13-16**

The Ten Plagues

Now this begins the first of ten plagues. So let me list all of them because here's where it gets wild: blood, frogs, gnats, flies, livestock, boils, kale, locusts, darkness, and death. These plagues that unleash over the

next few chapters are strange and it gets intense. What you see is these plagues are not random acts.

When I was a kid, I had the image that this was God showing off or something. I saw it as naked displays of power, but they were not that. They are highly intentional. They were not random ancient torture tactics. They're thoughtful, intentional, and hyper-specific acts that were charged with biblical symbolism. One commentator I read as I was prepping for this message said that this section of scripture is like trying to read a Rubik's cube. It is beautifully and masterfully constructed in a way that whatever you take away from this particular text and what you think about God, you cannot question its sophistication in the way the author put it together.

The plagues are broken down into three distinct trios. In set one, you have blood, frogs, and gnats. In set two, you have flies, livestock, and boils. Set three, you have hail, locusts, and darkness. The tenth plague, death, is set aside to itself because it is set aside literarily as well. You'll find that through three chapters, you get the first nine, but then the author takes about three chapters to talk just about the tenth. We're going to spend all of next week talking about the tenth.

What you'll notice also is that plagues one, four, and seven all begin with the reference "in the morning." That's how they're set apart. They also all happen at the Nile. They have that locational reference. Then, each of them, one, four, and seven, starts with "by this you will know" and details what that is.

Two, five, and eight all have the reference to "in his palace." That's unique to two, five, eight, and then lastly, seven, eight, and nine come at Pharaoh and the Egyptians without any warning. These are masterfully created acts that have its brilliance in both the vertical as well as the horizontal connection. I just want you to see this because, again, for me, it felt like when I first read these, they were random and haphazard. But as I dove in, I realized that this is quite intentional in the way God orchestrates it and the authors record it. They're trying to draw our attention to the fact that these are not random acts. They're very specific. So the question is then, what are they specific to?

Tim Mackey, a Hebrew scholar of the Bible Project, has a great article that he calls "The 10 Acts of De-creation." What does he mean by that? What we'll notice and I'll run through quickly here is that each one of these plagues links back to the Book of Genesis. And instead of in Genesis where God was creating a world, in the plagues, God is De-creating the world.

It's because Pharaoh, the height of evil and power, is creating a world in which such heinous oppression is taking over the world that God created. The best God can do is begin to de-create all that Pharaoh had created. It echoes of the flood. Do you remember the flood story in which God flooded the earth because such evil had pervaded the world? It was almost like it was so bad that he needed to start over again. These ten acts are acts of De-creation. This is the scholarly consensus about the plagues.

So, the first plague, as we just read about, is the plague of blood. This plague takes place at the Nile River, in which God says, "I will turn the Nile into blood." What do we know about Pharaoh and the Nile River thus far in the story of Exodus? The story opens with that genocidal maniac of Pharaoh telling his people to take all of the Hebrew boys and throw them into the Nile. It was a horrific evil. He brought all the Egyptians in and said, "If you see a Hebrew boy, you can rip them from their mother's arms and throw them into the Nile."

Now, drowning wouldn't necessarily evoke blood in the water, but we get the imagery. This first plague is in some ways the center introduction in which God is saying to Pharaoh, "I know what you've done. You have blood on your hands." Pharaoh had defiled the gift that God gave him in the Nile as a source of life. He's reminding Pharaoh that he has blood on his hands.

The second plague is frogs. In Exodus 8:3, we see this begin, and the text says, "The Nile will teem with frogs." If you're familiar with the Genesis story, you'll know that that word, teem, should link you back to the creation story.

> **And God said, "Let the water team with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky." So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it. Genesis 1:20-21**

The Genesis story was about creation teeming, both the sea creatures separated and distinct from the land creatures. The only place that frogs occur in the entire scriptures, particularly the Hebrew Bible, is in Exodus. The word will appear in other places, but it's always in reference to the frogs in Exodus.

So why intentionally frogs? Are frogs sea creatures or land creatures? They're a little bit of both. They're amphibious. So what you see in this second act of de-creation is God saying, "Your evil has blurred the lines of the order I have brought to creation." The creation story in Genesis 1 is about order. It's about God separating light from darkness, land from sea, day from night, and the sea creatures and the land creatures. He's bringing order. And now, instead of that beautifully ordered creation, the lines are beginning to blur. Creation is starting to fracture. After each one of these, God gives Pharaoh a chance to recant, but he doesn't.

