

The God Who Delivers – Exodus 7 (Part 1 of 6)

“Deliverance Through Judgment: Introducing the Ten Plagues and the Hardness of Pharaoh’s Heart”

Exodus 7:1-13

Mark Vroegop

¹ And the LORD said to Moses, “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. ² You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land. ³ But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, ⁴ Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. ⁵ The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them.” ⁶ Moses and Aaron did so; they did just as the LORD commanded them. ⁷ Now Moses was eighty years old, and Aaron eighty-three years old, when they spoke to Pharaoh. ⁸ Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ⁹ “When Pharaoh says to you, ‘Prove yourselves by working a miracle,’ then you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.’ ” ¹⁰ So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. ¹¹ Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. ¹² For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs. ¹³ Still Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said (Exodus 7:1–13).

Last fall we began an extensive study of the book of Exodus, an Old Testament book that records the story of God’s deliverance of the people of Israel. The first six chapters set up the scene, and they are not very pretty. Let’s review what happened:

- The Jewish people settled in the land of Egypt, thanks to God’s protection through Joseph, who spared them of certain death through a famine.
- After many years, a new Pharaoh ruled Egypt, and the people of Israel were increasing in their population, such that they became a national security threat to the Egyptians.
- The Israelites were forced into slavery, and pressure was put on the midwives to kill any new born male babies.
- When that strategy didn’t work, Pharaoh required every Egyptian to throw male Israelite babies into the Nile River.
- Into this oppressive and dangerous situation, a baby boy named Moses was born.
- Moses’ mother hid him in a basket in the Nile River, and one day a daughter of Pharaoh found the basket and adopted Moses into the royal family.
- Moses was raised in the palace, took note of the oppression of the Israelites, and took matters into his own hands, killing an Egyptian taskmaster when he was beating a slave.

- Moses had to run for his life, and while he lived in Midian, God spoke to him from a burning bush, telling him about His intention to deliver his people through the leadership of Moses.
- Rather reluctantly, Moses returned to Egypt with his brother Aaron to deliver God's message to Pharaoh, but the plan back-fires as Pharaoh made life even harder and the people resented Moses' leadership.

But as bad and as difficult as this scene is, the first six chapters show us that the suffering of God's people has not gone unnoticed by God:

²³ During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. ²⁴ And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵ God saw the people of Israel—and God knew. Exodus 2:23–25 (ESV)

God is a God who hears. So while Exodus features the people of Israel, the book is not really about Israel; Exodus is actually about God. It is a book that tells a story of redemption and deliverance which becomes foundational for the rest of the story of the Bible.

The God Who Delivers

Chapters 7-12 record the beautiful and powerful story of God's rescue of the people of Israel from Egyptian slavery. These chapters include the Ten Plagues, the killing of the firstborn, the Passover Meal, and the Exodus.

However, these chapters are not primarily about Israel; they are about a God who delivers. The aim is to demonstrate the supremacy of God over Egypt and Pharaoh. The Ten Plagues, the Passover, and the Exodus are designed to declare that God is God!

Our text this morning is a prelude to what will follow. Exodus 7:1-13 summarizes what is to come in the next five chapters by giving us the major theme and an example through a miraculous sign. What is the main theme of the Plague Narrative? **It is that God is supreme above all rivals.** God is the ruler of the universe, and when He says "Let my people go!" He must be obeyed. The overarching theme of this section is really the theme of the entire book of Exodus – to show us that He is the LORD. God shows this clearly by delivering His people through the judgment of their enemies.

This is what God wanted Israel to know as they watch God deliver them.

I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians (Exodus 6:7).

This is what God wanted the Egyptians to know as they watched God send wave after wave of plagues.

... Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. 5 The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them (Exodus 7:4-5).

This is what God wanted Pharaoh to know.

¹⁴ For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth... ¹⁶ But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth (Exodus 9:14,16).

God is going to deliver, and He is going to do it through judgment. Our speaker for THINK|13, Dr. James Hamilton, has written a book entitled *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, and he traces this theme of deliverance through judgment from Genesis to Revelation. He says this:

Salvation always comes through judgment. Salvation for the nation of Israel at the Exodus came through the judgment of Egypt, and this pattern is repeated throughout the Old Testament becoming paradigmatic even into the New. When God saves his people, he delivers them by bringing judgment on their enemies. This is not limited to Old Testament enemies such as the Philistines... Salvation for all believers of all ages is made possible by the judgment that falls on Jesus at the cross. The cross allows God to be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:24-26). The cross of Christ, the climatic expression of the glory of God in salvation through judgment, is the turning point of the ages.¹

As you can see, God delivering through judgment is not a theme found only in Exodus; it is part of the over-arching biblical theology of the entire Bible.

