

# Deliverance From Slavery

Message 9

## *The Death Angel Strikes!*

Exodus 12:29-13:16

### ***Backstory***

They never saw it coming. The whole nation went to bed at peace and expecting the next day to be like all others. They never expected the attack which would kill thousands and wound thousands more. Some never woke up, and those who did woke to the screaming of terrified victims of the greatest slaughter they had ever known. I am describing the Japanese attack on Pearl harbor in December 7, 1941. If you thought I was describing God's attack on Egypt in the final plague, you would be wrong. Egypt knew disaster was coming, and they let it happen. The tenth plague was monstrously crippling, but God had given ample warning.

Let us review how we got to this point. Before it is all over, Egypt will be a complete wasteland. When God is finished with Egypt, her crops will be destroyed, only a small portion of her livestock will still be alive, all the firstborn boys will be dead, the whole army will be annihilated, and Pharaoh will be dead. Egypt was an ancient and robust culture, and she will recover. But it will take centuries before this magnificent nation will return to her former glory. How did it all happen?

It all started with fear and greed. For 300 years the descendants of Jacob had lived peacefully in Egypt. For a long time they were treated deferentially in recognition of Joseph who had been prime minister. Joseph had saved Egypt from starvation during a seven-year famine, and successive generations of Egyptians showed their appreciation by allowing Joseph's people to live peacefully in Egypt.

But eventually this memory grew dim and the Hebrew people multiplied. They were obedient to God's first command, to be fruitful and multiply. At some point the Hebrews became so numerous that the Egyptians began to fear them. So to prevent the Hebrews from revolting, the Egyptians enslaved the whole race. This partly settled the fears of the Egyptians, and it also became very profitable for them to have such a huge supply of free labor. But as the Hebrews continued to multiply and became overwhelmingly numerous, the fears of the Egyptians grew. They needed to cut back on their slave population. First they tried to shrink the number of Hebrews by increasing their labor. When that did not work, they turned to genocide. Pharaoh ordered that all Hebrew baby boys should be thrown into the Nile River.

### ***Justice and Mercy***

Now, what should God do about this? Let us transpose this situation to a different time and place. Imagine two nations, say Japan and the United States, that are at peace with each other. Suddenly there is an unprovoked attack by one upon the other. People are killed – a lot of people, but a tiny fraction of the total population of the U.S. What would you expect any nation to do in such a situation? Go to war, of course. This scenario has been played out a million times over the course of history. While it is not necessary for nations to attack other nations, defense is the role of government. A ruler who refuses to defend his people is traitorously negligent. So in 1941 the United States government declared war on Japan to defend our country. And any normal person would expect God to declare war on Egypt. Pharaoh had enslaved, persecuted, and slaughtered God's people. God must attack to defend His people.

Believe it or not, there are people who think that God was wrong to kill all the firstborn of Egypt. But of course in holding this position they are missing the whole context. Sure, if you ask me, "Should God kill all the firstborn boys in Russia," I would say, "No!" Even if I do not particularly like Russia, or suspect her intentions, it would be hideous simply to kill a quarter of their population. And when I think of all the Japanese, and American, men who lost their lives in World War II, it is pretty unnerving. But in the context

of an unprovoked attack on Pearl Harbor and the ensuing war, the loss of life was unavoidable. It was just a matter of which lives would be lost – ours or theirs, soldiers or civilians. So when we look at the slaughter of the Egyptians, we can see that although regrettable, it was entirely just.

But God was more than just. He was also merciful. Unlike most nations, God did not immediately strike when Pharaoh stole His people and began to oppress and slaughter them. Year after year, decade after decade God waited for Pharaoh to relent. Then God sent Moses to free His people. But Moses did not strike Egypt at first. He offered terms of peace. Think of it! After all that has happened, God was willing to settle with Pharaoh. No punishment – just release His people. It was an insanely generous offer. But no, Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go to serve God. Even then God did not attack Pharaoh directly. Nine times God warned Pharaoh to release His people. Nine times God sent a plague to demonstrate His seriousness and His power over all the gods of Egypt. Nine times all Egypt saw the terrible power of God. By the last plague, many Egyptians had begun to believe in this God. But Pharaoh refused to submit to the God of a slave race.

