

Israel's Deliverance

SCOTT HOEZEE

When God called Moses from the burning bush to go rescue the Israelites from Egypt, Moses protested that he could not do this, that he was too weak. God did not disagree, but assured Moses everything would go fine because, God said, “I will be with you.” So, with the almighty God of the universe as the wind beneath Moses’ sails, you would expect things to go smoothly and swiftly once Moses steps up to ask Pharaoh to release God’s people; but nothing could have been further from the truth. Things got a lot worse before they got better and the final release did not happen until God engaged Pharaoh in one of the most dramatic, high-stakes showdowns in history. Today on *Groundwork*, we look at these next stories of Exodus. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are now in the third program, Dave, of this series on Exodus. We saw from the first program in Chapters 1 and 2 the dire situation the Israelites were in, but that God was quietly active even so, and preserved the life of Moses, in particular. Then we saw, though, that Moses ended up making a mistake one day and fleeing Egypt after he had killed an Egyptian, and spends 40 years in Midian living as a shepherd, where God catches up with him and calls him from the burning bush, as we saw in the last program, to go and lead the people. Again, Moses threw every excuse in the book at God not to do it, but God would not let him off the hook; he could take his brother Aaron, who was a better speaker – fine, fine, fine – but the bottom line was: Do not worry; I am going to be with you.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we would expect that Moses would come back and waltz in and make his announcement to Pharaoh and God would show up as well in some dramatic way, and everything would be cool – off they would go; but no, that does not happen either. Again twisting and turning throughout this story, things do not follow the way we expect them to, and God’s work does not always go the way we expect it would.

We have a lot of ground to cover, by the way, in today’s program. We are going take it all the way through to the flight of Israel from Egypt, so let’s get started right away and find out what happened when Moses had this initial confrontation with Pharaoh.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Here is how it went. Exodus Chapter 5: ¹Afterward, Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel says, ‘Let my people go so that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness.’” ²Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord. I will not let Israel go.” ³Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now, let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, or he may strike us with plagues or with a sword.” ⁴But the king of Egypt said, “Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their labor? Get back to your work.” ⁵And Pharaoh said, “Look, the people of the land are now numerous and you are stopping them from working.” ⁶That same day, Pharaoh gave this order to the slave drivers and overseers in charge of the people. ⁷“You are no longer to supply the people with straw for making bricks. Let them go gather their own straw, ⁸but require them to make the same number of bricks as before. Do not

reduce the quota. They are lazy; that is why they are crying out, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.' ⁹Make the work harder for them so they keep working and pay no attention to lies."

DAVE BAST

So, here come Moses and Aaron. They appear before Pharaoh. They announce that God says, "Let my people go," and then they add kind of a curious thing – so that they can go have a festival in the wilderness and worship – they imply this is not a permanent escape, we just want to go off and have a religious ceremony. Otherwise, if we do not do it, God may send plagues upon us. Well, there are going to be plagues coming, but they will be quite different. Then Pharaoh gets angry and he doubles the workload and the burden. This is how the people of Israel respond when they find this out. I will pick it up at verse 19 from Chapter 5: The Israelite overseers realized they were in trouble when they were told, "You are not to reduce the number of bricks required of you each day." ²⁰And when they left Pharaoh, they found Moses and Aaron waiting to meet them, ²¹and they said, "May the Lord look on you and judge you. You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us." ²²Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Why, Lord? Why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me? ²³Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and you have not rescued your people at all."

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so the people's reaction to Moses and Aaron is thanks for nothing, and Moses' reaction to God is thanks for nothing.

DAVE BAST

Hey, what is going on?!

SCOTT HOEZEE

From the previous program in this series, Dave, one of the biggest things that happened at the burning bush story in Exodus 3 was the revelation of God's personal name of Yahweh, which means I AM, or it means I AM WHO I AM, but that is God's name. So Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh and say Yahweh says you have to let the people go. Well, Pharaoh grabs his Near East gods and goddesses guidebook and he looks up Yahweh and he does not see it.

