

October 12, 2014

The Rod of God and the Fall of Pharaoh

Exodus 5 – 11

5:1-2; 7:14-18; 10:21-29; 11:10

We come this morning to a particularly long section of Scripture and what we won't do is go through this verse by verse – much to your relief I'm sure. The reason we are taking chapters five through 11 as a unit here is because it is really a kind of story that you need to read as a whole to understand the big picture. And it starts in chapter five when Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh and give him the message from the LORD - Yahweh: *Let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness!* Let My people go that they may worship Me. And Pharaoh answers them and says, '*Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go!*' This is at the heart of this section. All the drama of chapters 5 – 11 is unleashed because Pharaoh says '***Who is the LORD – that I should obey His voice?***'

What follows is this story of the ten plagues of blood, frogs, gnats, flies and disease; boils, hail, locusts and darkness, and finally death. And you find yourself asking, 'What is this all about? If God wants to free His people, why go through all this? What is the point? Couldn't He just kill Pharaoh, blind the army, and get His people out? Why go through all this drama? Is it payback time? Is He paying them back for enslaving His people or what?' But I want you to see this morning that the plagues come to answer a question – ***Who is the LORD that I should obey Him?*** That is the question: Who is the LORD that ***we*** should obey Him? Why should we obey this God? Why should anyone? Who is He? And what this text shows are at least three reasons why Pharaoh, or anyone, should obey God. He is the only God; He is the Creator God; He is the saving God.

First of all ***He is the only God***. When Pharaoh asked the question: '***Who is the LORD – that I should obey His voice?***' he wasn't saying, 'I don't believe in God'. Pharaoh was many things but he wasn't an atheist – the ancient world had very few, if any, professed atheists. Everybody believed in a god, or gods. He was simply saying what many people today are saying – 'You have your god and I have my gods, so why are you insisting that I obey yours?' He was like many are today, ***a religious pluralist***. He certainly believed in the existence of deity, after all, he was considered to be a god himself. But for Moses to come and insist that everybody obey ***his*** God undoubtedly seemed a bit arrogant to him. Pharaoh would have found that he fit in very well in today's philosophical climate.

Everybody has a different view of God today, but the underlying assumption is that everybody's view of God is valid. You have your god and I have mine – how intolerant of you to insist that I abandon my view of god to accommodate yours. The great sin today is not whether you believe in God, but that you believe there is only one God and only one way to get to God. People say all the time that no one can be really sure their view of God is correct, so we must accept all views of God, and to insist on one view is wrong. But if that is true, then your certainty that there is no certainty is also wrong. Many times pluralists have used an illustration of four blind guys who encounter an elephant and are trying to describe it. One grabs the trunk and concludes it is a snake. Another explores one of the elephant's legs and describes it as a tree. A third finds the elephant's tail and announces that it is a rope. And the fourth blind man, after discovering the elephant's side, concludes that it is, after all, a wall. So, they say, with a wise nod of the head, ***we should conclude that no individual religion has a corner on truth, but that all should be viewed as equally valid.***

But when everything is said and done – the thing ***is*** an elephant – not a snake or a tree or a rope or a wall. ***Their misconception about the elephant doesn't change the fundamental fact that it is an elephant.*** It is true whether they believe it or not. Furthermore, all four guys are believing a lie – it is actually an elephant. Their opinions are not equally true nor are they valid – ***they are equally, and actually false.*** At best, such an analogy of religious pluralism would show that all religions are false, not true. Finally, if these four blind guys had encountered one guy with sight who told them, 'No, this is an elephant' then that changes everything. What we have here is one guy who sees the elephant and shows the blind guys the reality of what they can only imagine.

