

Thursday Morning Bible Study:

Exodus: God Forms His Holy Nation

2. The Battle of Covenant (Exodus 6:14-14:31)

This next section of Exodus begins with a “names” section, listing the names of the heads of some of the tribes of Israel—Reuben, Simeon, and Levi (6:14-19), who were the first three sons born to Jacob by Leah. The genealogy doesn’t progress further to the rest of the sons of Jacob as the point of the genealogy is to give the family line of Moses and Aaron and their children (6:20-25.) In this genealogy we *are*, unlike chapter 2, given the names of Moses’ and Aaron’s parents (Amram and Jochebed.) A note that follows (6:26-27) rehearses the commission of Aaron and Moses to deliver Israel from Egypt.

We re-enter the narrative at the point of Moses’ reluctance to go, being uncertain that he will get a hearing from Pharaoh (6:28-30). But we hear in 7:1-6 the LORD’s response, and the provision of Aaron to Moses’ spokesman, given Moses’ fear of his inarticulacy. However, Moses must still speak – and as the narrative progresses, very little (if any) reference is made to Aaron’s intermediary role.

The word of the LORD to Moses here scopes out the large picture of what will happen as he speaks. “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people, the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by acts of great judgment. The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them (7:3-5)” The final outcome will be not only the liberation of Israel from their oppression, but also Egypt’s knowledge that “I am the LORD.”

The coming exodus will be for the glory of the name of God (the LORD.) The coming events are a battle for the supremacy of the LORD over the pretender gods of the age. Pharaoh saw himself as a divine figure, and as the one who determined the destinies of the peoples. His pretension will have to come under judgment, and that is primarily what the “plagues” are. The “plagues” are properly “signs” – acts that show the sovereignty of the LORD as the one true God, and that brings down those who dare to usurp the place of God. The constant, simple, steady message of the LORD is clear – “Let my people go that they may serve me.” For there is a sure tomorrow that lies ahead – the people of Israel will go free. But God’s persistence in warning is met by persistent resistance from Pharaoh. At the end of each sign, Pharaoh responds from a hard heart, refusing to act according to what the LORD is doing and saying. The “today” of Moses’ and Aaron’s prophetic ministry could be for Pharaoh a day of salvation, a favourable time, if only he would hear and respond with faith. If he would, then he and his people would be on the inside of God’s saving purpose. But his stubborn resistance makes the tomorrow that lies ahead for him only one of judgment and loss.

The signs (that we call plagues) that God sends on Egypt are His response to Pharaoh’s resistance. These signs begin as annoyances and inconveniences (signs 1 to 3 – the Nile, the frogs, the gnats), become afflictions (signs 4 to 6 – the flies, “the land was ruined by the swarms of flies” 8:24; the blight on the livestock, “all the livestock of the Egyptians died” 9:6; and the boils), and then escalate further into unprecedented catastrophes (signs 7-9 –the hail 9:18, the locusts, 10:14, the darkness.)

As the signs progress, they effect a wider and wider scope, impacting not just on Pharaoh but on the natural environment, the climate, human health, the economy, trees, crops, animals, and people. [To complain about the scope of the judgment is to overlook the fact that human resistance to the word of God cannot be met with a judgment that is determined to be fair by those human resisters. To think that we know best what judgment fits us is to kid ourselves that we can manage judgment (and so manage God Himself.)]

In each of the three groups of three signs, there is a progress from Moses and Aaron being sent in the early morning to meet Pharaoh (7:15, 8:20, 9:13) to being sent at some indefinite time (8:1, 9:1, 10:1), to not being sent at all (8:16, 8:23, 9:8, 10:21.) And there is a sense of urgency given – but urgency that allows some time to repent – when the warning is given that the sign will come *tomorrow*. The third of each three, where no word is sent to Pharaoh, reminds him, if he will but listen, that there is a time when the patience of God will have reached its fulfilment, and when presumption on that patience will no longer be possible.

The signs are all with a view to Pharaoh, Egypt and Israel all *knowing* God. 7:17 – ‘Thus says the LORD, “By this you shall know that I am the LORD.”’ And that He is the LORD who is the covenant faithful God in the land of Egypt as He is in the whole earth, making distinction between His people and those who are not His people. 8:22 ‘But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth.’ And knowing God to be the LORD, to whom no one can be compared. 9:13 ‘This time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth.’ And the signs serve to let Israel also *know* the LORD, telling their children and grandchildren who their God is. 10:2 ‘...that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done through them, that you may know that I am the LORD.’

Each day he woke, Pharaoh must have dreaded the new day, wondering if Moses will come with more trouble for him. But the persistent turning up of Moses was the sign of a God who is like the persistent widow in the parable of Jesus – earnestly seeking justice to be done on the earth. If only Pharaoh would open himself to, humble himself before, this holy and gracious God who, through the people He comes to rescue, will bring blessing to the ends of the earth. So too in our world. The church, the people who bear the promise and warning of the coming day of the Lord, are not necessarily welcome. We must persist and proclaim! Today is on the edge of that great tomorrow. The risen Lord Jesus is bringing all things to the great renewal. Men and women and are called to repent and believe the gospel, before that day appointed for judgment (Acts 2:36, 10:42, 17:31.) It is for that very reason alone that the church is on the earth.

