

The Blood in the Nile
Exodus 7:14-25
June 28, 2020
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CenterPoint Church

Read Exodus 7:14-25

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matt. 4:4b)

Introduction: How Do You Free A Slave?

If you are a baseball fan, you may know the name Adam LaRoche. Even though I'm not a huge baseball fan, he was on my radar because he played for both the team I've rooted for all my life (the Pittsburgh Pirates) as well as the team that I rooted for in my 30s and 40s when I lived in Northern VA (the Washington Nationals) (as well as four other teams). Adam LaRoche was a first baseman who had a decent major league career, averaging 21 home runs per season over 12 years. When he played for the Pirates between 2007-2009, he was asked by a chaplain whether he wanted his tombstone to say: “Adam LaRoche: Gold Glove, batting average, hit so many homers, and had so many million dollars in his bank account,” or “Adam LaRoche: Man of God, integrity, raised a great family, loving”? It made him reassess his life and take an active role as a spiritual leader for his teammates. In 2015 during the offseason, he spent ten days with a ministry that sent him undercover to help rescue slaves in the sex trade, and it changed the course of his life. He decided that “he could not continue playing baseball while slave trafficking was destroying the lives of young girls,” so he abruptly retired!¹

You may not know this, but there is more slavery today than at any time in all of human history! Over 30 million estimated slaves worldwide TODAY. It's not just a problem *over* there in other countries; it's a huge problem here in America as well. There are great groups working towards freeing them, but how do you free a slave when it's already against the law? It's not like before the Civil War when slavery was legal, so you had to smuggle them in the underground railroad. Today, slavery victims work in the shadows, are moved around from city to city, sometimes country to country, particularly if they work in the sex industry. Others who are forced to work off unjust bonded labor have no voice and no one to intervene for them.

Gary Haugen is the founder and head of the International Justice Mission, a Christian organization committed to freeing slaves worldwide. He talks about 6 different approaches to intervening for victims of violence or slavery in his book *Good News About Injustice*.²

- 1) **Spiritual Intercession** – asking God to intervene.
- 2) **Personal Appeal** – privately showing someone how their actions have hurt others and asking them to release that person, appealing to their conscience.
- 3) **Legal Sanction** – using the power of law enforcement to bring release.
- 4) **Public Shame** – if government and legal authorities are unwilling to do anything about injustices being committed, putting pressure on them through the media, public demonstrations, conferences, whatever it takes to force their hand to arrest and prosecute oppressors.
- 5) **Economic Sanctions** – figuring out how to cut off money to nations or groups that oppress and enslave.
- 6) **Military Force** – usually the last resort option for a group or country that will not bend to any other method.

¹ Gary Scott Smith, *A History of Christianity in Pittsburgh* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2019), pp. 202-203.

² Gary A. Haugen, *Good News About Injustice: Youth Edition* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), pp. 157-171.

These are very wise ways in our modern world to deal with the huge problem of slavery. But I notice that there was nothing in that list about sending frogs to pester the slave owners. Nowhere do they list making boils break out all over people's skin as an effective deterrent to keeping slaves. And they probably would not approve of killing the slave owner's firstborn sons to force their hands. And yet, those methods actually worked. This is what we find God enacting in order to get His beloved people free from the hands of their oppressors. Today's passage is Exodus 7:14-25, and it is the first plague out of the ten that will be sent on Pharaoh and Egypt. God has said that He is going to send "great acts of judgment" and "strike Egypt with wonders," but we don't know exactly what they're going to be. If you'd never heard this story before and you'd never seen the movies and were coming to the text totally fresh, you wouldn't know that there were 10 plagues coming. Maybe you'd know about the first one, which was one of the signs back in Exodus 5.

So let's look at how this first plague unfolds, where God tells Moses and Aaron to go again to

A. Confront Pharaoh (vv. 14-18)

14 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. 15 Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water. Stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that turned into a serpent. 16 And you shall say to him, "The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, "Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness." But so far, you have not obeyed. 17 Thus says the Lord, "By this you shall know that I am the Lord: behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood. 18 The fish in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile.""

This scene reminds us of two other scenes if we know the whole story. One scene is from the past when Pharaoh's daughter first found baby Moses on the riverbanks. The other scene is from the future where Moses will hold up his staff over a body of water that Pharaoh and his people are in the midst of. Now, we don't know if Pharaoh was going to bathe or to worship, or if he was meeting people about official business or going for a boat ride. It just says that Pharaoh was out on the water, and Moses is told to confront Pharaoh there and to announce what's about to happen, so there's no confusion as to the cause. Pharaoh is not left to guess at the significance of the plague that is coming, Moses tells him outright: "You have denied the Lord's request to let us go worship Him in the wilderness apparently because you don't understand who He is. It's time for you to get acquainted with the power of my God."

