

Christian Holidays #2

The Passover

by: Ronald L. Dart

Not long ago a woman asked me a hard question. Now everyone knows the story of the Exodus. The Charlton Heston movie, the 'Ten Commandments', that is played every year around Easter has seen to that. The more recent 'Prince of Egypt' has told this story to the younger generation as well.

Her question was simple, Why did God have to kill all the firstborn children in Egypt to get Israel out of there? After all He is God, He is sovereign and He can do anything He wants. Wasn't there a better way of getting those people out of there than killing all those innocent babies? I thought it was a fair question and I thought it deserved a better answer than she'd gotten heretofore.

God is Merciful and Just

The question raises the issue of the very nature of God. God is all-powerful, merciful, kind, gracious, forgiving, gentle but there is a quality of the divine nature that is often overlooked, God is also just! He is a God of justice.

Mercy is the quality in God that all of us desire and yearn for, but you have to understand one thing, if there is no justice, then there is no mercy! If there is no justice then one pattern of conduct is just as good as any other pattern of conduct.

In fact, it's out of a sense of justice that this question arises in the first place. Is it just for God to kill all the firstborn of Egypt? And that is a question we have to answer and oddly enough it is closely related to this series of articles that we are doing on Christian Holidays.

Story of the Book of Exodus

This is the story of the book of Exodus. All of the children of a man named Jacob had migrated to the land of Egypt in a time of famine and after having done this which was a normal thing to do, they made a fatal mistake, when the famine was over they stayed in Egypt instead of returning home. One of the reasons they were able to do this was that in the early years, the government of Egypt was dominated by one of their own. He was a man named Joseph, but after his death and the death of the Pharaoh who admired Joseph, things began to change.

The story is in the first chapter of Exodus beginning at verse six, "Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation. {7} And the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty, and the land was filled with them." They were prospering and having big families. They were begetting children on every hand.

"There arose a new king over Egypt, which never knew Joseph. {9} And he said to his people, "Look, the children of Israel are more and mightier than we." This very simple observation that he made was that they have now outpopulated us and they're actually a physically stronger people than we are. I suppose it's fair to say that this is an example of the roots of anti-Semitism, it's fear.

"Come on," said Pharaoh. "Let's deal wisely with them; lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, in the event of a war, they join our enemies and fight against us, and so go up out of the land." In other words we have to be careful about this situation. They are a terrific resource from the standpoint of work but if we ever have a war and they join our enemies we are going to be in a whole lot of trouble. This is not an unreasonable concern.

"Therefore they set over the Israelites taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens, and they managed in the process to build for Pharaoh treasure cities, two of them Pithom and Raamses. {12} But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew. They became in dread because of the children of Israel." The dominant feeling was fear.

It's a strange thing, you know, that the more they afflicted them the more they grew and multiplied. I suppose what happened to them is, that because of their affliction, that when they went home and sought comfort in their wives and in love, they had more children than ever before. The Egyptians became increasingly afraid of the Israelites.

"The Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigor: {14} They made their lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar and in brick and in all manner of service in the field: all their service, wherein they made them serve was with rigor." They were like any slaves, they worked from daylight to dark, seven days a week, but it still didn't work. Since that wasn't working, the Pharaoh decided to resort to more drastic measures.

The Hebrew Midwives

The Pharaoh spoke to the Hebrew midwives, the name of one of them was Shiphrah and the name of the other was Puah. "Pharaoh said to them, When you do the office of the midwife to the Hebrew women and you see them up on the stools" (Exodus 1:16). A birth stool was a device that they sat upon to give birth to a child, "If it's a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, you can let her live."

You know, inconvenient children have been victims in many human societies over time. The state has an obligation to protect the weakest and most helpless of the citizens but here the state was the instrument of their destruction. But even this didn't work, because the

midwives feared God and they wouldn't do what the King of Egypt commanded them. They saved the boy children alive. That was at some risk, I might add, to themselves. {18} "The King of Egypt called them in and asked, "What are you doing, why are you doing this, why are you saving the boy babies alive?" {19} And the midwives said, "Well, Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, they are lively, they are strong and they have these babies before the midwives get in to them." {20} So God did well with the midwives and the people multiplied and waxed very mighty." They just kept getting stronger.