Finally (11:1) one more plague is threatened, and Pharaoh will finally capitulate (unwillingly and without resolution) to the call of the LORD to “let my people go that they may worship me.” The Passover, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread which followed it, were festivals for Israel to celebrate and re-enact an event in their history that defined who they were and what God’s faithfulness meant for them. They were a people formed by the saving acts of God. He had acted to release them from oppression into a new safe place in a new and safe time in which to live. This is what had happened in the events that the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread

called them to remember. But it was not simply the recollection of an historical fact; in the Passover, Israel was called to know again and to believe again in this redeeming God, who still was their Deliverer, who still was giving them a land, and a future and a hope, in which to live.

When Pharaoh was in charge of time and in charge of Israel, their life in ‘the land of slavery’ was an endless, day by day repetition of wearisome toil that seemed to have been going on for ever and that had no end in sight. And *who* they were was simply slaves of Pharaoh. Their existence was slavery simply for the sake of slavery. Past and present were just limitless extensions of an intolerable present. Memory was turned into a growing mountain of pain, and hope was and a lengthening shadow of despair.

But the LORD, the faithful covenant God of Israel acted for His people to give them a land and a future, and so to make them a people. In the awful and dread events of the last of the 10 signs, the plague in which the LORD went to take from Egypt all the firstborn of the land, from the firstborn of Pharaoh to the firstborn of the captive in the deepest dungeon and even to the firstborn of the livestock, the LORD did the act which finally broke the hard-heartedness of Pharaoh. The Egyptian ruler had chosen to enslave God’s firstborn, His people Israel, and trap them in a world that was dominated by death. But now the LORD was taking the firstborn of Egypt and that was the act that finally prompted Pharaoh and his people to drive them out. 12:30ff – ‘And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians. And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead. Then he summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, “Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the LORD, as you have said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone, and bless me also!”’

The Passover was a *sacred* meal given to Israel at that time. It became the meal that marked the beginning of the year (12:1.) A new time began with God’s redemption. It was inaugurated in the shadow of events through which God was taking hold of covenant promises given in the past and renewing them through redeeming acts for life into the future.

It was a meal eaten indoors, under protection given by shed blood. Outside that protection, the first-born of the land are all taken by the LORD who passes over the land (11:4, 12:29.) No Israelite was to go outside their house that night; to do so would lose that blood-protection (12:22.) To sit in the blood-protected house was to affirm faith in the promises of God; to not do so was to spurn Him. And as Passover was to be a yearly event, Israel was always to know that their security in time and space came from God, who would provide the sacrifice that would be their salvation.

This memorial meal was to be repeated yearly in the land of freedom to which the LORD would bring Israel (12:14, 25.) Memory and hope would be reawakened, and create a present that full of hope and joy. They would know afresh that the LORD is their redeeming God, that He has given them space and time to be His people. When their children asked why they did this, they would be able to speak not just of the past, but of the present as the time and place that God had given them to be His people.

The Passover was a meal that was open and closed. It was closed to anyone who did not bear the covenant signs, who did not affirm the covenant faith. No foreigner could eat of it (12:44-45) unless he became a circumcised member of the community of

faith (12:44, 48.) And it was prescribed for all were members of Israel. To spurn Passover was to spurn the reality of being the people of God, to spurn the gift of redeemed time and space.

This protection, this rescue into the blessedness of God's time which heads to the great rest of communion with Him, is a gift for the whole world. Through Abraham's children all the nations of the world will be blessed. So the Passover is a sign of the fulfilment of all times that dawns in the coming of the First Born of all creation, God's own Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus was given in sacrificial death at Passover for the redemption of the world. He stood in the place of judgment, and in so doing covered us, creating a space and time for us to know the grace of God our Father. The church has its identity as the people of God not simply by ties of kin nor by ties of friendship or common interest. We have our identity as God's people by the redemption wrought in the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is in Jesus Christ we have sacred time and space. And we are called to call the world to this feast.

The escape (13:17-22) is told in very simple language. The escape is not by a direct route, but a more round-about way, because the LORD knows that in the face of battle Israel may well choose to return to Egypt (13:17.) The escape is entirely managed by the LORD Himself who leads them by fiery cloud, day and night, never departing from His people (13:21-22.) But then the escape seems threatened by the very path that the LORD chooses to lead them – they end up with the sea in front, and the armies of Pharaoh (who has reneged on his agreement to let them go) in hot pursuit behind. The people cry out to the LORD and raise their complaint against Moses, who seems to them only to be intent on having them die! Their faith in God shrivels in the face of trouble. Moses' words are good words: "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will work for you today. For the Egyptians who you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you only have to be silent." And that is what they see, through their remarkable and unforgettable escape through the sea, and the closing of the sea over the pursuing Egyptian armies. 14: 31 – "Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses."