

The First Plague

“When will it end?”

Was that the haunting question in Pharaoh’s mind in the aftermath of the death of the firstborn throughout Egypt? Was that the question among Pharaoh’s advisers and military leaders as they grieved their losses? Was that the desperate question as the waters of the Red Sea drowned Egypt’s military power while God’s people looked over their shoulders from dry land?



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In Israel’s challenging history we have gone from the golden years of Joseph’s position in the court of Pharaoh to slavery for Israel. And now, a new chapter of freedom, the unmistakable power and love of God, and nationhood.

Improbable, impossible, incredible – all those words pale in comparison to grace, the idea that beyond human imagination and pride there is the very real God who cares deeply about people. But this is only one chapter in the saga of God’s grace, one victory that shocks both winners and losers, until the full meaning is presented in the cross and resurrection.

Our story opens with the numerous children called Israel camped on the shore of the Red Sea. No one could have predicted this rushed exodus from slavery, with their baggage crammed full of Egyptian treasures and a freedom they had no idea how to manage. Whatever else they were feeling there was the understanding God cared about them and Moses is getting his orders from God.

But there were still questions. Like, how were they to get past this water barrier, as the sounds and sight of Pharaoh’s army appeared on the horizon! Fear crafted their words once again: “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians ... better for us to serve them than die in the wilderness.’” (vv. 10-12).

Moses had learned from hard

experience that God does not operate out of human strategies. God is not prevented by human obstacles. God is not shaped by human fear or uncertainty. Moses is still learning to trust God and Moses has bet his life on God’s promises and faithfulness as he frames Israel’s hope in simple terms: “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still” (vv. 13-14).

While we look back at those fearful Israelites on the shore of the Red Sea, let us not forget that we often give in to fear and uncertainty when our world falls apart; when illness and tragedy strike; when injustice seems to win out; when politicians fail to make good decisions; when disaster seems certain. But just as God did not abandon his chosen people to their fears and doubts, so God does not abandon us. It is in the tests of life, our times of struggling in the shadows without easy answers and grand rewards, that we discover God has been with us every step of the way.

As Moses reminded Israel shortly before he died (forty years later): “Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail or forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6).

Pharaoh decided that he could not let those slaves win the battle against him and all the gods of Egypt. In a rage of vengeance he called out his army and went after Moses and the Israelites. And Moses’ promise of God’s deliverance comes true as God parts the Red Sea as though the waters were walls beside a dry pathway and God’s children hastened through to the other side. The Egyptian army is in pursuit as the water collapses on them and “Israel saw the dead Egyptians on the seashore” (v. 30). Spectacular? Yes!

Of course, we, unlike those Israelites, would have expected nothing less! I cannot speak for anyone else, but there have been times in my life when I wondered why God allowed something

to happen or did not answer a prayer in what I thought should be his will. Why cancer? A shattered marriage? A pastor caught in sexual impropriety? An unjust job loss A _____?

There is an answer to my hardest questions, an answer that brings me to my knees before God. That answer is the image of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet at the last supper, Jesus dying on the cross, Jesus appearing to the women in the garden when he stepped out of death’s darkness. We all know in some degree what it means to be trapped on the shore of the Red Sea with a threatening army of disaster about to catch us. What did Moses do? He trusted God and stood his ground.

There are two key elements in living as a child of God and overcoming the dangers of this world: faith in Christ and making right choices. The story of Moses’ life fascinates me. He is not perfect and he does not know all the answers, but look at all God did through the life of that man.

We speak of the “sovereignty” of God, which means creation and our lives exist because God made it so. Your life can never be complete or even open to all God has for you without faith in God. Look at Moses’ life: the son of slaves in a foreign land, a fugitive from murder charges, beyond what should have been his most productive years, suspect to his own people, and reluctant to serve God. All that was pushed to the background when Moses took off his shoes before a burning bush and said yes to God.

The first key to spiritual life is making that critical faith choice and then following it with daily choices of how you will live. Read the entire story and you will find Moses made some mistakes, but he always came back to God and did what was right. In the business of choices God offers us a beautiful gift: forgiveness that can heal, restore, and change life. We do not remember Moses because of his greatness but because of his willingness to trust God and his striving to do God’s will. That victory at the Red Sea was not a celebration of Moses and Israel, but a declaration of God’s love and promise of eternal life to all who will believe and act out that belief.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.