These plagues are not just random disasters chosen to astonish the ignorant, superstitious Egyptians. Everything that happens in these chapters are carefully selected to challenge everything they believe in. We won't go into detail about these plagues, but from the first one, turning the water of the Nile into blood, to the last one in this section, a thick darkness over the whole land of Egypt, all hit hard at their core religious beliefs. If you study the Egyptian religion, you quickly realize that they had a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses, each dedicated to oversee some aspect of Egyptian life. And the rod of God in the hand of Moses through these plagues, hit everyone of them, knocking them out of contention as real gods. In each case, Moses would take his staff, the rod of God, and strike judgment on Egypt – blood, frogs, flies, disease, hail. And the Scripture is very clear on the reason why. Several times throughout this text God says that **these judgments came so that Pharaoh '...would know that I am the LORD – I am Yahweh'**.

As we've seen before, this was a unique name indicating that this God did not merely define Himself as one more god. He is not some river god or sun god or moon god, or god of fertility or prosperity or good luck or any other class of being. **He is the self-existent I AM.** Utterly unique – the only God. In chapter nine He tells Pharaoh that He is sending these plagues on he and his people '**...so that you may know that there is no one like Me in all the earth**'. The first message strikes at the root of the belief that everybody has their own god and every religion is equally valid, and every god is equally good for the people who worship them. The first lesson is that **the rod of God falls on every other thing raised up as god in His place.** The first thing God is saying here is, "**No. I'm the only God. I'm the unique God. There is none like me in all the earth.**" This is reason one we should obey Him.

The second thing we see here is the declaration that **God is the unique Creator God.** Look at what we see here. What we see is creation out of control. All that He has created is thrown into chaos. Rivers turn to blood – in fact water everywhere becomes undrinkable, and the whole ecosystem becomes chaotic. Frogs multiply exponentially and get into everything, and then they die by the millions, rotting all over the place and stinking everything up. And then come the gnats and the flies from those rotting corpses, and disease follows right behind, killing all the livestock. And then we get disease in the human population with serious boils breaking out all over. And then we see this chaos in the weather with incredible lightening and hailstorms. And then the locusts come and eat everything up, and finally even the heavens get involved with thick darkness covering it all.

And you might be tempted to look at this and say, 'Well those things are really bad, but as miracles go, they're not that miraculous. I mean, really what we're looking at are nothing more than natural disasters – those happen all the time'. In fact, the more you look at this stuff that's happening, the more you begin to think that if God really wanted to show His unique power and authority over everything, He would do something a little more dramatic. He could have had Moses wave that staff and have lightening burst out the end like Gandalf in the Lord of the Rings and zap everybody in the palace. And then bring them back to life in front of Pharaoh to prove His sovereign power. So why does God do it this way? We should know by now that God is not into parlor tricks. That's what Pharaoh's magicians were into. They even duplicated a few of the signs that Moses did, using illusion, however, rather than any kind of magical powers, just like David Copperfield.

But eventually, their powers of illusion ran out and after the plague of frogs where they made more frogs appear (making no one very happy I'm sure) they couldn't duplicate any more of the plagues. Eventually I think, it began to dawn on everyone that these were not just natural disasters, but something more. In the beginning it seemed to be cause and effect – polluting the Nile put the ecosystem out of whack – frogs appeared by the billions and then died all over the place in stinking piles, giving rise to flies and bugs and things that feed on corruption – disease breaks out in the animal world and the human world. But then we get a tremendous devastation by hail and rain and lightening, and what was left of the crops was eaten up by locusts and then the heaven's themselves were hit with a darkness so thick you could feel it.

But you still wonder why God chose to break Pharaoh's will by this string of seeming natural disasters. And the answer seems to be a visual lesson to us on the consequences of disobeying our Creator. What we see is nature out of control, nature breaking down, nature going crazy and devouring itself, nature reverting back to pre-creation chaos. Theologians have long made the connection between Exodus 5 to 10 **with an undoing of Genesis 1 and 2.** The message is an old one going back to the garden. What happens when we disobey God? **What happens is we get uncreation,** weeds instead of flowers, thorns and thistles instead of food.