We move on to the third plague of gnats. *"Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the ground,' and throughout the land of Egypt the dust will become gnats" (Exodus 8:16).* Where else is dust important in the creation story? Well, that's what you and I were created from. God took the dust of the ground and breathed his Spirit into it, and we became humans. See, dust in the biblical imagination speaks to mortality. "From dust, you came, and to dust, you shall return." The imagery of dust, particularly in Genesis, is meant to evoke life. But here, Moses strikes the dust, and gnats begin to go over all of Egypt. Instead of life swarming over creation, the gnats are bringing death. Death is now like the dust. It's swarming over the created order.

The fourth one is flies, which began to cover the land. And what we see in flies is that life was meant to fill and multiply over the land. But rather than multiplying, the flies that feast on decomposing matter are now swarming. It's an image of death covering and swarming over the land.

The fifth plague is livestock. In Exodus, God says that he'll separate the Egyptian livestock from the Israelite livestock. Then there's a little phrase that says "The Lord set a time," he will then cast the plague of the livestock. This is filled with creation language in which God is separating light from dark and is setting an appointed time. The separation of light from dark marks night from day. It is an appointed time. And it's at that time that the livestock are struck with disease and death. De-creation.

The sixth plague is boils. Here's where it gets creative. The word for boil is the word snake backwards in Hebrew. The Hebrews had unique ways in which they emphasized things, whether it was repetition or otherwise. This is one of the tools that biblical authors would do to flash the lights like, "Hey, pay attention to this." You see that here in the act of boils.

The seventh plague is hail. It says that it would destroy in Exodus all the people and animals who had not taken shelter and everything growing in the fields of Egypt. This language mirrors the summary of Genesis of all the living creations on days three and six of the creation story. It's almost the exact same language used there.

Plague eight is locusts. They come devouring everything growing in the fields. That's what the locusts do in Exodus. Again, the imagery mirrors all that is listed on day three of Genesis. What God created on day three is now destroyed by the locusts in Exodus. Then, we reached the climax before the plague of death, which is darkness. And this might be the most profound act of de-creation because what do we think of when we think of light and darkness? We think of Genesis 1:3. *"And God said, 'Let there be light," and there was light" (Genesis 1:3).*

The first most fundamental act of God in creation was to separate and extinguish that darkness by bringing light. But here in Exodus, we see the exact inversion of this when God says, "Let there be darkness." And there's darkness, de-creation over and over and over. Creation is coming undone under the evil tyranny of Pharaoh, where the very created fabric is breaking and fracturing. It's the inversion of all that was good and in the de-created order is unleashed on Pharaoh and Egypt.

Then you reach death, which we'll talk about next week. Here you see as the culminating act, God is a God of life and flourishing, but what we find here in the last plague is death. Commentator Terrence Fretheim says this.

The entire created order is caught up in this struggle, either as cause or victim. Pharaoh's anti-life measures have unleashed chaotic powers that threaten the very creation that God intended...Water is no longer water; light and darkness are no longer separated; diseases of people and animals run amok; insects and amphibians swarm out of control... And the signs come to a climax in the darkness, which in effect returns the creation to the first day of Genesis 1, a precreation state of affairs. Terrence Fretheim

When we, like Pharaoh, participate in evil, we are undoing God's created order. The intrusion of evil, the intrusion of Pharaoh, the intrusion of mine and your broken hearts into the world is undoing the very good that God had intended for the world. C. S. Lewis once said, "There is no neutral act in the world. You're either partnering with the kingdom of light or partnering with the kingdom of darkness." But those two things are what's before us.

God reaches a point with Pharaoh in which such evil and atrocity are taking place throughout God's good creation. The oppressor oppressing those who are vulnerable and marginalized so much so that all God could do was to begin to undo the very created order on which Pharaoh had built his reign of evil.

I believe the plagues are not God's intended way of redemption, but rather it is God doing damage control on a suffering world. It is that it had been so heinous, and Pharaoh is so unique to history. We have a hard heart at times like Pharaoh, but Pharaoh is unique in the sense that while we may perpetuate evil at times, none of us in here have the power and the authority that Pharaoh had.

We want to read this and think that this is the way God deals with every situation, but it's just simply not. The text is clear. This is an utterly unique moment in which God wants us to see Pharaoh as the archetype of human rebellion that began in the garden culminated in Babylon, and is then demonstrated here so vividly in Pharaoh.

Put differently, the plagues are not God's preference but are a concession to the immense evil of the moment. At times, this is all that God can do in a world that has free will. *"Yet Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said" (Exodus 7:13)*. This is one of the hardest themes in Exodus is this idea of Pharaoh's heart. Because, at times, you read that Pharaoh's heart became hard. You could read it as Pharaoh made his heart hard, and then at other times, you read that God made Pharaoh's heart hard.

Who Hardened Pharaoh's Heart?

Throughout this text you have this question that's aching to be answered. Who hardenedPharaoh's heart? The question beneath that is even more intense. Who is morally culpable for the atrocities that unfold in the plagues. Because if God hardens Pharaoh's heart, did Pharaoh have a say in it? What does that mean for him? Is God culpable or Pharaoh? Who is the active agent in all of this? The very basic answer is there is no simple answer.