DAVE BAST

No entry.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, Marduk, Re, Gilgamesh, Baal, Asherah – there are a few other gods, but no Yahweh – So, Pharaoh says: Yahweh? Never heard of him. Who is this Yahweh that I should listen to him? No, no, no. I am not going to listen to him at all. And so, he makes the people more miserable, but what is interesting is that what has happened here sets up a dramatic tension in this book. Pharaoh has now challenged God. Pharaoh has thrown down the gauntlet and has said: Who is Yahweh that I should listen to him? He asked the question; God is going to answer.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely, because if there is one truth that the Bible emphasizes about God it is that he will not be mocked; he will not be shown up in any way. If you want to throw down the gauntlet, and in your arrogance, dismiss the reality of God, you will find out eventually that you are rubbing your hand against the grain of reality. You are challenging the ultimate being of all – beyond being – the God who simply is. The God who is there. The God who is the creator. The God who is responsible for all things. He will not be stood up to by human beings in their arrogance. The Bible says over and over that God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble, and Pharaoh is the very definition of the proud here in this story. He is sure of himself; he is dismissive of the power of God, the identity of God, the nature of God; he is attacking the people of God. It is going to go badly for him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; in the short run, though, in the meantime, you feel sorry for Moses. This is not what he signed up for. He did not want to go in the first place, and now it is getting worse and he confronts God to his face...

DAVE BAST

He feels like a fool.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and a failure.

DAVE BAST

Because he has made this announcement; and then the people – they have started in on their characteristic, which is to complain – What are you doing to us, Moses? Come on, you made things worse.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I feel sorry for him and probably a lot of us can relate to this, too. There have to be times in our lives where we do the right thing; we do what we are sure God wants us to do, and it blows up in our faces, or we do all the right things, but things still go badly; and meanwhile, we see people who cut corners or people who do the wrong things and they succeed where we fail. So, I think we can identify with how Moses is feeling here. It is like: I am doing what you asked. I am being a faithful servant of you, O Lord; and you are doing nothing. In fact, things have gotten worse on account of my having mentioned you; and you have not rescued the people yet. That is how Chapter 5 ends; you still have not done anything. Get off the dime, God; and I think we can understand that. Of course, we know, even before this episode is done, we are going to see where and how God will answer Pharaoh's question; but before we get to the ten plagues, we want to look at some stuff that goes on in the middle. It has to do with the hard heart of Pharaoh, and we will look at that next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are digging further into the book of Exodus; the story of Moses delivering the people of Israel by the power of God, and we have been looking at his confrontations with Pharaoh. The first one did not go so well, as we pointed out. Moses feels a big letdown. God did not seem to back up what Moses said, and the people get mad because they are suffering even more; and then here comes the next one. We will read from Chapter 7, beginning at verse 1:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. ²You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. ³But I will harden Pharaoh's heart and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, ⁴he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment, I will bring out my divisions, my people, the Israelites. ⁵And the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it."

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, that is one thing that God says, especially regarding Pharaoh and his heart; but now, just a few verses down, Exodus 7:10: So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials and it became a snake. ¹¹Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers and the Egyptian magicians also did the same thing by their secret arts. ¹²Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. ¹³Yet Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said.

DAVE BAST

In the next chapter, Chapter 8, the plagues start out and we will talk a little bit more about those later, but one of them is the multiplication of frogs that come out of the river, and it is a real mess and it stinks. So Pharaoh says to Moses: Okay, okay, okay, I will let you go. Just get rid of these frogs for me, and Moses says: All right, I will. And he prays and it happens, ¹⁵but when Pharaoh saw – this is Exodus 8:15 – when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You will notice that there are three different ways of talking about what is going on here. In the first verses that we read, God said: I will harden Pharaoh's heart. Then the second one, Pharaoh's heart just kind of hardens all by itself; and in the third one, Pharaoh hardens his own heart. So, there is a different subject to the verb. That leads to the question: What is going on here? Is God pulling all the strings? Is God actively hardening Pharaoh's heart? Does Pharaoh have no responsibility here? If so, then why are we told that Pharaoh hardened his heart, or is Pharaoh's heart just impenetrable in general? It is just a hard heart and nobody is ever going to be able to penetrate it. We are looking at this, Dave, because this has become a go-to set of passages in Church history for dealing with questions on the sovereignty and the control of God – the providence of God – and some people say: Well, what you take away from this is that God does everything. He hardens people's hearts. He makes people cruel. But others say: No, no, no, no. These verses do not teach that. This shows it is more complicated because we are also told Pharaoh hardens his own heart; or his heart just hardens itself. So, we are not quite sure.