The Objects of Judgment: Egypt and Pharaoh

God intends to glorify Himself over the nation of Egypt and Pharaoh. He intends to smash the external and internal idols to demonstrate that he is Yahweh. He focuses His judgment on the false gods of the Egyptians and the pride that is within Pharaoh's heart. So this text is essentially about a conflict between God and a nation with a ruler who is opposing His will. God wants the world to know who He is, and He will use Egypt and Pharaoh to make that clear. His glory will not only be seen in mercy; it will also be seen in judgment. God will deliver His people through judgment.

Let's see how this emerges in verses 1:13.

In verses 1-2 we learn that Moses and Aaron are to be the spokesmen for God to Pharaoh. This role involves speaking and embodying God's word. They are to deliver God's message to the ruler of Egypt – "You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the

¹ James Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Publishers, 2010), 57.

people of Israel go out of his land" (7:2). But Moses has another role: *"I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet"* (7:1). Moses is a mediator of God's word and His authority.

Verse three highlights a theme that we first learned about in the story of the burning bush in Exodus 4. Here is what God said:

"When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go" (Exodus 4:21).

We learn about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Chapter 7 connects Pharaoh's hardness, miraculous signs, and his unwillingness to listen.

But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, 4 Pharaoh will not listen to you . . . (Exodus 7:3-4).

We will dig into this theme more in a moment, but for now I simply want you to see the connection between God's deliverance through judgment and the hardness of Pharaoh's heart. God delivers His people through the hardening of Pharaoh.

The other aspect of judgment is the sending of the Ten Plagues. They are sent one by one with a demand to "let my people go," and the failure to obey results in judgment. Verse four captures this with the following statement:

"Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment" (Exodus 7:4b).

God will deliver His people through judgment. But it is not judgment for judgment's sake. The ultimate goal is the declaration and glorification of His name. He is going to declare to the world that He is God.

The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them" (Exodus 7:5).

The Egyptians and Pharaoh will come to know that God is supreme over all rivals. And when He says, "Let my people go!", He must be obeyed. Verses 8-13 give us a vivid illustration of this. Moses and Aaron obey God's instructions (a contrasting theme) by delivering God's message and demonstrating the power of God through the sign of the staff turning to a snake (v 10). However, Pharaoh's magicians were able to copy Moses' sign (v 11). Initially, it seems that power has met equal power. But then verse twelve enters the picture. Don't miss the significance of what is said here:

For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs (Exodus 7:12).

I would imagine that it was a dramatic moment when Aaron's serpent began eating the serpents of Pharaoh's magicians. It was not accidental. It was symbolic. God is greater than Pharaoh and Egypt, and He must be obeyed . . . or else.

The pericope ends with Pharaoh's heart, and a pattern that will be very clear throughout this section of Exodus: ¹³ *Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said" (Exodus 7:13).* Pharaoh's heart and the nation of Egypt will be intertwined in their rebellion against God. The plagues will bring the nation and Pharaoh to their knees.

God is going to exalt Himself over Pharaoh and Egypt. In order to understand this section of Exodus, the challenges that are present (such as Pharaoh's hardening), and the overall message of the Bible, you have to get the supremacy of God in the right place. You will miss the ultimate story and the beauty of Exodus (and even the Bible) if you do not see that God's purpose in everything He does is to display the beauty of who He is. Creation, redemption, judgment, mercy, grace, wrath, and deliverance are not individual themes. They are like a string of pearls which are intended to be put together in order to make much of God.

Everything that God does is for the purpose of the display of His glory. The Apostle Paul echoes this theme in two very important places:

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:4–9).

³³ *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!* ³⁴ *"For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"* ³⁵ *"Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"* ³⁶ *For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:33–36).*

God intends for Israel, Pharaoh, Egypt, the entire world, and those who would read this story, to know that from the rising to the setting of the sun, there is none besides the Lord. He is the Lord, and there is no other (Isa. 45:6). He is supreme over all rivals, and He will smash all idols. It is only a matter of time. Deliverance comes through judgment.

The Means of Judgment: Plagues and Hardness

Now the two means of the display of God's glory on the enemies of Israel are the Ten Plagues and the hardness of Pharaoh's heart. Let me give you an overview of the plagues so that in the next two weeks we can study them more effectively, and then let's take a look at the hardness of Pharaoh's heart and some of the questions surround that issue.

The Ten Plagues

The judgment that comes from the Ten Plagues is intended to force Egypt to release the people of God and to make a statement about God's power over the Egyptian gods of nature. We will look at each plague in further detail, but it is important for you to know at the outset that each act of judgment was designed to humiliate the Egyptian belief in their gods and what they believed to be the power of their culture. The Egyptians believed that their society was dependent upon and protected by a variety of gods. They worshipped those gods in order to find favor with them, and since Egypt was the reigning superpower, they no doubt thought their gods were more powerful than any other nation's. That is why Pharaoh said in Exodus 6:2 – *"Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord."* Therefore, when God begins turning their gods against them, and when Moses can control the start and end of a god-plague, it is clearly a statement of superiority.

For instance, the first plague was directed at the beloved and honored Nile River. Nothing was more revered and important than the Nile. Egypt was built around the Nile. Moses' command that the Nile be turned to blood and for the second plague to involve frogs coming out of the Nile would have been a stunning statement to Egypt.