In Exodus 7:13, you see the verb "became hard." Now, in Hebrew, there are different forms of verbs. There's passive, which is something that happens to an individual. Pharaoh's heart was hardened. There's also active. Pharaoh hardened his heart. And then there's this other category called the stative and the stative is essentially ambiguous. It just is. You have every instance in the plague narrative in which Pharaoh's hard heart is referenced. You see that the Lord hardens Pharaoh's heart in the middle. You have Pharaoh hardening his own heart, and Pharaoh's heart became hard.

Notice through plagues one through five, God is never referenced as the active agent in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, meaning the initial act of Pharaoh's hard heart was either him or some ambiguous thing. Pharaoh's heart became hard. In the very first instance in Exodus 7:22, Pharaoh's heart became hard. Then you see it oscillate in plague two in Exodus 8:15, where Pharaoh hardens his own heart. What you see is this constant interchange between Pharaoh's hard heart and then it becoming hard until you get to plague six, which is finally the first instance in which you see it explicitly that God hardens Pharaoh's heart.

Why that's important is because it changes the story a little bit if we believe God initiated the hardening of the heart for the very first time or if Pharaoh initiated the very first hardening of the heart. The issue that we have to wrestle with is whether Pharaoh's heart hardened in such a way that God just continued the trajectory of his own evil, wicked ways. Did Pharaoh or God initiate that? That's the question. The evidence suggests that Pharaoh's heart was already set in this particular way. A commentator, Alec Motyer, said:

Exodus tells us three things about Pharaoh's heart: that the Lord hardened it, that Pharaoh hardened his heart, and that his heart became hard. In other words, it is possible to tell two stories about Pharaoh's heart...One is the story that Pharaoh's moral choices, whereby his heart became increasingly "set in its ways," committed more and more irretrievably to a course of genocide regarding Israel. The other is a mere statement that from the perspective of the Lord as a moral ruler of his world, the point of no return had been reached, and the hardness of Pharaoh's heart must now be judgmentally imposed on him as the justly due consequence of what his own choices had made him. Alec Motyer

You see the two stories, and they're both accurate. Pharaoh had made up his mind and was morally culpable for the wickedness in which he was carrying out over the Egyptian people. The most powerful evil man in all of human history to that point was enslaving a people, race-based slavery, to build up his own economic empire. It is evil, genocidal, throwing babies into a river to intentionally drown them. I mean, it is an evil at a level that is hard to wrap our heads around. And at some point, God moves into the mix and becomes active in this. It's clear that he, at some point, did harden Pharaoh's heart, but it seems like, as Motyer says, that it was more of a continuing judgment way to say this is heinous and evil.

Now, one more text before we get out of the weeds is Exodus 3. We're going back in the story a little bit. This is when God was setting the stage with Moses, saying, "You are going to go and liberate the people." In Exodus 3:19, we read, this is God speaking,

> **But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him. So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go. Exodus 3:19-20**

Notice in verse 19 it says, "but I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go." Is that a comment on sovereignty or foreknowledge? It's foreknowledge. It's God saying that he knows what will happen. Pharaoh's heart is hard. God knew that the only way he would let them go was if he was compelled by a mighty hand as strong as Pharaoh's. God, in Exodus 3, is saying that he understands the wickedness of Pharaoh's heart, that it is so hardened it will take an act of the same caliber in order to break through the cemented heart in his soul to let the people go.

The plagues are in no way, shape, or form God's design or desire. It is not his preferred way of dealing with evil, but rather, I believe it was God's concession to the immense evil that lay in the heart of the most powerful man in the world. The point of the story is that God is a God who hears the cry of the oppressed and moves closer. If you wrestle with that, I get it. I've wrestled with this for two weeks trying to figure out what it means that God was active in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. The text says that at some point, he was, and I understand that if that's your struggle with it, I get it.

Mercy and Judgment

The reason I want to go to such lengths on this is because what comes to mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you. And here's maybe my gracious question. Would it absolve God in your mind? If you're really stuck on this. Would it absolve God in your mind if he just continued to not do anything to release the oppressed? Would it make it better to know God never intervened to liberate the people from such heinous evil?

The question that we really need to ask is at what point is it enough? At what point is evil so bad that it tips the scale and God must act on behalf of the vulnerable? That's a tension that we have to live in. The Exodus story is a story about a God active in the midst of horrendous injustice and is working toward redemption.

We have a weird tendency, and it's because the evil that we see in Pharaoh is so unpalatable, to flatten this story. We make it cute, and we put it on flannel graph and read all these beautiful books about it. It is so evil that we flatten the story because we can't imagine that tyrannical individual. But when we flatten the story, of course the guilt shifts towards God, because we forget the heinousness that was Pharaoh.