DAVE BAST

Well, that has been described as the question of the ages. This whole debate between God's sovereignty, human freedom, human responsibility, God's overruling power. There has been a tendency probably for Christians and churches through the ages to come down more on one side, more on the other. It is a powerful and an important question, and this, as you say, Scott, is one of the passages that is often pointed to; but I think the very nature of the language is intended to help us see that the dilemma is maybe more perceived than real. It is maybe something that we create when we think too theoretically about this; and that reality is really mysterious. It is deeper. No, God does not create puppets that he then sets up in order to destroy. God is not the author of evil. We have to be really careful, I think, in this question not to allow our intellectual struggles to put this all together. The plain teaching of scripture is that God is good and God is gracious and God is not the author of evil. The plain teaching of scripture is also that God is sovereign; God is in control; God is the one in charge. So, we hold that together somehow.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we hold it in tension. It is a bit of a paradox, and it can be, pastorally for a lot of us, a painful paradox. It is not just an intellectual question or proposition; it is something people struggle with when terrible things happen in their own lives.

I remember my teacher, Neal Plantinga, talking about this in class when I was in seminary, and among the things he pointed out is that if we were supposed to learn something about how this all goes from this section of Exodus, then the author would have been more careful to be consistent, and always have God hardening the heart or Pharaoh hardening the heart; but since it is described three different ways, we are probably not supposed to deduce anything in particular from that other than, as you said, Dave, holding in tension the idea that God is sovereign; he is in control, but people have free will, too. Pharaoh does not come off scot-free and blameless here. Pharaoh is still responsible for his own actions, for his own pride, for his own arrogance, as we said in the previous segment of this program. He is still responsible, and nobody gets off the hook by saying: Well, the game is fixed. God wrote the whole script, so I am just reading my lines. Why would you blame me? God is doing... No, that will not work.

DAVE BAST

But, on the other hand, we also recognize God is the main actor here. In a sense, he is calling the shots. He says explicitly: I am going to glorify myself in what happens here. I am going to reveal something of my power. I am going to reveal something of my care and concern for my people. I am going to deliver them and it is going to be a big act of power. It is a power struggle with the gods of Egypt, in a way; with the world view of Pharaoh, this arrogant, godless, individual. Yes, we affirm that on the one hand; on the other hand, we say Pharaoh had a choice. He made a decision and it is going to cost him and his people. We will look at that cost when we see, in the next segment – which is not going to be very long – we are going to have to do all ten plagues in about eight minutes; so stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and obviously we could do ten programs on the ten plagues, Scott, if we chose to, but instead, we are going to treat them as a whole and race through them and ask what are we learning here?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, taken together, what do they mean? And just as a reminder to everybody, what are the ten plagues? Well, the Nile River turned to blood; then there were a huge number of frogs in the land; swarms of gnats invade the land; swarms of flies invade the land; then livestock first and then people become diseased; then there is terrible, awesome thunder and hail that sweeps through the land; locusts invade; then there is darkness day and night; and finally number ten, the firstborn children of human families, and even the firstborn of cattle, die in the night, on the night that we now know as the Passover.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and I think the first thing that strikes me as we look at them that way, as a whole, is there is an increasing severity. They get worse and worse. The first few plagues are more in the nature of nuisances or they are annoying, but gradually they become life threatening; and ultimately, of course, there is death in the end.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They are all powerful signs, and we said earlier, Pharaoh, in Chapter 5, when he first encounters Moses says: Who is this Yahweh that I should listen to him? I do not know any god named that. This is God's extended answer to the question: Who am I? This is who I am. I control the creation. I control everything that happens in this world and I am going to show you. Pharaoh mocked God; Pharaoh would not grant God his due, and so here God is going to do battle with him.

