

Deliverance From Slavery

Message 6

God Strikes Back!

Exodus 7:1-8:32

Rebound From Failure

Put yourself in Moses' shoes. He rode into town to save his people from the cruelty of Pharaoh. He came with a vision from God Himself, and a message of salvation. In spite of his powerful desire to stay safely out in the desert, Moses went to Egypt, and God promised to go with him. In spite of his reservations about how he would be received, the people welcomed him and received his message from God. Moses was a hero! But then his first move to free his people was a total disaster. Moses marched into the palace – just as God commanded him to do – and demanded that Pharaoh let his people go to worship their God. Pharaoh refused. Worse, he oppressed the Israelites far more than before. He required them to make bricks without providing the materials to do so, and beat them mercilessly when they failed. Now the Israelites understandably hate Moses. He has utterly failed to deliver his people. They were much better off before Moses even came.

How do you respond to failure? Do you give up? Or do you get back in there and try again? Perhaps some of both. Most of us keep trying until we pass our driving test. But perhaps you gave up on a musical instrument or a sport. And if you simply do not have the talent, moving on to something else may be the right choice. But what about when God calls you to serve Him? Do you give up when the going gets tough? I remember the first Bible study I led. I was a sophomore and a senior was teaching some of us how to reach out to our friends. So I prepared a Bible study and invited some people. No one came. Zero. It was pretty humiliating. Then when I graduated and began campus ministry, I was sent away to learn how to teach. I failed. But I was convinced that God was calling me to serve Him, so I kept at it.

If you had been in Moses' shoes, would you have marched back into the palace to repeat your demand? To face the laughter of the court, the sneer of Pharaoh, the hostility of your own people? Or would you have slunk back into the desert? Do you remember what we saw back in chapter two? We saw that Moses' mother was a woman who refused to give up. Faced with a royal decree to throw her baby in the Nile river, she did just that. But she provided a little boat for him to float in. Moses' mother was courageous and resourceful in dealing with the wickedness of Pharaoh. When many people would have caved in to the mighty power of Egypt, she refused to give up. Moses also is a man who refuses to give up. But before he charged back into the palace, Moses took his problems to God.

Here is the real key to rebounding from failure. In fact this is the key to Moses' whole life. All his life Moses will face problem after problem – famine, drought, enemy attack, mutiny – but every time, Moses brought his problems to God, and God strengthened him and guided him. The first part of chapter six is Moses' conversation with God about this disastrous encounter with Pharaoh. God does more than just tell Moses to get back in there and stay on the job. God reminds Moses of His promises – His promise to deliver Israel, His promise to bring them to the land of Canaan, His promise to be with them – His covenant. God reminds Moses that He will never forsake His people because He is bound to them forever in His covenant.

Here is what this boils down to: is God telling the truth? Or is He pulling your leg? It was ridiculous enough to think that Moses could singlehandedly deliver all the Israelites from the power of Egypt. Moses tried to avoid getting sucked into this mess. But God promised success, and Moses failed. Now God says again that He will rescue the Israelites. Look around. Look at the massive power of Pharaoh. Look at the weakness of an 80-year-old man. Look at the crushed spirit and broken body of the Hebrews. Look at Moses' failure. Who in his right mind would go on with this insane plan? God says He will give you success, but there is no evidence of it. Can you trust Him?

Do you believe in God? I mean more than accepting His existence. Do you trust God? Or do you trust your sight? Jesus said He would never leave you. Do you believe this – even in the moments of deepest despair? God promises to guide you. Do you believe this – even when you feel hopelessly confused and God seems far, far away? God promises to produce fruit in your life. Do you believe this – even when you have trouble seeing any, and your efforts to serve Him flounder miserably? What is real and true – God’s promises, or your perceptions? Faced with no human reason to continue, Moses persisted in serving God. The only reason was trust in God’s word – trust in God’s word in spite of contrary evidence. Whom will you believe – God, or your eyes?

