

Sermon 22, The Portents Begin, Exodus 7:8-13

Proposition: God's credentialed prophets overcome Egypt's magic, showing God's persistence in offering mercy — not that it makes any difference to Pharaoh.

- I. Credentials Given, vv. 8-9
- II. Credentials Enacted, v. 10
- III. Credentials Duplicated, vv. 11-12a
- IV. Credentials Vindicated, v. 12b
- V. Credentials Disregarded, v. 13

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, last time we saw God reiterate His promise to reveal Himself through delivering His people from Pharaoh. This time, God dispatches Moses and Aaron into Pharaoh's presence to do a final pre-plague sign. It's one final warning, a final invitation to Pharaoh to turn before he actually feels the weight of Yahweh's heavy hand on him and his nation. So God gives to His prophets one final sign that will vindicate their claim to be messengers of a God superior to all the gods of Egypt. Of course, God knew that this sign would be duplicated and mocked, and He gave it anyway. We'll talk about that. But in terms of what the Holy Spirit is teaching us in this passage, we see that God's respectful and serious approach was rebuffed and disregarded by Pharaoh, whose heart was hard. It's a warning: Don't let your heart get hard. And it's a promise: God will, in general, bend over backwards to give you fair evidence that it's really Him and that you really ought to believe Him.

I. Credentials Given, vv. 8-9

As part of reading commentaries for this sermon, I watched a couple of the film versions of this scene. What I found is that they are uniformly lame. Yul Brynner's Pharaoh is the best, but Cecil B. DeMille had no way to show Aaron's rod swallowing up the others. The other thing I noticed was a tendency on the part of the directors to try to dramatize it all a little more. The way it's written here in Exodus is the opposite of that. Rather than trying to dramatize this material, God deliberately makes it more boring. What do I mean? Well, as with the ten plagues to follow, God announces what's going to happen beforehand!

The way we would write the story to appeal to the reader's sense of adventure, Moses and Aaron would be primed with the ability to perform the first plague. Then they would go in before Pharaoh and threaten to turn the water into blood. Pharaoh would laugh and ask for their credentials. "Egypt is a land of magicians," he might say. "You don't look Egyptian to me. How do I know that you can perform this great sign?"

And then we all squirm, because we don't know how Moses and Aaron will present their credentials. But that's not how God writes the scene. Instead, He says "Pharaoh will want to see some I.D. Here are the credentials you can present to Him."

Why does God tone down the drama rather than ramp it up? Because the essence of drama is that you wonder how it's going to turn out. The situation has to have that element of uncertainty, of free-will, within it. A situation that's all sewed up in a bag is the opposite of dramatic. It's not dramatic to watch someone pull up to a gas station, get out, pay, pump their gas, hang up the hose, and drive away. It was totally predictable. Well, the reason God totally predicts the undramatic first half of Moses and Aaron's presentation of their credentials is to tell us that He has this under control. And the reason it gets dramatic in the second half? Well, because God never simply shows Himself. His revelation is, on this side of eternity, always just a touch equivocal. There is, as Pascal said, enough light for those who want to see, and enough darkness for those who would prefer not to.

So God gives this sign that will function as the miracle Moses and Aaron have to show for themselves. They will do in Pharaoh's presence something unaided human beings cannot do, thus showing that they are in fact emissaries of Yahweh.

II. Credentials Enacted, v. 10

So the brothers go into Pharaoh's presence and perform the sign. Everything goes according to plan. The stick gets thrown down, and it becomes a serpent. Had Pharaoh been disposed to believe in Yahweh, here was evidence before his very eyes that Yahweh was indeed the God of the Hebrews and had in fact demanded that they be let go.

Now, what overtones does this miracle have? As we noted when God originally revealed it, in ch. 4, the miracle takes the serpent, the well-known symbol of Egypt, and shows it as subject to Moses and Aaron. Phil Ryken comments in his sermon on this passage that equivalent symbolism in our own nation would be for a diplomat to bring a bald eagle into the Oval Office and wring its neck. The point is clear. Obviously, Moses and Aaron don't kill their own serpent in this passage, and so, as my wife suggested, it might be better to say the symbolism is more like bringing a caged bald eagle into the Oval Office, and perhaps having it perform a trick or two. The message would be plenty clear enough. Moses and Aaron, by Yahweh's power, rule the snake or crocodile or great sea creature that is Pharaoh King of Egypt, the "dragon among the reeds" as Ezekiel calls him.

Credentials? Only servants of Yahweh can exercise power over the serpent.

