

Sermon Given by

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At the 9am service on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2009

### Exodus 11:1-12:30 - "The birth of a Nation"

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I think this passage immediately raises two questions. First, the reading ended with the wailing grief of Egypt: why does God carry out such a terrible act? What can we understand about a God who kills every firstborn? The second question arises from the detail given to establishing an annual celebration: why was it so important for Israel to remember these events? In short: one, why did God do this? two, why commemorate it?

When I was preparing this sermon, I thought I should start with a joke. Well, there are Jewish websites offering Passover humour, such as: why is a good sermon like preparing the unleavened bread? it should only take 18 minutes. Well, to use my 18 or so minutes productively, I'll forgo lame jokes, and turn to my first question, which isn't a comfortable one, but one we need to wrestle with if we want to know God. Why does God carry out this act of putting to death every firstborn? The short answer is given by my first heading...

#### **God the righteous judge**

That heading was the sermon title when Psalm 7 was preached in the summer, and I'll return to that. Let us first look at some detail here. I'll start from chapter 10 verse 27, after the previous plague. READ 10:27 – 11:1. How is the plague on the firstborn to be different from all the others? It is the last one. Moses has had enough of playing games with Pharaoh, and God is clear in verse 1 that this is the final plague before Pharaoh lets them go. Last week, we saw with nine – nine! – previous plagues, Pharaoh was like a badly-behaved child – agreeing when it suited him to bring an end to the latest punishment, saying sorry, but not really meaning it. And so, just like a parent in authority over such a child, God has to show that he is deadly serious and act in a way that will really cost Pharaoh. But first, Pharaoh is warned. READ 11:4 – 8. Moses is hot with anger. His requests for a few days leave for the Israelites have been met with deceit and prevarication by Pharaoh.

Now God doesn't blow hot and cold with anger. As we learnt from Psalm 7, God's anger is a settled hostility to evil – Psalm 7 verse 11 says *God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day*. God must have judged Egypt when they started murdering boys at birth back in Exodus 1. A new Pharaoh may have arrived since, but slavery continued, and God heard the Israelites groaning and was concerned. God gave judgement back in Exodus 4: "...say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, "Let my son go, so that he may worship me." But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.'"

So we have this intimate picture of God wishing to enjoy a relationship with his son and his anger directed at the man stopping that. So why didn't God decide to put to death just Pharaoh's son? Why condemn all other Egyptians, right down to the lowest of the low grinding grain with her bare hands in verse 5?

Certainly, we can see why the officials were judged. In previous plagues some officials feared God's word and some tried to persuade Pharaoh to agree to Moses's terms, but in the end they showed the same hardening of heart seen in Pharaoh. They must have been

terrified by Moses's angry words here in chapter 11, knowing he could deliver, but they kept quiet and showed no sign of repentance or trying to get Pharaoh to back down. We gain a little more insight if we jump to chapter 12 verse 12, where God reiterates what he will do. READ 12:12.

God's judgement is on the gods of Egypt, the false ideas that the Egyptian people worshipped. They worshipped men and animals – and even their creator-god, Ra, they identified with the Sun, forgetting that the true Creator made the Sun as well. Today's world must equally be under judgement, as many turn their back on belief in a Creator, and follow ideas that assert that man can determine all truth for himself including right and wrong. Romans chapter 1 explains how God's wrath is being revealed against all godlessness, saying "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse..." but (Romans continues) "...their thinking became futile... they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator." And so God judges the Egyptians.

Returning to Exodus 12, at the end of verse 12, we have the simple sentence "*I am the LORD*". Not "because I am the LORD" or "so that you may see that I am the LORD". God simply reminds us who he is, as revealed at the burning bush. It is a phrase running through Exodus: "I am the LORD". Remember LORD means "I am" – I am who I am; I am the one who is holy, who cannot tolerate sin, whose judgement falls on all who reject me. We cannot expect to know exactly why God chose to enact his judgement on all Egyptians that night, but it suited his purpose and was entirely consistent with his character. If you and I wish to know God, to deepen our relationship with him, then we need to understand this aspect of his character – God as judge.

When we talk of God being a judge, or rather the Judge, we are talking not about a person who just makes pronouncements on our actions (like a judge on Strictly Come Dancing), but someone committed to seeing good triumph and evil condemned, and with the power to bring that about – with a punishment of death.

Verses 29 and 30 show that this happened to Egypt. God removes their firstborn, the next generation who in due course should have inherited the rights and responsibilities needed for Egypt to continue – they were Egypt's future. There was no escape – verse 30 ends "there was not a house without someone dead."

When King Amanullah of Afghanistan visited London in the 1920s, crowds came to watch. Two Cockneys were overheard: "Hoo's that?" said one, the other replied "That's the King of ARF-ghanistan." "Oh, hoo's the king of the uvver arf?". But no, God's authority is not limited to half of the world, to the Jews, or Christians, say. As our Creator, he rightfully judges us all – he judged the Egyptians, he judges Muslims and atheists; he judges you too; and he judges me.

Romans 2:6-8 say "God 'will give to each person according to what he has done'. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger." And because God is perfect, his judgements are perfect, with a perfect knowledge of the truth about us, and with a perfect allocation of punishment and reward according to what we deserve. As a result, we must take judgement seriously, but we can also rejoice that God is a morally perfect being and committed to seeing justice done. I must turn to my second question today: why command an annual commemoration of these events? This brings me to my second heading...