Pharaoh Charged All His People

"It came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that He rewarded them greatly. {22} Pharaoh charged all his people, saying "Every son that is born to the Hebrews, you shall cast into the river, and every daughter you shall save alive." It was a short simple statement. Sometimes the Bible does not belabor the obvious so I will!

Note carefully, it was not just the government that was involved in this infanticide, it was all the people. Pharaoh charged all the people saying, "Every son that is born you shall throw him into the river." It was all the people who were charged with taking little Hebrew boys by the ankles and spin them around and give them the heave ho into the river to drown or be eaten by crocodiles. It's amazing how readily people will come to accept and then participate in such vile actions. We've had a horrible example of it in our own time with the participation of the German people in the persecution of the Jews. The German people ultimately suffered horribly for it.

God only knows how many babies were thrown to the crocodiles in the Nile River in that generation of Egyptians.

What Does a Just God Do With Callous Infanticide?

And now comes your question which you must answer if you're going to understand what is yet to come. What is a just God to do about this record of callous infanticide? Can He ignore it? Can He just let it slide? If He is to punish a nation for it, what punishment is just? Remember, this is not merely the sin of a few, the whole nation was involved in it. There's an incredible irony in the next phase of this story.

Now let's go to Exodus chapter 2, "There went a man of the house of Levi, and took a daughter of Levi for his wife, {2} And the woman conceived and bare a son, when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him for three months because she didn't want him thrown into the river, {3} When she couldn't hide him any longer," and after a while you have to do something, "She took an ark of bulrushes, daubed it slime and pitch to waterproof it, put the child inside of it and laid it in the reeds by the river bank." In a sense she followed Pharaoh's command, she put him in the river.

Y"His sister stood a long way off and watched to see what would happen. {5} The daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river, and her maidens walked along the riverside and they saw this little boat floating among the reeds. She sent her maid to fetch it. {6} When she had opened it she saw the child and behold the baby wept and she had compassion on him," as most normal people would. She said, "This is one of the Hebrews babies." The woman knew what she was doing.

Moses

In making the decision to save this child's life, she saved the man who would be the undoing of her own people. {10} "She named the little boy Moses." She brought him up in Pharaoh's household as a prince in Egypt.

You know God's justice is sometimes a long time coming and in this case it had to wait for Moses to mature. The story of Moses from this day until his exile from Egypt to his return to Egypt is a great story all by itself. But we are going to pass over it for the moment to stay with our theme.

When Moses returned to Egypt with his staff in his hands and God's instructions ringing in his ears, he marched into Pharaoh's presence with a message.

Justice

Justice walked into the court of Pharaoh in the person of Moses and Aaron. They walked in and they told Pharaoh "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness" (Exodus 5:1). It is a fascinating little thing here as we start working our way into this particular situation. The first request given to Pharaoh is, "Let them go that they may hold a feast in the wilderness." Moses did not ask Pharaoh to let them go completely. He doesn't ask him to let them go from slavery. He just ask him to let them go out in the wilderness and hold a feast to God.

A Holiday Is Coming

Now implied in this is the idea that there was a holiday coming. It was one of the appointed times of Jehovah which the Israelites were supposed to obey but surely had not been able to for all the generations that they had been in slavery.

In Exodus 5 and verse 2, Pharaoh predictably said: "Who is Jehovah that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I don't know Jehovah, neither will I let Israel go." Then they said, {3} "The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us, let us go three days journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword."

Now I want you notice something, this is not a voluntary holiday, it's got divine sanctions connected with nonobservance. There's reason to think that what God was aiming at was that

He would let them go to the festival that became the Passover, after the terrible events to follow. Pharaoh of course refused and he made the burden on the Israelites just that much worse.

God Hardened Pharaoh's Heart

Passing on down to chapter 7 and verse one, "The Lord said to Moses, Look, I have made you a god to Pharaoh and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet. {2} You shall speak all that I command you and Aaron your brother shall speak to Pharaoh that he send the children of Israel out of his land." Then God says something truly astonishing, He says, {3} "I will harden Pharaoh's heart and I will multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt but Pharaoh will not listen to you."