In the beginning we have a beautiful creation. Everything in perfect harmony and balance – humans, animals, plants, water, land and weather in a wonderful interdependent, integrated, harmonious whole. Everything works together perfectly as our Creator designed it to work. Everything is characterized by beauty and integration and growth and light and order. We had what the Bible calls '*Shalom*' – the state of having whatever is needed to be whole and complete – **everything working together in harmonious oneness**. Here we see the exact opposite – every day of creation being undone. It is a picture of creation after the fall crammed into ten events; and what you see is an ecosystem breakdown, corruption breeding disease, weather wreaking havoc on plants and insects and animals and men, until finally we get back to the very beginning where Genesis tells us '*...the earth was without form and void (chaos) and darkness was upon the face of the deep*'. And a deep darkness fell on Egypt.

What this story is telling us is something very significant. God is telling Pharaoh, and He's telling us, 'These are not parlor tricks merely to impress the natives. I'm not just saying that I am God alone above every other god. This is not some exercise of naked power. What I am saying is that I created everything with perfection and integration, to live in harmony according to the rules that I made up, according to the laws that I determined. **To disobey Me is to unleash the forces of chaos and disorder and disintegration in your life and in the life of everything around you.** Because when you disobey Me, you are violating the very fabric of creation.' The consequence of disobedience is to unleash all sorts of disorder and disintegration in your life and the life of everything and everyone around you.

Suppose you went to the doctor for a physical checkup and he tells you that you must stop smoking and drinking and overeating and start exercising or you'll be dead in six months. How will you respond to his orders? You probably won't say, 'Who are you to be giving me orders? You're just on a power trip, trying to tell me what to do'. At the very least you're going to give his orders some deep thought and maybe even some action because he knows the state of your health and it's not good. He's simply trying to give you some rules to live by that reflect his knowledge of your body and his understanding of good health so as to give you some chance of staying alive and continuing to enjoy life. If you violate his orders you violate yourself. If you disregard his rules, you've disregarded your own well-being. Chaos, disorder, and eventually disintegration, death, is the result.

God is the doctor. But He's the greater doctor because He's the one who designed you and made you and knows exactly how you work. He knows you physiologically, psychologically, emotionally, socially, spiritually, and knows what it takes to keep you growing and flourishing and functioning. His laws to us are given so that we won't experience chaos and disorder and disintegration in our lives. Too much of the time we look at the law of God and see it as '**Do this or else**'. But when God gives His law to His people He always says, '**Do this and live!**' The law came to help us – not hurt us. The law was necessary because of the Fall, because the forces of chaos were unleashed in the world through our sin. But one purpose of the law was meant to preserve us from all the negative effects of the disorder and disintegration of sin. The law of God, C.H. Spurgeon said, '*...is such a law as a man might make for himself if he studied his own best interests, and had wisdom enough to frame it aright. It is a perfect law, in which the interests of God and man are both studied; it is not a partial law, but impartial, complete, and covering all the circumstances of life.*'

Look at the first and most important law of God – '*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.*' What God is saying is 'In order for you to experience wholeness, in order for you to experience integration and order and harmony, **you must love Me more than you love anything or anyone else.** You have to put Me first – above your wife or your husband, above your children or your family or your jobs or your hobbies or your toys – above everything'. Does that mean that God is some divine ego-maniac around whom everything must revolve, or else? And if you don't He'll visit you with boils or something? That isn't it at all. What it means is that if you put other things first ahead of God, what results in your life is disorder and disintegration.