And then maybe another gracious correction. We tend to bring our questions to a text like this, and what we forget is that our questions, although good and important, are contextually based. We bring a question to this text about the sovereignty of God: did God have a say in this? We impose free will versus sovereignty into this debate, but that's not what the story is about. That's a modern question we're imposing on it. It doesn't mean that that's not a good question we need to wrestle with. But if we're to understand this particular story, and this is biblical interpretation 101, we have to understand who and to what purpose this original story was written.

This story is a book written to and for those who have a history of being oppressed by an oppressor at a grand scale. I don't know if I, as an American white male, am the right person to answer this question. Because the reality is I haven't faced any oppression in the way that this

story depicts. If we're to understand this question, it'd be much more interesting to hear how a Palestinian trapped in the Gaza Strip who's on the receiving end of a barrage of rockets would answer, or the Israeli family who had their doors knocked down by Hamas and brutally killed. Or maybe it's the Ukrainian family who are experiencing the tyrannical rule of Putin's invasion.

They would have a different window into this story because it's one thing for me to sit back and wrestle with the questions of sovereignty and free will. It's a whole other thing for someone who's experiencing the oppression and the brokenness in the world to ask where God is in the midst of it. That's who this story is written to: the Israelite people. They had been asking that question for 400 years. God was silent, and they were crying out, "God, where are you? Is my lot in life to simply suffer under the power of a tyrannical maniac for the rest of my life and die?" At some point, God said no because Pharaoh was also acting under divine authority, thinking he was God. God said that enough is enough.

This is the question that we need to bring to this text. Who is this God? And God says emphatically, "I am the God who hears the cry of the oppressed, moves closer to that, and is doing something about evil." Whether it's at a grand systemic state or whether it's at the very personal individual evilness of my own heart, God is doing something about evil. He's in the midst of horrendous injustice, working towards redemption.

I couldn't help but continue to hear the words of Martin Luther King Jr. when he cried out famously, "We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." This is a story in which we remember that God is the God who is bending the arc of history toward justice and that evil will not have the last say. God is a God of hope for the hopeless, and he's good news for the suffering because he's entering into the very brokenness of the world and will finally say enough.

The tension we wrestle with is we want a God of mercy, do we not? When we recognize our own Pharaoh's hard heart within ourselves, we need and desire a God of mercy. Because if we're honest with ourselves, although Pharaoh is unique, we see the wickedness in our own hearts. We've seen the way we've contributed to brokenness in the world, maybe not at the scale of Pharaoh, but certainly, we, too, have perpetuated death and brokenness in the world. We are crying out for a God of mercy.

But at the same time, you read a story like this, you read about those atrocities I mentioned earlier, and you desperately want a God of justice. You believe it at your core because that's a proper response to demand justice. So, what do you do when you desire mercy and justice? They seem to be in conflict. How do you have mercy for the oppressor and justice for the oppressed in the same way?

I was reminded of Psalm 85. That love and faithfulness meet together. Righteousness and peace kiss each other. That word righteousness is also the Hebrew word for justice. Justice and peace kiss each other. The tension we live in is trying to figure out how we hold mercy and justice together. What the text demonstrates in the plagues is that mercy and justice is the very core of who God is.

You see that most clearly in the cross of Jesus Christ. In which you realize on the cross of Jesus Christ, you see mercy in God laying his own life down, that the God who hears the sufferings of the oppressed is the one who also co-suffers with them. He is not removed and distant, but rather, he is a suffering God who will bleed alongside you. He is the God of mercy. Yet, on the cross, you also see justice. You see that Jesus opened up his life to receive all of the death and the brokenness the world could throw at him, and so in Jesus, you find the perfect connection between mercy and justice.

The beautiful thing about this God, this Jesus, is that it is good news for the oppressor that God is merciful, but it's also good news for the oppressed that God is just. And it's this beautiful paradox of God being revealed to us in Egypt. This is the message God is saying, "I am this God, who is Yahweh. I am Yahweh who is merciful and just."

Some of us are praying for God's mercy. Some of us recognize the vitriol and evil that's within our own heart and we are crying out to God, "Lord, I need mercy. Please have mercy on me." Others of us are praying for justice. We have been on the receiving end of brokenness and evil and pain. We are asking God, "Where are you? Will justice ever be served?"

This tension of mercy and justice is what we most long for. This paradox. God shows us in Exodus that this is the God "I am." What you think about when you think about God is the most important thing about you.

I've been praying a lot this week that what would come to my mind and would come to your mind is that you would come to see not these questions we impose on the text but rather the God who's wrestling in the midst of utter brokenness, that he is merciful and he is just. This is the God we desire.

Have mercy on us, and come, Lord Jesus, come.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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