### God the merciful Saviour

The Passover is a truly momentous event – as any Jew even today will tell you. It's one of God's greatest acts of salvation, and it heralds the birth of a nation. Let's read from 12:1. READ 12:1-3.

God tells Moses to reset his calendar. The month of the Exodus is the beginning, the month that the family of Israel which went into Egypt starts to look like the nation of Israel coming out of Egypt. Indeed, for the first time in the Bible, verse 3 uses the phrase "community of Israel", describing the Jews as a religious gathering, a people under God. That's reinforced when we read from chapter 12, verse 17. READ 12:17-19

Now, the Israelites left Egypt immediately after the 14<sup>th</sup> day, and these commandments describe the week following the 14<sup>th</sup>, so in one way they described to Moses events yet to happen, but with certainty about those events – verse 17: "it was on this very day that I brought you out of Egypt". In another way, it is written as history, looking back – in fact, this is God giving a first slice of Law through Moses, and the Law is the foundation of God's relationship with the nation of Israel. This Feast of Unleavened Bread is also set out in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, so this is an important part of that foundation. Indeed, non-observance – verse 19 – meant being cut off from Israel.

The term card and last week's notice sheet promised today's sermon would be titled "Downfall of a dynasty"; that's Egypt's fate. But I see the service sheet has gone with "Birth of a nation"; that's Israel's fate. Before you sue All Saints for false advertising, I should point out of course, that the two themes are intertwined. It's a pattern in the Bible: where we see God's wrath and judgement, his mercy and salvation are not far away. They are two sides to the same coin: one cannot have salvation unless there is some condemnation to be saved from.

But we haven't even yet touched on the details of God's great saving act in this passage, starting with the choosing of an animal. Let's pick that up in verse 5 of chapter 12. READ 12:5-13

Later, animal sacrifice would become a public, priestly act to atone for all. Here, it is a private act in each home, using a carefully chosen animal – four days to identify any defects – to be consumed completely before the night is over. Its blood provides a substitute for human life and offers – to use the jargon – propitiation, a turning away of God's wrath. In some previous plagues, God automatically discriminated between Egyptians and Israelites – but not this time. The implication is that an Israelite would have suffered God's judgement if they chose not to participate.

So, it is a close thing. The end of verse 22 clarifies that they are not to go outside the house – judgement is passing so near. On the other hand, in verse 11, they are to be ready to travel immediately after, eating with their shoes on, not a polite thing to do in their society. Bitter herbs (verse 8) are a reminder of the pain and poignancy of this moment. And unleavened bread recalls that there was not enough time to work in the yeast as they fled. God, in his mercy, accepts the blood of a lamb as sufficient to avoid judgement – and it is his mercy, his saving grace, that makes it possible for another's blood to provide protection. So, if this is the nation's birthday, it is worth remembering every year, as verses 25 to 27 make clear. READ 12:25-27

The ceremony is to be passed down the generations, and even before the first Passover has happened, it's a reason to bow down and worship, as these events reveal the character of the LORD – "I am the LORD", the merciful Saviour.

To conclude, let's briefly see what light the New Testament throws on this passage. I didn't need to be much of a Bible scholar to make the links. When Jesus died on the Cross, the Bible teaches he was the Lamb of God – without defect – and his blood offered propitiation that would last into eternity. 1 Peter chapter 1 explains it much better, so I'd like to look briefly at that. ON SCREEN: 1 Peter 1:18-21. My final heading is a beautiful phrase from this passage...

### **The precious blood of Christ**

Let me read these verses. <sup>18</sup>*For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers,* <sup>19</sup>*but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.* <sup>20</sup>*He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.* <sup>21</sup>*Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.*

There are many echoes of Exodus throughout 1 Peter (indeed, throughout the whole Bible!), and I invite you in your own time to look back to the escape from Egypt as well as the Cross, to know and worship a saving God. Just note here that the greatest wealth – silver or gold – or the profoundest religious observances handed down the generations are nothing, nothing next to the precious blood of Christ. He was the perfect Lamb chosen before creation itself, and when his blood flowed on the Cross as he gave his life, it created the one and only safe place to stand when God's righteous wrath is revealed.

Are you self-seeking or God-seeking? We have been warned that there is no hiding from God's judgement. If we trust in Christ, we can be sure of being saved to see the fulfilment of the hope Peter talks about in verse 21 and then joining Jesus in a glorious life without death. Even then, some of us will find our deeds judged deficient and as 1 Corinthians 3 says "if [a man's work] is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames." As with the Israelites, it's going to be a close thing, but Jesus will bring us through.

If you are not trusting in Christ, I urge you to. His precious blood is freely offered; Jesus wants to rescue you from a life being a slave of the unsatisfying things of this world. Remembering is good, particularly when we make a habit of remembering God's acts of judgement and salvation, above all the Cross which provides the foundation today for the relationship between God and his people. Jesus died the week of the Passover feast, the week he instituted a new act of remembrance – the bread and wine – which we will share in a moment. As we do that, and in the days to come, my prayer is that we will go on looking back on the Cross and the Exodus, leading us to know the Lord and to worship him. Let's pray.

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(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)