Seen in this light, the plagues – awful as they were – show the overwhelming patience and mercy of God. There was no reason for God to give Pharaoh so many warnings. There was no reason for God to delay the final attack. But this is characteristic of God. God is a God of unreasonable mercy.

Many of you have known this mercy personally. You were born in sin and lived in rebellion against God. Year after year God showed you His power and mercy in creation and through the gospel. And year after year you refused to listen. God should have destroyed you long ago. There was no reason to allow you to live on His earth, breathe His air, eat His food, drink His water, enjoy the pleasures of life – while rebelling against Him. You deserved to die. But God was patient. God was merciful. In spite of your hatred of Him, God loved you. Because of God's mercy, you now know and love God.

But perhaps you do not know God. Perhaps you are still rebelling against Him. Perhaps when you hear Him call for obedience you hate His voice. The fact that you are still here tonight is compelling testimony to God's mercy and love. God should have destroyed you before you arrived here tonight. But instead God loves you. Why do you continue to resist God's love? Why do you hate the only person who loves you with a perfect love? Will you be like Pharaoh? Will you resist God until finally He destroys you? Don't! Give up your hate, and embrace Jesus. Welcome His love, and follow His commands. Turn from your sin and believe the gospel. Go home tonight a forgiven man or woman, a child of God.

### ***Israel the Firstborn of God***

Egypt deserved to die. But why did God kill only the firstborn males? It is hard for us to see the significance of this today. Our culture generally does not place special value on firstborn males. It is true that some men may have a special fondness for their first son, but there are no legal ramifications to being born first. But the firstborn son was very important in biblical cultures, and is also important to God.

Among the Hebrews, leadership of the family would pass to the firstborn son. There are several dimensions to this. The firstborn son would receive a double portion of the inheritance. So if there were four boys, the first would get 2/5 of the inheritance, and the other sons each would get 1/5. Now this was not bald favoritism. The purpose of this extra portion was so that the firstborn son could care for his parents in their old age. Along with leadership of the family would come the priestly responsibilities. You see this everywhere in the patriarchal period. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were priests for their families. In the book of Job we see Job performing the same role for his family. And for Abraham's descendants the firstborn received the blessing of the covenant which God made with Abraham. Abraham gave this blessing to his son Isaac. Isaac had twins, Jacob and Esau, who fought over the blessing. Jacob received the blessing and God's people came through him.

But it was not just the Hebrews who gave a special role to the firstborn son. We have reason to believe that the practices mentioned above were common throughout the ancient world. In Egypt the firstborn son would someday sit on the throne. This practice, which we call primogeniture, was dominant throughout European history as well. In Victorian England the firstborn son would inherit the whole estate. Consequently the second and third sons of gentlemen often took positions in the church and the military, since those were the best paths to advancement. In cultures where the firstborn son inherits a title, it is vitally important to have a son. Mr. Bennet, in Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*, failed to have a son – which meant that his family would lose their estate to another male relative. This dismal state of affairs was often brought up by Mrs. Bennet – and fueled her fervor to marry off her girls to wealthy gentlemen. A more tragic example of the problem of a male heir was the issue of a successor to Henry VIII. He went through six wives in a desperate and futile attempt to sire a son. And sure enough, his failure ushered in a period of civil unrest and violence in England after his death. So back to Egypt, the firstborn was looked upon with special favor. This is the man who would someday be the incarnation of Ra – god upon earth – the light and power of Egypt. The firstborn of Pharaoh was the hope and future of Egypt. His death would signal the death of the nation.

Putting all this together we can see that an attack on the firstborn was a blow to the groin. The nation would survive, but it would be socially and psychologically devastating. It would have been easier to recover if only the army had suffered a terrible defeat. (That will also happen – later.) The death of the firstborn terrified Egypt to the core and stripped her of all hope.