These are not theoretical questions. We are in that season when we are choosing new leaders for next year. We will elect a new president and new officers. If we are going to have a mission trip, a formal, a worship team, and all the other things we do – some of you will need to lead and participate in these events. Soon I will begin to ask some of you to lead Bible studies next year. At a minimum we will need three freshmen Bible studies. If we are to have some upperclassmen Bible studies, some of you will need to join the Bible study leadership team. But it will be much easier to sit on the sidelines and hope that someone else will do the heavy lifting. Some of you have found that involvement in ministry is taxing. Ministry is rewarding – even exhilarating. But it also can be tiring, frustrating, and disappointing. Sometimes you fail. Sometimes it appears that you have nothing to show for your efforts. And it is at such times that you must ask yourself, what do you believe? God’s promise of fruit, or your own perception? Can you trust God to make good use of your efforts?

The War Begins!

You must understand Moses’ encounters with Pharaoh as a war. It is a strange war. There were no massed armies and no military weapons. It was fought with strange animals and the forces of nature. But chapter one introduces Exodus as a war story. Pharaoh made the first move. He enslaved the Hebrews out of fear that they may side with his enemies in a future battle. Pharaoh said, “Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.’ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens.” (Exodus 1:9-11) When this did not reduce the Hebrew population, Pharaoh ordered the midwives to kill all the Hebrew male babies. Then Pharaoh ordered everyone to drown any Hebrew male baby they found. This was worse than war – it was genocide. By attacking the Hebrews, Pharaoh attacked the God of the Hebrews – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God responded by offering terms of peace. We saw this last week. In demanding the release of the Hebrews to worship their God, Moses was essentially offering peace to Pharaoh. But Pharaoh refused. Not only did he refuse God’s terms of peace, he renewed his attack on God’s people.

Chapter seven opens with a preliminary skirmish – as if two generals are testing each other’s strength. Moses and Aaron take their staff with them into the palace, and throw it down before Pharaoh. As before, it turns into a snake. This is an impressive display of power, but Pharaoh is not impressed. He brings in his magicians who duplicate the sign.

How did they do it? If it was impressive that Moses, by the power of God, was able to turn a staff into a snake – it is equally impressive that Pharaoh’s magicians were able to do the same. There are only three possible explanations for the magicians’ act. It could have been a trick, like the magic you see performed in a theater by a professional magician – or at an RUF talent night by Dr. Femister. Some people might think Pharaoh’s magicians possessed real magic power. But there is no evidence that such a power has ever existed. That is the stuff of fantasy, not history. The third possibility is that the magicians possessed demonic power. I think this is most likely. The people of Egypt worshiped a collection of gods, and scripture teaches us that false gods are powered by demons.

Philip Ryken explains in his commentary on Exodus how significant it was to turn a staff into a snake.

The Egyptians were fascinated by snakes, partly because they were so afraid of them. Many of them carried amulets to protect them from Apophis, the serpent-god who personified evil...It was this fear of snakes that led Pharaoh to use the serpent as the symbol of his royal authority....

By finding his security in the serpent-god, Pharaoh was actually making an alliance with Satan...When Pharaoh first ascended the throne of Egypt, he would take the royal crown and say,

O Great One, O Magician, O Fiery Snake!
Let there be terror of me like the terror of thee.
Let there be fear of me like the fear of thee.
Let there be awe of me like the awe of thee.
Let me rule, a leader of the living.
Let me be powerful, a leader of spirits.

With these words, Pharaoh offered his soul to the devil.¹

It does not matter much how the magicians produced their snakes. Now we have the snake of God versus the snakes of Egypt. A snake fight! Ready, set, go! And they're off, one snake against ten. But whoa, God's snake is all over the place. He eats each of the other snakes, until they are all gone. God's snake wins! Almost before it began, God won the first battle in the war for Egypt. In so doing, God proved that He is superior over the power of Pharaoh – and the power behind the throne, Satan. But although he lost this first battle, Pharaoh was unwilling to surrender.