For example, if you put your job ahead of God and you are a workaholic, and you're always gone, and you're always at the office, what happens? Your family experiences disintegration; if anything goes wrong at the office, you experience emotional disintegration, and eventually you experience physical disintegration. **Obeying God is how He has hardwired the universe to operate in harmony, coherence, integration – shalom.**

God is saying to us, 'I put you in a world to love Me supremely, to worship Me only, to obey Me. If you don't live the way I tell you to live, all the coherence in your life will turn into incoherence. All the integration in your life will turn into disintegration. Everything will start to fall apart'. Disobeying God is to continue to live under the curse that came in Genesis three. Adam and Eve disobeyed, sin entered the world, and since then all creation lives under the curse. And Deuteronomy 27 tells us: *Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.* Deuteronomy 27:26 In other words, **disobedience to God's law confines us to live under the curse of sin – chaos, disintegration, disorder.** But obedience brings order, integration, wholeness, completeness. Only in obeying God will you be fully alive. Only in obeying God will things ultimately not fall apart but come together for you. Only in obeying God will there be shalom.

That's the second reason we should obey Him – He is our Creator. He made everything and set everything up and rules over everything and His law brings order and harmony and wholeness into our lives. But there is more. If all we had were the facts that He is God alone and He is our Creator to compel us to obey, it still wouldn't be enough. However sincerely you might believe that smoking and drinking and eating too much isn't good for you and you should stop, that belief alone isn't enough to get you to obey the doctor. And just believing that He is God alone and He is our Creator won't be enough to keep you obedient. The devil believes that and it doesn't do him any good. We need something more – we need a Savior. We need someone to rescue us out of the disintegration and chaos of sin; someone to rescue us from the curse; **We need a God who saves.**

Although we tend to view this section as merely judgment, and it is, **it is much more than that.** The effects of sin are disintegration, disorder, chaos – and that is a judgment on sin. That is what happens when disobedience reigns. But the plagues are not just designed to judge. **They are designed to save.** There are at least three ways we can see this. The **first** is they are designed to save the Hebrews. God sends the plagues to ultimately cause Pharaoh to obey His command to 'Let My people go'. The judgments are designed to rescue the Hebrews out of their slavery to Pharaoh and free them to worship God. That's the first thing. The second thing is a little more hidden in the story. But if you turn to chapter nine, verses 15 – 16, you'll see this: *For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. 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.*

The **second** reason for the plagues is that God was writing a story of salvation that generations yet unborn would be reading. Through the story of this salvation, through the revelation of who God is and His redemption in the book of Exodus and in the Bible in general, God says, '**My name will be proclaimed in all the earth and all the world will know Me**'. This is not just a story of some minor, insignificant and isolated ethnic people group who are saved from slavery. God's intent was to write a story of salvation for all mankind. In the story of the Exodus, millions upon millions of people have understood the bondage of sin, the wrath of God, the promise of a Redeemer, and the triumph of a Savior.

The **third** reason for the plagues is that they were designed not only to rescue the Hebrews and write a gospel story, but to awaken faith in the Egyptians. Even though the effect of the plagues was to confirm the hardness of Pharaoh's heart, they actually worked to soften the hearts of other Egyptians. We get hints of this throughout the narrative, but in chapter nine we read that when the word came that hail was coming: *Then whoever feared the word of the LORD among the servants of Pharaoh hurried his slaves and his livestock into the houses, but whoever did not pay attention to the word of the LORD left his slaves and his livestock in the field.* Evidently, the plagues to this point had worked to soften the hearts of some of the Egyptians to at least fear the word of the LORD. And in chapter twelve we read that when the Israelites left Egypt '*...a mixed multitude also went up with them.*' So it seems that there were some Egyptians whose hearts were not hardened like Pharaoh in their unbelief, but rather softened.

Which raises the question: Why was Pharaoh's heart hardened through all these plagues, but other Egyptians apparently had their hearts softened? All through this narrative we are told either that **Pharaoh's heart was hardened**, or that **Pharaoh hardened his heart**, or that **the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart**. And we want to know – which is it? In the first case, some outside agency seems to be responsible; in the second, Pharaoh himself appears to be the one doing the hardening; and finally in the third case the blame seems to be on the Lord who hardened his heart. So which is it?

