

## **ON EAGLES' WINGS**

### **IV. "Who is the Lord?"**

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Exodus 4:29-6:12

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Most of us remember the agonizing struggle in South Africa of the people kept in terrible bondage under apartheid, and Nelson Mandela's courageous leadership. In his autobiography, Mandela recalls the scene when he first laid eyes on his granddaughter. At the time, he was working in hard labor in almost unbearable conditions, cutting limestone in a quarry under a sun so bright it almost blinded him. The only one thing that kept the prisoners from despair, he writes, is the songs they sang as they worked. They kept alive memories of home, family, and the world outside. During the 14<sup>th</sup> year of his imprisonment, he finally gained permission for a visit from his daughter. He had not seen her since she was a young girl. As she ran across the room and embraced him, he describes the moment as both poignant and dizzying— to hug this fully grown woman, his child. Then she handed him her newborn baby, his granddaughter. Nelson said, "To hold a newborn baby, so vulnerable and soft in my rough hands, hands that for too long had held only picks and shovels, was a profound joy. I don't think a man was ever happier to hold a baby than I was that day."

Mandela's tribal tradition was to let the grandfather choose the name for a new baby. He toyed with various names, and then he settled on *Zaziwe*, which means Hope. Nelson writes, "The name had special meaning for me, for during all my years in prison hope never left me— and now it never would. I was convinced that this child would be part of a new generation of South Africans for whom apartheid would be a distant memory— that was my dream." As it turned out, it would be another 13 years before he was set free. But that vision of hope sustained him.

Hope is such a critical ingredient to our souls. Emil Brunner says, "What oxygen is to the lungs, hope is to the soul." In other words, our souls suffocate without hope. As we turn to our Scripture this morning, the Israelites no longer could sing songs like Nelson Mandela. They had lost all hope.

Before we read this morning's Scripture, let me remind you where we are in this series of sermons. In Exodus we are encountering an amazing revelation of the salvation and power of God. In these first sermons, we see how God's people are enslaved, groaning under terrible oppression, but God hears their cries and is concerned and begins the wheels of salvation moving on their behalf. He begins with two insignificant midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. Then Moses is born, his life spared through the courage of his mother, Jochebed. Last week, we considered the

message of God's call to Moses from the burning bush and the revelation to him of who God really is— "I Am Who I Am" or Yahweh. So far, we've seen God's propensity to use insignificant people and even failures by empowering them to do His will.

Now Moses comes to Israel, fresh from his encounter with God in the burning bush, equipped with supernatural signs to verify that it was indeed God he had met.

Ex. 4:29-6:9

### **WITHOUT HOPE**

*...but they did not listen to him because of their discouragement and cruel bondage. (Ex. 6:9)*

Have you ever been there— a place where all hope has been wrung out of you? False hopes have been offered and dashed too many times. Your current circumstances feel so oppressive you can't even imagine anything more. Drowning happens when our lungs are invaded and overwhelmed with water. But we also speak metaphorically of drowning in sorrow or despair. There are many in our world who are there and life itself feels like a killing burden.

I'd say, the Israelites are drowning in their discouragement. Things are so bad, they can only imagine worse, not better. They can't even hear the promises of God. They've given up. There seems to be nothing they can now do to help themselves. There is no spark left to fan into a flame of faith. Without God's unilateral intervention, all is lost.

And, think of poor Moses. He is obeying God in bringing God's message to the Israelites. Obeying God, he goes before Pharaoh and makes his case, *This is what the Lord, the God of Israel says, "Let my people go..."* And he is met with, *"Who is the Lord that I should obey him and let Israel go?"* And then an angry Pharaoh makes things much, much worse for the Israelites. The people blame Moses and Moses blames God.

*Moses returned to the LORD and said, "O Lord, why have you brought trouble upon this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and you have not rescued your people at all." (Ex 5:22-23)*

Sometimes things have to get worse before they get better.

But the process of deliverance here is highly instructive. Getting His people out of Egypt is one aspect of what God faces, and that is really the easiest problem to solve. The more difficult second problem is to restore His broken people so they can trust Him and be His people. So the way God delivers them from Egypt must be in a way that brings the Israelites to faith— to salvation. Pharaoh frames the question, *"Who is the Lord that I should obey him?"* and God proceeds to answer this for both Pharaoh and the Israelites in the plagues.

### **THE PLAGUES— God's Self-disclosure**

Exodus chapters 7-10 give us the story of the ten plagues. I'm not going to go into detail on these. I just want us to get the big picture and the message God is giving through them. The plagues cover a period of nine months to a year (like Pharaoh joined "the Plague a Month

Club”). These plagues are directed against the various gods of the Egyptian pantheon. They had to be exposed for their impotence so Israel could come to faith in the true, living God.