So to accomplish bringing the first plague, Aaron did as he was told and

B. Strike The Nile (vv. 19-21)

19 And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, "Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, their canals, and their ponds, and all their pools of water, so that they may become blood, and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone." 20 Moses and Aaron did as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned into blood. 21 And the fish in the Nile died, and the Nile stank, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. There was blood throughout all the land of Egypt.

The Nile River was the life-giving water of the Egyptians. Now it becomes the death blood. This is not just a change in appearance, this is a change in substance. Imagine the sight and smell of blood running through every waterway in and around the land. Truly horrific, especially as you think about all the dead creatures.

I want you to get a feel for how devastating it would have been to have the Nile undrinkable and unusable, even for one week. “Hardly any country in ancient or modern times has been so dependent on its waterways as ancient Egypt.”(John Davis)³ The Nile was responsible for trade and commerce, irrigation, drinking water, food, even the setting of the calendar. Tony Merida explains what that would look like to us: “this type of catastrophe would be similar to cutting off all oil supplies, the stock market collapsing, drinking water being contaminated, and having no food in the grocery store. It would be total chaos.”⁴

Remember last week when I talked about how Aaron’s staff turning to a serpent was a direct attack on Egypt’s idols? This is an even more powerful attack on the gods that the Egyptians thought operated around the Nile. But now, maybe the doubts started coming into their minds: The great god Khnum might not be the guardian of the Nile that they thought. Hapi was the god believed to be the spirit of the Nile, perhaps he was impotent in the face of a more powerful God. Neith, the goddess of the large fish, and Hathor, the god of the small fish, might not have the power that had been credited to them. God totally humiliated these gods and brought Egypt to its knees when He turned the water into blood.

There’s an additional insight here that reminds us that the punishment fits the crime. What happened back in Exodus 1 when Pharaoh’s plan to have the midwives kill the baby boys didn’t work? He ordered the baby boys thrown into the Nile. Hundreds, possibly thousands of Hebrew babies had been drowned and left to have their bodies torn by the elements and the animals in those waters. Pharaoh, in a sense, had already made the river run red with blood. Now God is returning the favor.

But even so, this sign, this plague, seems to produce nothing but

C. Disbelief & Thirst (vv. 22-24)

22 But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts. So Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. 23 Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart. 24 And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile. 25 Seven full days passed after the Lord had struck the Nile.

Politicians don’t like it when their policies bring about hardships for their people. It’s not good for their image or their reelection campaign to have people discontent, grumbling, and starving in the streets, so they have to reverse course or try new policies. But a dictator doesn’t really care. It’s interesting that Pharaoh does not believe that it was really God’s judgment making the water turn to blood, because he figures if his magicians can do it, then that’s probably how Moses and Aaron did it. However they were able to accomplish it (the text says “their secret arts”), they couldn’t do it on the scale that Moses does. And what would have actually been helpful to Pharaoh and the Egyptians at this point would have been to undue the plague. Which, of course, they can’t do. Satan is the great deceiver and can imitate God on a small scale, but he cannot undue the work of God in the world or in someone’s life when God doesn’t allow him to.

I talked a lot last week about Pharaoh’s hard heart. These verses today are basically bookended with the observation that Pharaoh’s heart was hard before the Nile gets changed and it’s still hard afterwards. What we see is that: **A Hard Heart Needs to see Blood.** God could have dried up the

³ Davis, pp. 98-99.

⁴ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Exodus* (Nashville: Holman, 2014), p. 57.

Nile. He could have turned the water into mud or some other liquid (maybe burning sulfur?), right? But He didn't. He made it blood and I think there's a reason.

Pharaoh is not going to change as a result of conversations. He's not going to read an article on repentance and decide that's what's been missing in his life all this time. He's not open to anyone in his palace questioning him and saying, "Hey, maybe you ought to listen to those Hebrew brothers before things get really out of control." It's going to take a lot more than that. His hard heart is going to need to see death many times. The fish have to die, the livestock have to die, the crops have to be destroyed, and eventually children will die before he changes his mind.

And hard hearts today need to see blood. I don't mean literal blood necessarily, though there is often something about being around death that makes people start asking eternal questions. But a hard heart needs to know that someone bled and died for them. Christianity is not about behavior modification, about just becoming a little better every day; a little more helpful to our neighbors, a little less sinful and selfish. Christianity is about dead people with hard hearts becoming alive in Christ spiritually with hearts of flesh. And that new heart comes after the Holy Spirit opens your eyes to see that you have been rescued from a bad place: your sin has condemned you to eternal death but there is someone who will take your punishment for you. And it didn't come easy, it cost him His life, His blood, because without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin, the Scriptures tell us. God Himself, the 2nd person of the Trinity, Jesus, bled and died in your place to take your sin's punishment for you. His blood is your covering, it is what opens your hard heart. We just sang about it in the song "Behold The Lamb": *"Lifted up on Calvary's hill / You bore our shame and paid the cost / Oh God, we thank You for the cross / Offer up this sacrifice, for every sin our Savior died / Behold the Lamb, the story of redemption written on His hands."*

Jesus turned water into blood. Well, not exactly, He turned water into wine in John 2 at a wedding near the beginning of His ministry. But at the end of His life, He told His disciples that wine would represent His blood when His people drink it in faith during the communion supper. The wine represents His shed blood on our behalf, dying on the cross and giving up His life to wash us clean. Next week we will be celebrating communion for the first time since March!