But there is another reason why God struck the firstborn of Egypt. Back in Exodus 4:22-23 God had said to Moses, “Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.” If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.’” Now it is clear that Israel was not physically born from God. Yahweh is not a human being. He appeared to Moses in a burning bush. He appeared to Abraham in a smoking firepot. Yahweh did not physically birth all the Israelites. There is some other sense in which Israel is the firstborn of God, and that sense is adoption. As we said last week, God chose Israel from among all the nation to be His own special people.

I would like to read again the passage from Deuteronomy in which Moses reminded the Israelites of how God chose them from among all the nations of the world.

The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 7:6b-8)

Isn't this priceless? God did not rescue Israel from Egypt grudgingly. He did not say, “Those silly Hebrews. Now look what trouble they have gotten themselves into. Oh well, I guess I'll have to go rescue them again.” It is true that the Hebrews were a motley crew. They were not impressive by any measure. That is what makes it all the more impressive that God chose them. But God did not chose them to be His slaves. They were a “treasured possession.” They were God's crown jewels! God looked all over the earth. He saw all the nations. Then when He saw Israel His face brightened. This was the one! This was the people He was looking for. These were just the ones He wanted to be His own people. These were the people that God loved.

All this is summed up in the statement, “Israel is my firstborn son.” Because God loved Israel, He

adopted Him as God's own son. Israel will have the benefit of the protection and care of his heavenly Father. Because Israel is His firstborn son, God determined to bless Israel more than other nations. Israel will be God's priest to the other nations. Israel will inherit the covenant. And it is through Israel that the Messiah will come to save all the nations of the earth.

In this light it is especially heinous that Pharaoh would kidnap, persecute, and murder God's firstborn son. And if Pharaoh will not return God's son to Him, God will exact retribution. God will seize and kill Pharaoh's firstborn son. Then when Pharaoh feels the effect of God's justice, he will release his grip on God's son.

### ***Jesus the Firstborn of God***

Now you might think it is very unfair that the firstborn son should be given such special treatment – especially if you are a second or third child – or a woman! But these social patterns actually reflect something deep within the nature of God Himself. Speaking of Jesus, Paul says in Colossians 1:15, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”

Now this is not the time to go into a lengthy discussion of the trinity. We believe that scripture teaches unequivocally that there is one, and only one, true God. We also believe that scripture teaches that God is simultaneously Father and Son and Spirit. We say God is one being existing in three persons. No one understands this. It is one of the mysteries of our faith. But since this is the case, it is obvious that Jesus was not created, nor was His birth as a man the beginning of His life. The apostle John says clearly that Jesus, whom he calls “the Word,” existed before the world, and created the world. And it is obvious that when Jesus was born as a man, he was not the first man born. So this verse in Colossians cannot refer to Jesus' physical birth. It refers to His relationship to the Father. It is saying that before anything was created, Jesus was the Son of God – the firstborn Son.

Now lest you think that I am making too much of one verse, Jesus is called the firstborn of God all through the New Testament. Romans 8:28-29 says,

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

This verse combines the concept of God's people as His son with Jesus as God's Son. Earlier in Romans Paul said, “you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons.” (Romans 8:15) Jesus is the true, eternal Son of God. We are sons of God by adoption. That makes us brothers of Jesus! But as you can see, this sonship language does not refer to physical birth. Jesus is the eternal Son of God. We are the adopted sons of God. From the beginning Jesus was not born from the Father and a woman. “Son” for Jesus refers to His relation to the Father. We were not born from the Father and a woman. “Son” for us refers to our relation to God. Our relation to God is not a matter of our physical birth, but that does not make it any less profound. Although we are adopted, we are nevertheless real sons of God.

But Jesus is preeminent. Sure, you might say, Jesus is superior to us because He is divine and we are human. He is the Creator and we are creatures. True. But there is more to it than that. Jesus is preeminent because He is first. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus

...become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”? Or again, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son”? And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, “Let all God's angels worship him.” (Hebrews 1:4-6)

One reason Jesus is superior to the angels (and to man) is that He was first!