Egypt was an impressive culture, with gods for everything dominating the landscape. The architecture of temples, pyramids, and the extravagance of gold everywhere still impress us—most all of it was tied to their religion. It was a totalitarian society ruled by the Pharaoh who was himself also viewed as a god—an embodiment of the great Egyptian god, Ra. Egypt was among the most prosperous and successful nations on earth—so this belief system seemed to be working. The Israelites had lived immersed in this for 430 years. And for at least the last 50 plus years, they had been terribly oppressed, forced into slave labor building the magnificence of Egypt. To compare that with our own American history, 430 years ago would be the year 1575. That’s a long time ago! The Pilgrims didn’t arrive until 1620. So, we can imagine, these Israelites were pretty well “Egyptianized.” The stories of God appearing to their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob along with Joseph’s providential arrival in Egypt were ancient stories, and many didn’t believe in God. Remember, they didn’t have any written Scriptures like we do to tell us about God—only the stories and traditions passed on through those years. A lot can be lost in 430 years.

So, the primary purpose of the ten plagues is purge the Israelites of Egypt’s model of life. (Here I am drawing on number of observations from my brother’s book, [Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places](#). If their minds and hearts weren’t thoroughly cleansed of the Egyptian way, when freed from slavery, they would simply take their place farther up the chain of oppression and become oppressors themselves. After all, this system of slave labor had built a mighty impressive empire.

Often we assume (especially as Americans) that all that people need in order to establish good government that respects people and honors their freedom is to be set free from the oppressor. But we’ve found in places like Haiti and currently in Iraq, deeper changes are needed or the oppressed become the new oppressors. We also see it happening in families where the abused become the abusers. Businesses and churches are not immune. Once the downtrodden get on top, unless there is a cleansing of the old thinking, they perpetuate the same pattern.

In these plagues, we see God stripping off the veneer of all the power, majesty, and beauty of Egypt to reveal the falseness of that way of life and the impotence of their false gods. Pharaoh’s claim to sovereignty is thoroughly discredited and the sovereignty of Yahweh, the God of Israel, is displayed. “Know” runs through the entire plague section, chapters 6-14, like a thread holding it all together (11 references in all) beginning with 6:7, *I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.* The plagues are to reveal just who the Lord is to the Israelites and to Pharaoh in response to his sarcastic question, “*Who is the Lord that I should obey him?*”

The plagues begin with Moses and Aaron in the royal palace repeating God’s words to let His people go. When Pharaoh asks for a miraculous sign, Moses has Aaron throw down his staff which becomes a snake. But Pharaoh’s magicians are able to do the same thing by their secret arts, except that Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs. Pharaoh, unimpressed, refuses to listen

to Moses and Aaron. Now the scene is set for the contest.

The first two plagues, the Nile turned to blood and the frogs are somehow duplicated by the court magicians. They must have done this either by sleight of hand or by demonic power. With the third plague, gnats, the magicians are out of their depth and conclude, “*This is the finger of God.*” With the fourth plague, flies, a new miracle begins with most of the rest of the plagues—the land of Goshen where the Israelites live is spared—showing that the Lord can preserve His own in the midst of judgment. The Israelites are no longer the oppressed, but are now shown honor and favor above the Egyptians. With most of the plagues, Pharaoh repents and promises to let the Israelites go. After Moses prays and the plague ends, Pharaoh relents on his promise. Through the first five plagues, we see the phrase, “Pharaoh hardened his heart.” In the last four, the phrase changes to, “The Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” Pharaoh had a clear choice to make in the first five plagues. But now, his heart is set, and the Lord adds His judgment in the next four—reminding us that there is a time when our choices run out.

At three different times, Pharaoh offers compromises which the devil still uses to tempt us. **First**, worship the Lord but stay in the land, don’t leave (8:25). Aren’t we tempted that way? The devil tells us, “You can still hang-out with the old crowd. You don’t need to be so radical and separate—fit-in. You can be a Christian and still not leave worldly things behind.” The **second** compromise offered is, leave the women and children behind (10:10). But salvation is intended to involve whole families. We dare not give up and leave anyone behind. The **third** compromise is to leave the flocks and herds behind—their wealth (10:24). God and business don’t mix, we sometime hear. We are still tempted to keep our possessions and material things separate from our worship. God wants everything to be encompassed in His salvation.

