

Final Plague Threatened
Exodus 11
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7/1/2012

The anticipation of a thing is often better (or worse!) than the thing itself. Imagine children waiting and waiting for Christmas to come so that they can finally know what is in those boxes with their name on it! Or, on the flip side, the dread of something can be worse than the event itself. When it finally happens, people often respond better to the catastrophe than they do to the stress of not knowing whether it will happen. Or even if they know something is going to happen, the anticipation can be devastating. I'm sure that something like this must have happened to any Egyptians who knew the power of the Lord God of Israel, when He threatened to kill all the firstborn in the land of Egypt. This threat didn't seem to phase Pharaoh. In this chapter, we see fairly clearly that Pharaoh is pretty much on his own in his refusal to acknowledge the power and glory of God. All his people respect Moses and the Israelites, because they see what the Lord has done for them. But not Pharaoh. So we see here that God always gives fair warning before judgment happens. He did it then, and He has done so now.

Our passage divides easily into two main parts. The first part tells us about how the Israelites were to leave Egypt with great possessions, just like the Lord had promised to Abraham. In Genesis 15:14, the Lord promised Abraham that although his descendants would be enslaved and oppressed for 400 years, they would eventually come out of that land with great possessions. How did that come about? Well, the Lord had worked in the hearts of the Egyptian people so that they could see and respect the Israelites, and especially the God of the Israelites. One could say that the Lord had *softened* the hearts of the Egyptian people even as He *hardened* the heart of Pharaoh. In any case, chapter 12 says that a number of the Egyptian people went with the Israelites when they left Egypt. A mixed multitude went with the people. So some of the Egyptians had been converted to the true faith by what God had done, and by what He had said through the prophet Moses. At any rate, when the Israelites were directed to ask their neighbors for articles of gold and silver, the Lord had arranged that the Egyptians would be favorably disposed towards giving them what they asked.

It is important to notice here that what the Lord tells the Israelites to do is not theft. It was more like a free-will offering! And it is quite consistent with what the Lord would later tell the Israelites to do for those who had sold themselves into bondage in order to pay off their debts. Deuteronomy 15:12-15 says:

"If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the LORD your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today."

The Lord ties this principle to their slavery in Egypt, and the fact that they came out with great possessions. So also, every slave was to go free in the seventh year. This was an extension of the Sabbath principle. Just as they were supposed to rest one day in seven, so also they were to give a much larger rest to their slaves after the seventh year. Of course, the Egyptians had done no such thing for the Israelites, and hadn't even given them a weekly Sabbath rest. In the Fourth commandment as given in Deuteronomy, the reason for the Sabbath rest is that they didn't get any rest in Egypt, and now they have some rest. And, as it was with rest, so it also is with possessions. In a way, this was back payment for 400 years of work that the Israelites had done for the Pharaohs without any pay at all.

For us, we can remember that sin is a hard task master that allows no spiritual rest whatsoever. The application to us then comes in the form of the rest from sin that Jesus Christ brings us. Jesus tells us that His yoke is easy and His burden is light. The yoke of sin is heavy, in fact, impossible to carry. For eternal punishment is what awaits the sinner.

This burden is exactly what Jesus came to earth to remove. Jesus underwent that slavery to sin by taking on Himself the guilt of our sin. When we have that guilt removed from us and laid on Christ, then we are no longer in slavery, just as God removed Israel from slavery in Egypt.