Now the war begins in earnest. As we saw last week, the story of Exodus is not about political freedom. The primary issue is not that the Hebrews are ruled by Pharaoh. The primary issue is that Pharaoh has attacked the people of God, and thus God Himself. Exodus is a spiritual battle, and spiritual issues are at the center of the whole story – beginning with the participants. On one side we have the God of the Hebrews, Yahweh. On the other side we have Pharaoh. In ancient Egypt Pharaoh was considered to be a god. This will be a war between Yahweh and Pharaoh – and Satan, who is the power behind Pharaoh. On Yahweh's side are Moses and Aaron, His prophets. On Pharaoh's side are a whole array of other gods. Egyptians worshiped the god of the Nile, the sun god, the god of the dead, etc. As in all ancient cultures, the Egyptians imagined a god over all the important aspects of life. The Nile River was the source of water for Egypt. The sun was an ever-present reality in that treeless land. Death is always a concern for every people. Gods ruled over all these important aspects of Egyptian life – all under the rule of the supreme god, Pharaoh. As the war heats up, Yahweh will attack and destroy all these false gods. And in the process He will destroy the whole nation of Egypt. The final blow will be against Pharaoh himself.

Attack on the Nile

The Nile was the life of Egypt. There is hardly any rain in Egypt, and the nation relied upon the Nile for all its water. Every spring the Nile overflowed its banks and deposited rich, wet silt on the farms lining the river. The Nile was the source for drinking water, and for almost all the water of the kingdom. The Nile provided transportation throughout the kingdom, and its fish were a staple of the Egyptian diet. The annual flooding cycle set the calendar for the life of Egypt. If the Nile died, Egypt died.

¹ Philip Ryken, *Exodus; Saved for God's Glory* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2005) pp. 206-207.

God's first attack on Egypt was against the Nile. There is a rich irony in turning the Nile into blood. Blood is the symbol for life, but by turning the Nile into blood, God brought death to Egypt. Seeing a wide river of blood was a sign to the Egyptians that their blood would flow unless they surrendered to Yahweh. In a further irony Pharaoh's magicians also turned water into blood. They could not undo Yahweh's act, or turn back God's attack. All they could do was make it worse!

How long can you live without water? You can live several weeks without food, but only a few days without water. The Egyptians feverishly dug in the ground to try to find water. For seven days the Nile, the rivers, the streams, the lakes and ponds of all Egypt had nothing but blood in them. The text does not tell us if anyone died as a result of this attack, but it seems inevitable. At least Egypt was seriously weakened by the loss of water.

Egypt worshiped the Nile River, the life-giver of their land. Ryken notes that there were at least three gods associated with the Nile.

One was the great Osiris, the god of the Nile, who was depicted with the river running through his bloodstream. Another was Nu, the god of life in the river. But the most important was Hapi, the god of the flood. Hapi was a fertility god who was portrayed as a bearded man with female breasts and a pregnant stomach. The idea was that the annual flooding of the Nile gave birth to Egypt and nursed its strength.²

But the God of the Hebrews defeated the gods of the Nile and turned the life-giver of Egypt into the source of death. This should have been a sign that Yahweh alone is the life-giver, that He alone gives strength to men. It should have moved Egypt to worship the God of the Hebrews. But that would have meant surrendering to Him, and relinquishing their slaves. The price was too high. Egypt would rather suffer than submit to God.

Attack of the Animals

Altogether it will take ten plagues to convince Pharaoh to submit to Yahweh. The next three plagues involve animal armies. There is something comical about using frogs, gnats, and flies to torment Egypt for their rebellion against God.

Frogs are the least likely candidates for an invasion army. They are not large or dangerous, and they are easy to kill. But as armies have learned for millennia, a powerful force can be overcome by the sheer numbers of a multitude of determined soldiers. In this case there must have been billions of frogs. God warned,

“““The Nile shall swarm with frogs that shall come up into your house and into your bedroom and on your bed and into the houses of your servants and your people, and into your ovens and your kneading bowls. The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your servants.”””
(Exodus 8:3-4)

I am sure when Pharaoh first heard Moses threaten him with frogs, he must have thought Moses was out of his mind. How much trouble can a few frogs cause? But when a parade of frogs trooped across his table, and when he rolled over and squished the frogs that had crept into his bed at night, I am equally sure that Pharaoh was thoroughly disgusted by the ordeal. In only a few days the whole country would have been begging for the frogs to leave. Finally Pharaoh pleaded with Moses to make the frogs go away. He even

² Ibid., p. 220.

promised to let the Hebrews sacrifice to God in the wilderness! At this point Moses began to gain some confidence, and he gently mocked Pharaoh, asking *when* he should order the frogs to depart. Amazingly, Pharaoh did not say right away. He told Moses to give the order the next day. Pharaoh is one tough dude! But even then the frogs were a huge problem. There were piles of stinking carcasses all over Egypt. But as soon as the frogs died, Pharaoh broke his promise and refused to release the Israelites.