Conclusion: No Little People, No Little Places

There's one more aspect of this story that I want to look at. Francis Shaeffer, the great pastor and theologian from a half century ago, had a sermon called "No Little People, No Little Places."⁵ It started with a catalog of the ways that God used Moses' staff in the book of Exodus – turning the staff into a serpent, holding it over the Nile to turn it into blood, the parting of the Red Sea, tapping the rock to get water; we see this staff appear over and over. But it's just a stick, there's no power in it. It's not like the elder wand in Harry Potter, there's no magic there. There's no microchip inside, it's just wood! Shaeffer sees a picture of us in the staff: "Though we are limited and weak in talent, physical energy, and psychological strength, we are not less than a stick of wood. But as the rod of Moses had to become the rod of God, so that which is *me* must become the *me* of God. Then, I can become useful in God's hands."

I remember when I had been out of college about 10 years and I went back to the Baylor campus and looked up some old friends. One of them had been a year younger than me, Victor, and we had been good friends, so it was great to catch up. But as we were having lunch, he had to excuse himself. You see, this week happened to be the week that President Bush had invited the Canadian

⁵ You can download a copy at http://www.sbts.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2010/02/sbjt_062_schaeffer.pdf

Prime Minister and the Mexican President to meet with him to discuss the NAFTA trade agreement on the Baylor campus. And because my friend Victor had gotten his PhD and was an expert in U.S. trade relations, CNN wanted to interview him. That's why he had to leave our lunch! Of course, I'm sitting there thinking, "He's a year younger than me and is being interviewed for national television for something really important. Uh, last weekend, I had a lock-in with Middle School students, and I've set up a dodgeball game soon." I started comparing our lives and I felt so small, so unimportant, so unaccomplished. I knew intellectually that we're all called to different paths, that he was following God's call on his life with the gifts he'd been given, and I was following God's call on mine. But I still felt small.

How about you - do you feel small and unimportant? Do you wish that you were accomplishing more big things? Does the endless laundry or the barrage of busywork in AP World History or the menial tasks you accomplish at your cubicle, or whatever in your life makes it feel monotonous and unimportant, make you question whether God is using you? And it's not just that we feel bad about ourselves, but we can become bitter with envy and question God in the process. In A.J. Jacobs book *A Thousand Thanks*, he has a chapter where he talks about people who work behind the scenes, who don't get the credit that the people in the spotlight get. He talks about it in work situations and in scientific discoveries, but the one picture he keeps coming back to is a band. Who gets all the attention in a rock band? The singer and the lead guitarist, right? Who is almost always the overlooked guy? The bass player. (Sorry, Chris and Joe!) But they're essential to keeping the band together. Jacobs says: ""in our society, we fetishize the lead singers. And not just in music. The front people in every field - art, engineering, sports, food - get way too much attention. The cult of celebrity has spread into every corner. We overemphasize individual achievement when, in fact, almost everything good in the world is the result of teamwork." ⁶

And the kingdom of God needs a lot more bass players - not literally, but the steady, humble workers who don't need the credit but do their job and help advance the kingdom work. 1 Corinthians 12 explains it a little differently, as Paul talks about the different parts of the body of Christ as actual body parts: "*The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'* On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable... God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body." (1 Cor. 12:21-22, 24a-25b) We need everyone in the church to use their gifts, to contribute their part whether they think it's important or not. It is!

So maybe small is not such a bad thing. Let me finish quoting from Shaeffer:

"The people who receive praise from the Lord Jesus will not in every case be the people who held leadership in this life. There will be many persons who were sticks of wood that stayed close to God and were quiet before Him, and were used in power by Him in a place which looks small to men. Each Christian is to be a rod of God in the place of God for Him. We must remember throughout our lives that in God's sight there are no little people and no little places. Only one thing is important: to be consecrated persons in God's place for us, at each moment. Those who think of themselves as little people in little places, if committed to Christ and living under His Lordship in the whole of life, may, by God's grace, change the flow of our generation. And as we get on a bit in our lives, knowing how weak we are, if we look back and see we have been somewhat used of God, then we should be the rod "surprised by joy."

Amen, let's pray.

⁶ A.J. Jacobs, *Thanks A Thousand* (New York: TED Books, 2018), pp. 18-19.