Then, in the final plague, the death of the first born, we are given a powerful metaphor for salvation foreshadowing the coming of Christ, to be celebrated yearly in the Passover. For the Israelites to be spared, each household was to take a perfect lamb, without blemish and kill it, placing its blood on the sides and top of the doorframe. They were to all remain inside that night. Then at midnight, the first born son of every Egyptian died. While there are many other Passover instructions given here, the dominate image is that of being protected by the blood of a lamb. Jesus came as the perfect Lamb of God, slain for our sins. Through His blood shed for us, we are saved.

The plagues have had their effect, ending with the Israelites, bowing down and worshiping the Lord (12:27). They have seen God’s promised redemption “with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment (6:6).” Plague by plague, God has proved the gods of Egypt are no gods at all. Beginning with the Nile turning to blood, the god of the Nile, Hapi, is discredited. Other important deities are exposed as worthless: the earth god, Geb as the earth crawls with frogs and locusts; the god Shu, whose air is blackened with gnats and flies; the goddess Nut, whose sky is filled with thunder and hail; the goddess and protector Amanuet, who is unable to protect against the boils ravaging the Egyptian’s bodies. With the ninth plague, the three days of darkness, “darkness that can be felt” (10:21), the greatest of their gods, Ra, the sun god is shown to be nothing. Neither the savior goddess Anta-Anat nor the savior god Anhur are able to defeat

Yahweh and prevent the death of the firstborn sons. Osiris, the god of death, cannot reverse the Passover. Pharaoh, claiming divinity himself, is powerless against the Lord's anointed servant Moses, the shepherd.

## **CONCLUSION**

The path of deliverance for Israel is for us to better comprehend God's intention for us and understand His loving purposes. Perhaps your spirit is broken, and you feel overwhelmed by your present circumstances. Maybe you are in bondage to some form of sin. Some are addicted to alcohol or other drugs or sexual sin like pornography. None of this is beyond God's ability to handle.

Maybe your faith is shaky, uncertain, as it was for many of the Israelites. You need a bracing exposure to the truth of God. We have His Word which is a great gift to us to build our faith. Go to that in your confusion and questions. Stay in touch with God's people, learning together, receiving their support on your journey. You'll find God renewing your faith.

Contemporary song writer, Don Moen, was awakened in the middle of the night a number of years ago to learn that his wife's sister, Susan, and her husband, Craig, were in a terrible car accident killing one of their four boys. Everyone was seriously injured. As Don and his wife grieved and poured out their hearts to God, they felt helpless in knowing what to say to Susan and Craig. Don recalls how it was then, that he felt the Lord give him these words:

“God will make a way when there seems to be no way.  
He works in ways we cannot see. He will make a way for me.  
He will be my guide; hold me closely to his side.  
With love and strength for each new day, he will make a way.”

The song is in your bulletin. As we sing it, let this promise be yours. Can there be any doubt of God's ability to make a way for you in light of His deliverance of Israel?

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### **Questions for Small Groups Meeting this week:**

Scripture: Ex. 4:29-6:12 (Plagues are in chapters 7-11)

1. Is there something in this sermon that seems particularly applicable to your life?

2. Worship precedes Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh (Ex. 4:31). Is there a time you can think of when you've been strengthened by worship to face a difficult situation?
  
3. Have you ever cried out to God for help and it seemed things only got worse, as they did for the Israelites in Ex. 5? How did you feel and did you receive help in any way?
  
4. When we face adversity, are there truths here for us in this first part of Exodus? Consider Ex. 2:23-25; 3:7-9; Ex. 6:5.
  
5. In the following verses, what does the Bible tell us to put our hope in?
  - 1 Tim. 4:9-10 \_\_\_\_\_
  - Ps. 130:5 \_\_\_\_\_
  - Ps. 147:11 \_\_\_\_\_
  - Col. 1:27 \_\_\_\_\_
  - Titus 1:2 \_\_\_\_\_
  - I Pet. 1:3-4 \_\_\_\_\_
  - 1 Jn. 3:2-3 \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. How does hope develop?
  - Ps. 62:5-8 \_\_\_\_\_
  - Rom. 5:1-5 \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_\_\_
  
7. Jeremiah 29:11-13 and Prov. 23:18 are wonderful verses about hope. As you read them and think about them, what do they mean to you personally?
  
8. The plagues are used by God to thoroughly purge the Israelites of the Egyptian ways. Can

you think of ways we are enamored with our culture that work against our walk with God?  
And how do we break free of that mind set?

9. Have you been tempted by any of the three compromises Pharaoh offers to Moses?
- Stay in Egypt (Ex. 8:25)
  - Leave family members behind (Ex. 10:10)
  - Leave possessions behind (Ex. 10:24)

How have you dealt with this?