III. Credentials Duplicated, vv. 11-12a

Except — and here the drama intrudes — Jannes, Jambres, and perhaps dozens of other courtiers, the entire staff of the Department of Magic in Pharaoh's bureaucracy, all threw down their rods, which promptly turned into snakes.

Moses and Aaron marched in there with a God-given sign showing that they were really the messengers of Yahweh. And every two-bit government conjurer in the Nile Delta was able to perform the same sign.

You know, in our day, this is a bit like the claim that Christians feed the poor, or that countries with higher church attendance have less war and suicide. We proudly announce that our credentials show that we are more charitable and more happy than those who don't fear God. And then the world says "You want to fight on that turf? Fine. How come the US has a much

higher church attendance rate and a much higher suicide rate than Norway? Why does the non-Christian soup kitchen in this town feed more poor people every day than your church does in a year?"

Oh snap, says the Christian. It's not supposed to be like this. I said that Christians have this credential, and now the world is coming out of the woodwork and waving this credential in my face because they have it too!

Just a quick reminder: What is our God-given credential in the church? What do we claim to have that the world does not? Love for one another! Yes. That's what Jesus said our credential would be. This is how all men will know that we follow the Lord Jesus. This is the supreme fruit of the Spirit, which only Christians can manifest.

So what do we do when our God-given credential is something that the world has too? When the members of a worldly organization like the Eagles Club or General Electric or the patrons of the Center Bar manifest more love for each other than we can show for each other, what do we do? Well, we obviously need to revisit that credential and ask why we are not loving each other and why this particular fruit of the Spirit seems to be absent from our lives. But we are also allowed to ask whether the love the world is showing is the real deal, or if it's really just self-interest disguised as bonhomie.

IV. Credentials Vindicated, v. 12b

But we also need to keep our eyes open for the power of God. God vindicated Moses and Aaron's credential, allowing their rod (in snake form) to swallow up all the other rods in the room. In Egyptian mythology, to swallow something was to gain its power. The power of God clearly triumphed over the power of the magicians. The credential Moses and Aaron presented was more powerful after all than the credential the employees of the Egyptian Department of Magic were able to generate.

In the same way, we can simply ask "How many martyrs has the Eagles Club got? What about the patrons of the Center Bar? Oh, none of them have ever died for each other or for the organization, eh? Is their love as real as Christians' love?" We can also ask things like "Among those who attend church two or more times each week, is the suicide rate lower or higher than the national average? Is it lower or higher than Norway's national average?" I am not aware of any data that directly answers this question, by the way. I'm just saying that God does vindicate the credentials He offers us. But we also need to be sure that we are pursuing the right credentials. Moses and Aaron were simply called to keep on showing the credential that God had given them. God didn't command them to convince Pharaoh that he would be better off obeying God. He simply told them to show their sign, and He would take care of the rest. That's what I mean by keeping our eyes open for the power of God. As you show your credentials by loving one another, in one sense, there is no need to worry whether the world sees that we are filled with supernatural, superhuman love here inside the church. Whether they are willing to see is not the issue. The issue is whether we are willing to be faithful to God.

V. Credentials Disregarded, v. 13

Well, the story ends with Pharaoh's hard heart preventing him from caring that Moses and Aaron actually had a credentialing sign. He had not the slightest interest in respecting the God whose sign it was.

What do we learn about God? His patience, for one. He gave Pharaoh every opportunity to give in, to back down, to submit. And He did so even after we human beings would have said "Forget it. He's obviously never going to listen." God keeps inviting people to be saved long after we have come to the conclusion that there's no point in issuing the free gospel invitation any more.

We also see God's willingness to try our faith even as He's offering an invitation to non-believers with hard hearts. God did not choose a sign that would knock Pharaoh off his throne and force him to say "The Lord — He is God! Yahweh — He is God!" The fire from Heaven produced that response on the lips of hardened Israel in Elijah's day. God vouchsafed no such miracle to Moses. Of course, the death of the firstborn, the pillar of cloud and fire, the very crossing of the Red Sea — none of it gave Pharaoh pause. None of it made him say "Now I know Yahweh, and I repent in dust and ashes for how I've mistreated His people." Far from it. By sending Moses and Aaron to perform a sign that Egypt's magicians could also perform, God was asking them "Do you really believe? Even when the world has the same credential you have, are you willing to trust that I know what I'm doing?" And they were. Moses' sulks are over; He believes God.

The hard-hearted won't believe. By and large, we live in the midst of a hard-hearted crowd of our fellow Americans. But we keep showing our credential and trusting in the God who gave it to us, knowing that His mercy is greater than ours and wider than we can imagine. Amen.