Now is this fair? Actually God says "I'm going to harden his heart and the objective of hardening his heart is so that I can multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt. I am not content to do just a few things, I want to do a lot of things and I need to have Pharaoh's heart hardened to be able to do them." This is what God is saying.

Now verse 4, "Pharaoh will not listen to you in order that I may lay my hand upon Egypt, and bring forth my armies, and my people, the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments." It's funny sometimes how you overlook words in the Bible that are very significant. He says He is going to bring them out of Egypt by great judgments. What do you mean judgments? What it means is, He has judged Egypt for her crimes. He has judged the people of Egypt for the crimes they have committed and they have to pay.

Why Did God Harden Pharaoh's Heart?

One of the most common questions I've ever been asked is, why did God hardened Pharaoh's heart? The answer is clear, God is just. He hardened Pharaoh's heart to make him and all the people of Egypt pay for what they had done. They had committed wholesale murder. They had killed the weakest kind of people, babies, in the most foul and violent way. They had held the people captive for generation after generation and they had grown wealthy by the use of slave labor. Justice demanded that a price be paid.

In the plagues that followed, Egypt's entire slave built economy, would be left in shambles and the firstborn of every Egyptian family dead. It's chilling when you consider the implication of this.

United States and Slave Labor

In our own country we held men slaves through several generations and built our wealth on the backs of slave labor. God only knows how many millions of captive blacks were killed outright in the slave trade. We know that millions died in the voyages across the Atlantic and were thrown over the side into the sea when they died.

It is a tragic irony that as a direct result of the shameful crime we fought one of the bloodiest and most insane wars in our history, the American War between the States. Even then I don't know if we killed as many of our own brothers as we did slaves in the trade. This country paid a terrible price for slavery in shed blood and economic loss and it was just. It may even have been the judgment of God. We paid, God knows how we paid.

Were the Plagues of Egypt Justice?

How can I be so sure that the plagues on Egypt were justice? You need to think about this. What was the very first plague that fell on Egypt? God doesn't do a lot of stuff at random, when He takes His hand at something, when He begins to do something, He does it with a reason and there is meaning in everything He does.

What was the first plague? Exodus 7 and verse 14, "The Lord said to Moses, Pharaoh's heart is hardened, he refuses to let the people go. {15} I want you to go to Pharaoh in the morning when he goes out to the water, you stand by the river bank against his coming, and the rod that you held in your hand that turned into a serpent, take it with you and {16} you say to him, "Jehovah, God of the Hebrews has sent me to you saying, Let my people go that they may serve me in the wilderness and behold you would not hear." {17} Thus says Jehovah, "In this you shall know that I am Jehovah, behold I will smite with the rod that is in my hand upon the waters of the river and they shall be turned to blood. {18} The fish in the river shall die and the river shall stink and all the Egyptians shall not be able to drink of the water of the river."

Why the river? Why blood? Because this is the place where the blood of innocents was shed. This is where countless hundreds of little baby boys were thrown. They wanted blood and God gave them blood to drink. Every fountain, every stream, every river, every bit of water in the country turned to blood and they had nothing to drink except blood.

This is probably the most symbolic thing Moses could have done as the first act, to point to the crime of Egypt, the bloody murder of generations of little Israelite babies.

Partial-Birth Abortion

Let me tell you what makes my blood run cold. In our country today there's a different kind of infanticide going on. It is called dilation and curettage, you know it, probably as partial-birth abortion.

There is not a lot of difference between this procedure and what Pharaoh wanted the midwives to do. As soon as the baby was far enough out to determine that it was a boy, the midwives were supposed to whack his little head on the leg of the birthing stool and kill him. In the modern procedure, the doctor delivers all of the little fellow except the head and then he kills it. Something that Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan called infanticide, and there is not a lot of difference between this procedure and other third term abortions. Sometimes the

baby survives the abortion and is killed afterwards. Most people in this country seem content to have it so, or at least they don't want to know that it is going on.

I can't help wondering how long God is going to wait before He avenges the blood of the innocents on us again, just like he did on the Egyptians.