What the writer was trying to convey here are two deep theological truths we see all throughout Scripture. First of all, **God is sovereign**. That means that not only does He rule over everything as He pleases, He orders everything as He pleases. His purpose is the driving force behind all of history and every individual. It is His will that **will** be done on earth, not ours. In fact He tells Pharaoh here in chapter nine: *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.* And the apostle Paul's comment on this passage in Romans nine is: *So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.* In other words, God has the right to do with His creation as He wills. God is in control. God can move hearts and direct history in accordance with His eternal purpose. He is the Potter – we are the clay. And doesn't the potter have the right to do with the clay whatever He likes? That's the first thing – God is sovereign. God hardens Pharaoh's heart.

The second thing is that **man is morally culpable**. That is, we are individually responsible for our actions and decisions. Ezekiel 18:20 tells us: *The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.* God does not coerce us – He does not strong arm us into doing what He wants against our will. We must always choose and we choose freely and we always choose what we most want. Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

But we also need to understand that we never choose against what we most want or desire, yet we never make choices contrary to God's sovereign decree. In other words, God freely determines what He wants to be; **AND** we freely determine what we want to be; **AND** those things happen together. All of our choices and actions are enmeshed with divine determination. We saw this back in Genesis when Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. In speaking of this in Genesis 50, Joseph understood that the choices of his brothers were intertwined with the will of God: *As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.* God determined and ordained that Joseph would be sold into slavery, yet the brothers voluntarily make the evil choice that makes it happen. Thus the text tells us – Pharaoh's heart was hardened.

So to get back to the point – the plagues were intended to be a judgment – **but they were also intended to save**. In fact it is a **salvation through judgment**. What this points to is centuries in the future and three hours on a cross where deep darkness covers the land as the wrath of God is poured out on Jesus as He cries out, 'My God, My God why have You forsaken Me?' and the earth shakes and the rocks split apart and the veil of the temple is torn in two. And we see all of the plagues of God's judgment, the rod of God, falling on Jesus. In Egypt, the rod of God fell on Pharaoh and one group of people were saved through His judgment. At the cross, the rod of God is falling on Jesus and this judgment works to save the world. In Egypt, the disintegration and disorder and chaos of sin was briefly visible through ten plagues that came and were gone; here all the plagues of sin are poured out on one man.

Christ received the judgment meant for us; the plagues of God came down on Him so that they do not come down on us. The judge of all the earth came to bear our judgment, not to bring us judgment. The rod of God fell on Him so that it would not fall on us. He experienced disintegration so that we might have integration. He experienced chaos and darkness and disorder so that we might at last come back into light and order. The Maker of all things was unmade to remake you. It is only when we submit to His rule and reign in our lives; it is only when we live in obedience to His laws that we can experience integration and harmony – shalom – in our lives. God is not some vengeful deity up in heaven who says, **Obey Me or else!** He is our loving Savior saying, **Obey Me and live!** Obedience means submitting to His rule and reign in your life, and that is what this gospel story calls us to.

Three reasons we should obey this God. One, because He is the only true God. Secondly, because He is the creator of your soul. To disobey him will violate your own being, go against your own welfare. Thirdly, because He is the only one who can save you from the chaos and disorder of sin and bring you into wholeness and harmony and real joy.

Our gracious God and Father,

Thank you for the revelation of who You are. You are God alone and there is no other. You have created us just as You please for Your own glory and purpose. You are the Author of all existence and the source of all blessing. Grant that our hearts would bow in worship and wonder before You. Destroy every lofty thought raised up against the knowledge of You; shatter our senseless pride to pieces before the truth of Your supremacy; kill each clinging shred of self-righteousness that resists Your grace. Reveal to us our desperate need for a Savior, our Maker who was unmade on the cross that we might be remade in His image. Rescue us from the chaos and disintegration of sin and renew us to wholeness and completeness we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.