

A Tragic Night, A Joyful Day
Exodus 12:21-32 and Revelation 5:6-14
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Last week we saw the tragic consequences of Pharaoh's hardened heart, as the first nine plagues caused widespread suffering among Pharaoh's people. There is one plague remaining. An impasse has been reached, and the end is near. Pharaoh has persisted in his steadfast refusal to let God's people leave Egypt. As a result, a final judgment will fall.

There is a gap between God's announcement of the plague and when the plague becomes reality. In the interim, God addresses the Hebrews through Moses about Passover and their observance of it. This tenth plague becomes a bridge, bringing to a climax what has gone before and introducing what is to follow. It advances the narrative from slavery to freedom, from judgment to joy, from plague to Passover.

At the burning bush, when God told Moses of his plan to free the Hebrews from bondage, God had said, "I will bring [my] people into such favor with the Egyptians that, when you go, you will not go empty-handed; each woman shall ask her neighbor...for jewelry of silver and of gold, and clothing, and you shall put them on your sons and daughters; and so you shall plunder the Egyptians." (3:21)

As God announces the coming of the final plague, God tells Moses to remind the Israelites to ask their neighbors for their silver and gold possessions as well as clothing. The Egyptians give the items willingly, for they have come to respect their Hebrew neighbors. Moses in particular is now highly regarded by the Egyptians which serves to highlight how isolated Pharaoh has become in his entrenched opposition to Yahweh and Yahweh's people. History has shown that this gap between the views of a country's leaders and its people is not uncommon, nor is the fact that millions may suffer because of that disparity in values. We need look no further than the international refugee crisis to see this dynamic being played out on the contemporary world stage.

The items the Hebrews ask for are not random, and we will see their importance later in the story. The clothing Moses' people wear out of Egypt do not wear out during their entire 40-year sojourn in the desert. The gold and silver will be put to both good and evil purposes. The plundering of the Egyptians, with

their cooperation, no less, is some measure of justice for the Hebrews. Think of all those hundreds of thousands of free hours of labor the pharaohs of Egypt have extracted from their slaves. Some of the compensation that was due them is finally being paid.

To our modern-day ears, the tenth plague seems inconsistent with our understanding of a merciful, loving God. The death of all the firstborn of Egypt, human and animal, is carnage on a massive scale, with thousands dying because of the sins of their king and their fathers. The truth is that we have trouble with both sides of this story. We are troubled if God doesn't act, allowing the Hebrews to endure horrific suffering under Egypt's genocidal policies, but then we're troubled when God does act because there is more innocent blood shed. We find ourselves face-to-face, once again, with arguably the greatest theological conundrum in scripture and in life—the relationship between God and human suffering.

Exodus does not spend any time trying to explain or defend God's actions with regard to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, nor will I, but I will leave you with just a couple of observations as “food for thought”. First, remember that from Genesis to Revelation, God is consistently depicted as a God of life, creation, and redemption. Nothing God does will violate that essential nature of God as a lover and giver of life. God is not glad for the Egyptians deaths. Far from it! God would much rather have achieved the Israelites' freedom with Pharaoh's cooperation which would have negated any loss of life or suffering. But, Pharaoh—not God—closed off that possibility.

Second, theologian and OT scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that we see God's actions here as “the passion of a mother bear in defense of a cub. The mother is ferocious and unreasoned in its attack on anything or anyone that threatens the cub.” That is certainly not a complete picture, but it does remind us to take seriously God's judgment of sin and evil. God is exceedingly patient, giving us opportunities time and time again to repent of our own stubbornness and rebelliousness. Think of all the times we go it alone and do things our way rather than God's. Thankfully, God does not immediately strike us down every time our attitudes and actions are not aligned with God's purposes of life, love, peace and mercy. But, God's patience does not preclude judgment. There is a day when we will answer for whether we worked to advance the kingdom of God or whether we worked to advance our own kingdoms. This tenth plague is a jolting reminder not to cheapen the patience and mercy of God.

It is certainly true that you can take the people out of Egypt, but it is a much harder task to take Egypt out of the people. A newly liberated nation will need to

create practices and institutions that are in tune with their new status as free people rather than slaves. When Pharaoh was in charge of time, a slave's day became an endless repetition of wearisome labor that seemed to stretch out forever. Past and future became limitless extensions of an intolerable present. But, when God is in charge of one's time instead of Pharaoh, a seismic shift occurs. Expectation replaces resignation. Hope replaces numbness. Rhapsody replaces routine. Celebration replaces drudgery.

In Israel's case, their newly created liturgy of freedom precedes the actual event of liberation. Their first Passover is celebrated *in* Egypt, and the liturgy prepares them for how set apart this ritual is. Meat is normally cooked slowly in pans or ovens, but not this time. Bread is normally prepared with leaven to help it rise, but not this time. One normally reclines and enjoys a meal in leisure, but not this time. Part of the sanctity of Passover is that one does things differently on this day, avoiding things that are perfectly permissible and ordinary on other days.