The plague of frogs was not only a joke on Pharaoh, it also made a mockery of another of Egypt's gods. Ryken puts it this way...

...the frog goddess Heqet was the spouse of the creator-god Khnum. The Egyptians believed that Khnum fashioned human bodies on his potter's wheel, and then Heqet breathed into them the breath of life.³

The Egyptians depended on Heqet to control the frog population of Egypt. This plague demonstrated beyond all doubt Heqet's impotence before Yahweh. Once again God attacked Egypt's god and won a decisive victory.

As with the first plague, this time the magicians were able to reproduce Moses' plague. They also brought frogs upon the land! Isn't this absolutely ridiculous? The magicians demonstrate some power, but only by aiding God in tormenting themselves. But this is the end. From here on out the magicians will be unable to compete with Moses.

Next Yahweh used the smallest animals in Egypt to harass Pharaoh. God turned the dust into gnats which crawled over everything in the land. Gnats might seem like a fairly minor problem, but think how annoying a few gnats can be. Now multiply that by several hundred – gnats crawling all over you, into your ears, under your clothes, through your food. Gnats also annoy animals, and they likely caused real havoc with the cows and other domestic animals. By now the court magicians were completely defeated. They admitted to Pharaoh that this plague came from God Himself. But Pharaoh still was unwilling to loose his slaves or admit defeat. He would rather suffer from gnats than submit to God.

Next up were the flies. There is some uncertainty exactly which creatures are meant here, but it is clear that they were a terrible scourge. The text says, "Throughout all the land of Egypt the land was ruined by the swarms of flies." (Exodus 8:24) Pharaoh endured the gnats without relenting, but the flies were too much to bear. In desperation he called in Moses and Aaron and struck a deal with them. He agreed to allow the Israelites go into the wilderness to sacrifice to God, as long as it was not a long journey. Moses warned him, however, not to cheat this time!

Did you notice that this time God protected his own people from the devastation of the flies? No flies entered the land of Goshen where the Israelites lived. As God intensified the plagues, He shielded the Israelites from their horrible effects.

Depending upon which animal was involved in this plague, there are several gods that Yahweh may have been attacking. Uatchit was the god of the ichneumon fly. Some scholars think the animals may have been flying beetles, know as scarabs. The god of resurrection, Kheprer, was shown as a beetle. Or this plague may have been an attack on Beelzebub, the lord of the flies. Some Egyptians worshiped Beelzebub, whose job was to protect the land against swarms of flies. In either case, the plague of flies showed once again that the gods of Egypt were no match for the awesome power of Almighty God.

³ Ibid., p. 228.

Even though Moses had specifically warned Pharaoh not to cheat, he reneged on his promise and refused to allow the Israelites to go and worship God. Amazingly, it will take six more plagues and the utter destruction of Egypt before Pharaoh will release his slaves.

Is Your Heart Hard?

We read these stories and marvel at the stubbornness of Pharaoh. His land is perishing all around him. How could he be so foolish? It is easy to criticize Pharaoh, because we have nothing to lose by doing so. But we are just like him. Faced with the alternative of losing your pride, possessions, and status in society, no one willingly obeys God. All of us struggle to follow Jesus when the stakes are high. That is why God often has to break us – as He broke Pharaoh – before we submit to His rule in our lives.

Let's get real personal here. I know it is dangerous, but let's try anyway. What have you done about the things God has shown you through our studies so far this semester? Have you taken these messages to heart and sought to change your life? Or have my words gone in one ear and out the other? Is your life changing because you are seeing your sin, repenting of it, and striving to obey God? Or have you hardened your heart – like Pharaoh. What will God have to do to break through to you?

Perhaps you are thinking, “Yes, I have been resisting God. And honestly, I do not have the will to obey. Jesus calls me to forsake my own desires and follow Him, and I know I should, but I do not want to.” If that is the condition of your heart, all is not lost. Tell God what I just said – or whatever is in your heart. And ask God to change you – to give you the desire to serve Him – to soften your heart. That is one prayer – if asked in sincerity – that God will never refuse.

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