The plagues are organized in three sets of threes, and they culminate in the tenth plague, the killing of the firstborn. The first three plagues – the Nile, frogs, and gnats – are sources of irritation. The second three plagues – flies, cattle, and boils – cause destruction. The final three plagues – hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of firstborn – are characterized by death. Another interesting feature is that the first of every set of three plagues – Nile, flies and hail – are announced at the Nile. The second of every three is announced at the palace. And the final plague in each set of three is not announced. Sometimes Aaron's staff or hand is the vehicle of judgment (the first three plagues) and sometimes it is Moses' hand or staff (the last three). Some of the plagues affected everyone in Egypt, including the Israelites, but others (flies, cattle, boils, hail, and darkness) did not directly affect the children of God.

The Ten Plagues seem to have a level of progression to them, moving from annoyances to dangerous calamities. They were designed to bring Egypt and Pharaoh to their knees and to clearly demonstrate that when Yahweh says "Let my people go!" He must be obeyed. He is the Lord of all, and He has no rivals. The plagues show the Egyptians that Yahweh is Lord.

The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

The other important part of this narrative is what happens to Pharaoh's heart. The conflict isn't just between the God of Israel and the so-called gods of Egypt. There is a clear confrontation here between the sovereign God of the universe and Pharaoh. And what we see in this text and in others is challenging.

Let me state the problem clearly: At times it appears that Pharaoh hardened his own heart and at other times it appears that God hardened it. So which is it?

Before I attempt to answer that question, let me remind you about the purpose of Exodus and Pharaoh's hardening. It is important to start from the right vantage point. Keep in mind that Exodus is designed to display the glory of God through the deliverance of God's people. Remember what Exodus 9:16 says about Pharaoh:

But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth (Exodus 9:16).

In other words, you need to see everything regarding Pharaoh through a lens of God's ability to be God. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart has a purpose, and that it to show the superiority of God over him and Egypt.

Second, keep in mind that one of the ways that God brings judgment is by not preventing the human heart from going where it would naturally go without action by God. Often the Bible refers to this as "God gave them up." Romans 1 tell us that when people suppress the truth that could be known about God (1:18), that God gives them up to the lusts of their hearts (1:24), to dishonorable passions (1:24), and to a debased mind (1:28) which leads to "all manner of unrighteousness" (1:29). In other words, there are times when God simply no longer intervenes. He allows people to follow the dictates of their own hearts. And the effect of this unrestrained pursuit of sin leads to a hardness of heart.

The book of Hebrews gives a warning about this condition:

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:12–13.)

This hardness of heart is part of the judgment of God, and it is what Pharaoh experiences due to his own rebellion and God's desire to display His glory through demonstrating the God is sovereign over Pharaoh's heart.

So did Pharaoh harden his own heart or did God harden his heart? The answer is: "yes." The Bible gives us examples of both – often in close proximity of each other:

But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had spoken to Moses (Exodus 9:12).

But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again and hardened his heart, he and his servants (Exodus 9:34)

Now you might think, "How is that fair?" And that would be a good question if God and Pharaoh were equal in essence and being. But we are talking about the Creator of the Universe and a human king of Egypt. Gratefully, the apostle Paul answers that question for us, not by giving us an answer, but by giving us a better question:

17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." 18 So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. 19 You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" 20 But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" 21 Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? (Romans 9:17–21).

What is the point here? It is that God is so "other" that His ways and purposes will not be fully understood by us. The point is that there are many times in the Bible when God is seen as so big, so supreme, and so sovereign that it nearly blows your mind. And I think that is the point. God is so glorious and great that there are questions which cannot be answered. There are some things in the Bible meant to humble us and to silence us – to make us realize that He is the potter and we are the clay.

This was the lesson that Pharaoh will learn. He will see that when the God of Israel says, "Let my people go!" He must be obeyed. The Creator will have no rivals. No idols – internal or external – will stand. He is the great "I AM."

The Ten Plagues and the hardness of Pharaoh's heart are both a part of God's plan to deliver His people through judgment. James Hamilton reflects on Exodus 10:1-2 when he writes: "Yahweh states that he has hardened Pharaoh's heart so *that* he can display his signs so *that* Israel can pass the story down so *that* they might know him as he is, Yahweh."²

That is what is happening in Exodus. But do you know that the same God who delivered Israel is the same God who rules the world today? Do you know that disobedience to Him is still as dangerous? Do you know that He tolerates no rivals - either on the inside on the outside? Do you know that sin still hardens the heart and that God owes no one mercy?

And, finally, do you that God has made deliverance possible through the judgment delivered on his son? Mercy is possible but only because God judged His son as guilty so that you by faith could receive Him and be forgiven.

God delivers through judgment. The Ten Plagues, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart show us this. But the ultimate deliverance through judgment comes from the crucifixion of the Son of God – the Lamb of God.

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² Hamilton, 93.