Anyone who takes justice in his own hands on this issue is worse than a fool. Moses tried that early in his life and it didn't work.

God's justice will transcend anything you and I can even imagine. Just be sure you're on the right side of the river when it comes to pass.

Magicians Duplicate the Plagues

So did Pharaoh respond? I would think that if I only had blood to drink for a while it would surely get my attention. Well, it might have, but the magicians of Egypt were able to duplicate what Moses did. I don't know how they found water to do it with, but they did.

Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he would not listen to them exactly like God had said. Let's continue in verse 23 of Exodus 7, "Pharaoh turned and went into his house, neither did he set his heart to this also. {24} The Egyptians dug around the river everywhere they could for water to drink because they couldn't drink any of the water of the river and there were seven days that passed."

Nine plagues later, with the Egyptian economy in shambles, all the people await the final judgment of God. They are absolutely unable to find a way to repent and to avoid it, because Pharaoh would not let them. Why? Because God had hardened Pharaoh's heart to the end that justice might finally be done.

Egypt Committed Crimes Against Israel

You have to remember, Egypt had committed crimes for generations against the Israelites and it was going to take more than a few plagues to put that right. Their economy had been brought to its knees.

In Exodus 10 and verse 24, "Pharaoh called Moses and said, "Get out of here, go serve the Lord, only let your flocks and your herds stay here and your little ones can go with you. I just want your animals to stay here. Moses said, "No, you have to give us sacrifices and burnt offerings. We are going out here and we have these things to do. {26} Our cattle have to go with us, there can't be a hoof left behind for thereof we must take to serve the Lord our God and we don't know what we will have to have to serve God until we get there. We do not know which ones we will have to sacrifice." It was a provocation, so that Pharaoh would not let them go. The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart and he wouldn't let them go.

He told Moses, {28} "Get away from me, take heed to yourself, don't see my face any longer, for in the day you see my face you will die. {29} And Moses said, You have spoken well, I will see your face again no more."

One More Plague

Exodus 11 and verse 1, "The Lord said to Moses, I have one more plague to bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt, afterward he's going to let you go and when he lets you go, in fact, he's going to push you out of here all together."

Now mind you, the penalty has been paid for the years of slavery. The punishment has been administered. The economy of Egypt has been all but destroyed, but there is one crime that has not yet been avenged, the death of all those little children.

{2} "Speak now in the ears of the people, let every man borrow of his neighbor and every woman of her neighbor, jewels of silver, jewels of gold and the Lord gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover the man Moses was very great in Egypt in the sight of all of pharaoh's servants and in the sight of the people." They admired him greatly, so when the Israelites said, "Give us silver, jewels of gold," and so forth, they gave them to them. Why shouldn't they, for crying out loud, after all the years that Israel had served for nothing.

Firstborn of Egypt Shall Die

And Moses said to Pharaoh in Exodus 11 and verse 4, "Thus saith Jehovah, about midnight I will go out into the midst of Egypt and all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sits on his throne, to the firstborn of the maidservant behind the mill, and all the firstborn of beasts."

Man, what a cold sentence passed upon these people, from top to bottom, but remember all of the people of Egypt were involved in the destruction, not merely of the firstborn of Israelite families, but all of their boy babies. God's justice did not extend to take all the men of Egypt, He only took the firstborn.

"There shall be a great cry," verse 6, "throughout all the land of Egypt such as there was none like it, nor shall be like it any more. {7} But against any of the children of Israel." Now remember Moses is speaking to Pharaoh, "Against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue against man or beast because I want you to know how God puts a difference between the Egyptians and Israel." There is a bright line between us friend and you will see it.

Verse 8, "And all of these your servants shall come unto me, and bow themselves down to me saying get out and all the people that follow you, and after that I will go out. Moses went out from Pharaoh's presence in great anger."

That's easy to understand. With all that had happened, with all the crimes and all the vile acts and the personal confrontation, nothing but fury would've been a normal response.

The Lord said to Moses, {9} "Pharaoh will not listen to you that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt, {10} So Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh and the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart so he would not let the children of Israel go out of his land."

Now we begin to understand why all those first born children in Egypt had to die. The Egyptians brought it on themselves!

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