DAVE BAST

Right; and in a way, there is an element of mercy in these because God starts out low and slow and gives Pharaoh – because after every plague, Moses comes back and says: Hey, how about it? Will you let us go now? Will you let us go now? And so God is gradually ratcheting up the intensity so that Pharaoh has a chance to bail before things get too bad; but he just keeps refusing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and what is interesting, too – so Pharaoh will be moved and ultimately will see, yes, finally, the tenth plague is so bad and touches Pharaoh's own house, that he does let them go. Even then he is going to change his mind, as we will see in the next program; he is going to pursue them after all. So, indeed, Pharaoh will not be moved; he is the classic anti-God person of evil, that is to say; he will not give God his due, even after that tenth plague. He is still going to come after them.

What is interesting is, of course these are great stories, make for great optics, great special effects from Hollywood movies special effects; people love these plagues. We enjoy reading about them; they are fascinating stories. You can picture it in your mind; but taken together, do they mean something more? One commentator I have always liked on the book of Exodus is named Terence Fretheim, and he points out that Exodus is not just the book that comes after Genesis, it is the sequel to Genesis; such that the themes of Genesis carry through, and one of the most important themes of Genesis, of course, is that God created the heavens and the earth. God created a cosmos, but when sin came, chaos came onto the scene, and chaos is the problem to be defeated. So, through these plagues, which are creation gone berserk – these are all creation – physical creation – gone berserk. It is the creation in chaos fighting the chaos of Pharaoh. So God is fighting fire with fire. He is fighting Pharaoh's chaos with the chaos of a world creation run amok; but through all of that, we also see the glimmer of hope – God is also saving the creation. This is not what God wants and he is going to defeat the chaos of Pharaoh so as to bring back a new creation.

DAVE BAST

It puts one in mind of what Paul says in Romans 8, that the creation is groaning in the pains of childbirth, and some of the natural disasters that fill our world, as you say, are not part of God's original intention for the creation, but they are creation run amok, or creation gone awry or gone astray; and the promise of scripture throughout is that God will eventually subdue this – that, in a sense, the Nile will be tamed – so, in Revelation we read that there is no more sea. Again, water being for the Hebrew the source of chaos and the source of evil. So, yes, God is fighting fire with fire, and at each step of the way, Pharaoh has a chance to acquiesce, and to repent – to humble himself before God and say: Okay, I get it; no more; enough is enough; I will let your people go; I see that you are the true God. But he refuses.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He cannot see it; he will not see it; he will never see it; and indeed, also weaving through here – so God is fighting fire with fire – he is using a creation gone bad to fight Pharaoh, who is a human being gone bad, with the ultimate goal of bringing out the good. We do not have time to go into all of it, but scholars point out that a lot of these plagues also go directly after the Egyptian false gods. The Nile was like a god to the Egyptians. It was a source of their life, but now it is fouled with blood; now it is a source of death; you cannot drink it. The sun – they had Re, the sun god – the Egyptians loved the sun, and God blots it out; it is eclipsed day and night; the land falls into darkness. All of the things that Pharaoh and the Egyptians held most dear religiously, God is also theologically going after those things to say: I am the supreme One, your sun? I control it. Your river? I control it. And yet, as you said, Dave, Pharaoh just will not be moved. He cannot be reached, and that makes Pharaoh a scary figure, and I think they still exist today, and we have seen other figures in history since then. The 20th Century had its share of figures and dictators like this who just seem impenetrable even by the power of God, and that is a very frightening thing.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think maybe one of the things we can conclude from the language about hardening of hearts is that if we do continue to harden our hearts, eventually we will reach a point of no return. When it says God hardened Pharaoh's heart, it may be trying to hint at that truth that there comes a point when it is no longer possible for a person to repent because they have so closed themselves off that the day of salvation has passed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Didn't C. S. Lewis say one time that for people who their whole lives long refused ever to say to God: Thy will be done; when they finally encounter God, God says: Very well, then; thy will be done. You never wanted to be with me? You are now separated from me forever; and that is the scary prospect of judgment and of hell; living apart from God.

DAVE BAST

So we come, finally, to the last plague; it is the worst of all, this awful darkness where the Angel of Death passes through the streets, but God's people are saved by the blood of the covenant that they have placed on

their doorposts. It is a wonderful image again. If you will tune in to our next *Groundwork* program, we will pick up the story there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you dig deeper into scripture. So visit groundworkonline.com, our website, and tell us topics, passages and questions that you would like to hear next on *Groundwork*.

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