However, the Lord does not merely save us from sin. He also gives us gifts. In fact, the Lord plunders the kingdom of Satan, and gives spiritual gifts to all His followers. What is the Lord asking us to use, then? There are many spiritual gifts. All of them are meant to be used not only in the church, but also in the community. So what gift do you have that will show the love of Christ to people? Maybe you have the gift of prayer, so that you can pray both for the church and for your neighbors. Maybe you have the gift of encouragement. So you can encourage your fellow believers, and you can encourage people to come to the means of grace in the church. Maybe you have the gift of hospitality, and you can bring people into your home and make them feel welcome. This is great for fostering fellowship among believers, and for making the church look like a family to those outside. Maybe you have the gift of generosity, and you can help people out by giving gifts that are useful. Maybe you have the gift of teaching, and can teach not only other people in the congregation, but can also teach what the faith is to those outside the church. Whatever gift you have, God gave it to you to use. Remember the parable of the servants given talents. Those were talents of gold, of course, but the same idea works with spiritual gifts. Use it, and do not bury your talent in the ground. Do not be discouraged if other people are not using their gifts. We especially need to be on our guard lest we withhold the use of our gifts because so-and-so is not exercising their gifts. To put it in the broadest possible terms: our fulfillment of our membership vows is not dependent on other people fulfilling their membership vows. There are no hidden "exceptions" to our vows. We only need to worry about using our gifts.

So, the Israelites were given gifts by the Egyptians, even though they were really gifts from God. But the second main part of the chapter is the threat of the death of the firstborn. It would happen at midnight. Midnight was the most ominous time of night for the Egyptians. For it was at midnight that the gods fought each other. The great sun-god Ra fought Apophis,

the god of darkness. The Egyptians would know that they had been protected, when the sun rose the next day. Well, the sun would rise, but their firstborn would not. The NKJV says that it will be every firstborn. The text does not say firstborn son, but simply every firstborn child. And it will be every firstborn child, from the lowest social status to the very highest. No one will be exempt. Notice that it says the firstborn of the slavegirl at her handmill. Midnight would have been the only time that a slave-girl could have ground wheat for herself. All the rest of the day she would have been slaving away for her master. She would therefore be the lowest of the low in social status. Her firstborn would die. But also the Pharaoh on his throne would lose his firstborn. The idea here is that everyone in between would also lose their firstborn children. Moses says that there will be a loud wailing. Most probably, this wailing is what will happen when the people wake up and find their dead among them. Such loud wailing will happen because they will all die on the same night. This is the ultimate punishment for what the Egyptian people (and all of them did it) did to the Israelite babies by throwing them in the Nile. All the people had cooperated in killing off the Israelite boys. So the Lord strikes them back. Moses uses a very interesting expression to tell us that the Israelites would not be bothered. The literal translation is that a dog would not even stick out his tongue. Dogs, of course, will often get riled up at the slightest provocation. But nothing will disturb their peaceful slumber in the land of Goshen where the Israelites were. Moses says that Pharaoh and all the officials will be bowing down to him (!), and that they will beg the Israelites to leave. Of course, that is exactly what happened. One is given the impression here that Moses leaves this threat hanging in the air and that he leaves Pharaoh in something of a stunned silence. Moses' anger here is righteous anger, not sinful anger. The last two verses tell us that God had it all planned out. Something very similar to this is said at the beginning of the plagues, and so we have something of a set of bookends before and after. Pharaoh will not listen. God will bring judgment. God will get glory because people will know that it was the Lord God who brought out the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt.

Jesus Christ was also a firstborn who died. He had all the innocence that we need to have, and yet bore all the guilt and punishment that we deserved. Of course, it was the Egyptian people and not their firstborn who really deserved to die. But then we all deserve to die. None of us deserves life. Life is a gift from God. New life in Christ, the crucified first born, is also a gift from God. Fortunately for us, Jesus is also the firstborn *from* the dead. That makes Him the firstfruits of the resurrection harvest. The rest of us, those who are in Christ, will rise in Him on that final day. We will have the rights of the firstborn then. We will have the rights of inheritance. For we are in Christ, those who believe in Him. Do you believe in the Firstborn, Jesus Christ?

Sermon Outline

I. Introduction: Anticipation

II. The Back-Payment (vv. 1-3)

A. Fulfilling God's Promise

B. Compassion for Servants

C. Jesus' Bearing of Our Burdens

D. Jesus' Giving Us Spiritual Gifts

III. The Threat (vv. 4-10)

A. Ominous Midnight

B. Comprehensive Judgment

C. Jesus as the Firstborn