We do not mind that Jesus receives more glory than we. He is God, after all. He created us and redeemed us. He is obviously so much greater than any other being, of course we give Him greater praise. But that is not the point. Scripture says that in addition to all these things, Jesus is to be worshiped because He was first. Now this is a quality which seems wrong to us, and when we apply it to human beings, every fiber of our egalitarian being screams “Unfair!”

I cannot explain why God gives special deference to the firstborn. On the surface it seems just as unfair to me as to you. We are Americans, after all. We live in the land of the free, where every little boy (and now girl), no matter how humble his beginnings, can grow up to be president. We hate the rigid social structures of the Old World. We hate aristocracy. And as a means of governing, I think our system is quite good. (I remember Winston Churchill’s quote. “It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.”) But the Bible was not written to please 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, nor to justify democracy.

All through history God has give special attention to some people. Scripture shows how God spoke to Abraham, while He remained silent to others. God raised David to be a great king, overlooking his brothers. Prophets, kings, and priests were treated differently by God than other people. Even men are singled out for attention. In 1 Timothy 2:12-13 Paul was giving instructions for how to conduct worship services. He said, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve...” Notice again that Paul’s reason here is simply that man came first. And again we cry, “Unfair!”

At this point I must inject a brief notice that although some people are given preference with regard to their particular role in society, all people are equal in God’s sight. All people – men and women, children and unborn, black and white, crippled and athletic, brilliant and ignorant – all people are made in God’s image and possess equal dignity. And all of God’s people – Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the present – all people are equally the firstborn of God. Distinction of role does not interfere with equality of value.

I do not understand all this, but I can see that God’s preferential dealing with prophets, priests, kings, men, and firstborn is rooted in the divine nature. Jesus is the firstborn, and because of that He receives God’s special recognition. Now here is a vital element in understanding all this. We, mankind, are made in God’s image. Mankind, distinct from all the rest of creation, is like God down to our core. And because the firstborn of the divine persons is worshiped, the firstborn of God’s image, man, is also to be given preference.

And now here is the payoff for this theology lesson. Scripture teaches us that all who believe in Jesus are made part of His body. Over and over Paul addresses the church as those who are “in Christ.” We are permanently united to Jesus. Romans 6:5 says, “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” Since Jesus is the firstborn of God, we also are the firstborn of God! That means we have all the blessing of the firstborn! That means we are the chosen people of God. We are the ones God delights in. We are the special treasure of God! And so Peter applies that verse from Deuteronomy to believers in Jesus. In 1 Peter 2:9-10 he says,

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but

now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

And when the author of Hebrews describes New Covenant worship, He says,

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven... (Hebrews 12:22-23)

Yes, the church of Jesus is the assembly of the firstborn. We are united to Jesus by His death and resurrection, and that means that just as He is the firstborn, so are we.

### ***Worship Jesus***

There is one other important difference between Jesus, the firstborn – and Israel, the firstborn. Israel escaped death, but Jesus did not. Israel's rescue was real and amazing, but insufficient and temporary. Sin still dominated and controlled God's people. The covenant failed many times – not because God failed, but because we were unfaithful. Man is no match for the power of sin. Just as Israel could not escape from Pharaoh, so the human race was permanently enslaved to sin. Just as Pharaoh had to die for Israel to be set free, so sin had to die for the human race to be really free. The message of the gospel is that when Jesus hung on the cross, He took the guilt of all our sins upon Himself. When Jesus died, sin died – and now sin has no power over those who are joined to Jesus. The true firstborn of God had to die so that the people whom God loved might become the objects of His special affection – the firstborn of the earth.

There are three brief applications to this message. First, if you are not part of God's firstborn – if you are not a believer in Jesus – do not throw away this glorious opportunity to receive God's special love. Turn from living for yourself and trust in Jesus tonight. Second, live for Jesus. If you are the firstborn of God, do not live like an alien. The Bible tells you how the sons of God live. As true sons, they live like their Father. They are characterized by kindness, courage, justice, holiness, faith, hope, and love. Learn to live like your heavenly Father. Third, worship Jesus. Without Him your fate would be the same as Pharaoh's. With Him you are a son of God. What a contrast! Only Jesus could make it happen. Praise the Firstborn of all creation!

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