The Passover is both meal and sacrifice. An unblemished lamb or kid was slaughtered, its meat nourishing the family while its blood was smeared on the doorposts of the home. Most often in Scripture when sacrificial blood is placed on an object or person, it is placed on the outside or on the extremities, that particular point that a hostile force would strike first. The blood was a symbol and sign of life. In the blood was life; the vitality of the living. The blood of creation was shed so that Israel's blood might be spared.

It's a fair question to ask, for whose benefit was the sign of blood? Was it for God, so God would know who occupied the house, Egyptian or Hebrew? God tells Moses the blood is a sign "for you," that is, for the Hebrews. Only those who in faith place themselves under God's divine mercy and protection will be spared. It is not their "Hebrewness" that will save them; only the blood will save them. In the earlier plagues, they had needed no blood on their doorposts to save them from flies or locusts or darkness, but here, where the issue is survival, life and death, they need both the blood and God's protecting presence over their homes.

Central to the inauguration of the Passover was God's specific instruction that this rite be passed down from generation to generation, told and re-told, enacted and re-enacted. But, here's the key: the Passover, like all sacraments, was not meant to be rehearsed merely as history, as if it had significance only for the people who lived through it. The Passover was, and is, meant to be a vehicle for making the exodus redemption real and effective for every generation. Every family, every person is to enter into the event in such a way that they experience

for themselves what it is to be liberated, rescued and formed as God's people. Worshipers past, present and future become actual participants in God's saving deed: God brought *us* out of Egypt, which invites us to name our own forms of bondage, our own systems of oppression, some of which we participate in as victim as some as the oppressor. God wants to free us from all of it.

After Moses finished relaying all of God's instructions for the Passover, the people responded by bowing down in worship, no doubt a service of thanksgiving for the promise of deliverance. This is the same response they'd had back in chapter 4 when Moses and Aaron approached them for the first time with God's plan for saving them from Pharaoh. It's the only reasonable response for any of us, when we experience the life-altering freedom of God.

As we're well aware by now, the Exodus is a story of both death and new life. Even with the joy associated with their newfound freedom, Israel, like God, voices no pleasure in the deaths of the Egyptians. The tenth plague is carried out at midnight, the darkness of the hour matching the darkness of the deed. Moses' life had begun under threat of death for all Hebrew firstborn males; Egypt is now visited by a plague of death on all firstborn, human and animal. The cries of sorrow and grief fill the land from the royal palace, to the most humble of homes, to stables and barns, and even to prison cells. Unless there was blood on your doorpost, there was no escape.

As the early church reflected on and celebrated Passover, they saw in this story a foreshadowing of the Christian gospel. In the Passover story, Egypt's firstborn died because of the sins of Egypt. In the gospel, Jesus is God's "firstborn" who dies for the sins of the world. They saw the slaughter of the lambs used at Passover as pointing to the death of Jesus, even using language that speaks of "Christ our Passover lamb." The Israelites were instructed to use a branch from the hyssop plant to spread the lamb's blood on their doorposts. John's Gospel tells us that as Jesus hung on the cross, he was offered a drink of sour wine using a hyssop branch.

For Jews, the central saving act of God on their behalf was the night when God liberated them from slavery in Egypt, claimed them as his own people, and began their journey to the Promised Land, all of which is recalled in the Passover Seder. For Christians, God's central saving act for all humanity is the death and resurrection of Christ. It was not an accident that Jesus' last supper with his disciples, the night before his crucifixion, was the Passover Seder. At the meal, Jesus reinterpreted the eating of unleavened bread and the drinking of wine, as he

said, “This is my body broken for you; do this in remembrance of me”; and “This cup is the new covenant sealed by my blood, which is shed for you.”

The focus in both the Passover and in the Lord’s Supper is on what God has done for us—setting us free from all that entangles us, weighs us down, enslaves us; liberating us from the burden of maintaining ourselves over and against the other; freeing us from the grip of attitudes and actions that promote difference, division and death. God has done all this in Jesus Christ because we could never do it for ourselves, and like the Hebrews, our response can only be to bow our heads in worship which I invite you to do now....

Sing “Behold the Lamb”

Behold the Lamb
Behold the Lamb
Slain from the foundation of the world.

For sinners crucified,
O holy sacrifice
Behold the Lamb of God
Behold the Lamb.

Crown him, crown him,
Worthy is the Lamb.
Praise him, praise him.
Heav’n and earth resound!

Behold the Lamb
Behold the Lamb
Slain from the foundation of the world.

For sinners crucified
O holy sacrifice
Behold the Lamb of God
Behold the Lamb.