

2020: The Global Year of the Bible
A Lamp and a Light, Part 4
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We have been in the lives of Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, Jacob (whose name was changed to Israel), all of Jacob's sons – let's say them because they become the twelve tribes of Israel: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Joseph (later split into the 'half-tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh), and finally Benjamin. When we left each other last Sunday, Joseph had revealed himself to his brothers (who had sold him into slavery to the Egyptians years ago because they were jealous of their father's affection for him). Let's listen to the final verses of that part of this amazing story which takes place after the 'big reveal': *"Now hurry back to my father and tell him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me master over all the land of Egypt. So come down to me immediately!'"* *"You can live in the region of Goshen, where you can be near me with all your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and everything you own."* *"I will take care of you there, for there are still five years of famine ahead of us. Otherwise you, your household, and all your animals will starve."* *"Then Joseph added, "Look! You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that I really am Joseph!"* *"Go tell my father of my honored position here in Egypt. Describe for him everything you have seen, and then bring my father here quickly."* *"Weeping with joy, he embraced Benjamin, and Benjamin did the same."* *"Then Joseph kissed each of his brothers and wept over them, and after that they began talking freely with him."*

So that's what they did. They went home and brought Jacob and all of his family and flocks and herds, etc. back to Egypt. What a reunion that must have been! And then we read in Genesis 47:27,28, *"Meanwhile, the people of Israel settled in the region of Goshen in Egypt. There they acquired property, and they were fruitful, and their population grew rapidly. Jacob lived for 17 years after his arrival in Egypt, so he lived 147 years in all."* And then in Exodus 1:1-7 we read, *"In time, Joseph and all of his brothers died, ending that entire generation. But their descendants, the Israelites, had many children and grandchildren. In fact, they multiplied so greatly that they became extremely powerful and filled the land. Eventually, a new king came to power in Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph or what he had done. He said to his people, "Look, the people of Israel now outnumber us and are stronger than we are. We must make a plan to keep them from growing even more. If we don't, and if war breaks out, they will join our enemies and fight against us. Then they will escape from the country."*

"So the Egyptians made the Israelites their slaves. They appointed brutal slave drivers over them, hoping to wear them down with crushing labor. They forced them to build the cities of Pithom and Rameses as supply centers for the king. But the more the Egyptians oppressed them, the more the Israelites multiplied and spread, and the more alarmed the Egyptians became. So the Egyptians worked the people of Israel without mercy. They made their lives bitter, forcing them to mix mortar and make bricks and do all the work in the fields. They were ruthless in all their demands."

Joseph was sold to the Egyptians as a slave, rose to power and was given free reign over all of Egypt. His wisdom saved the lives of millions of people in the 7 years of famine. But he was always different. He was free to reign, but he wasn't free to go. He and his family were always separated out. They were always distinct because of where they had come from and because of Joseph's initial status as a slave. And now, generations later, they are brutally enslaved to the Egyptians.

This is when we meet the next 'big' man of faith: Moses. Pharaoh, in an effort to cut down on the Israelite population gave the order that all newborn boys of the "Hebrew" people should be thrown in the Nile River. Moses' mother was able to hide him for a while, but then put him in a floating basket in the reeds near the bank of the river. He was discovered by Pharaoh's daughter who adopted him and brought him into the palace to be raised in royalty. Eventually Moses left his royal life and while he was in the land of Midian, he had an encounter with God. God spoke to Moses in a bush that was on fire but was not burning up. God told him that he had heard the cries of his people back in Egypt and was sending Moses back to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelite

people go! Moses resisted saying he wasn't qualified and he questioned who would believe him. But eventually he heeded the call with his brother Aaron alongside him.

There is a troublesome part of the story about the plagues against the Egyptian people that God used to eventually get the Israelite people free. The troublesome part for me came when God told Moses that he would harden Pharaoh's heart - that God himself would harden a man's heart. For me, it is troublesome to consider a God who arbitrarily takes a person's heart and hardens it, eventually leading to the death of that same person's firstborn child. But, what we see, if we are looking very carefully is that there is nothing arbitrary (meaning unreasonable and careless) about God, nothing arbitrary about what God does, there is nothing unreasonable and careless about God's purposes. God did not carelessly pick Pharaoh out of a lineup to harden his heart and God did not randomly pick the 10 plagues he sent against the Egyptians.

In essence, this battle between God and Pharaoh is a battle between good and evil. It is a battle between the One True God and the gods. Egypt was a country totally given over to pagan worship. Pharaoh himself was considered a god to them. Though the Israelites had been with them over 400 years, the One True God had not been heeded, or heard, or worshiped by the Egyptians. They had their own gods of their own making. In Exodus 5:2, when Moses and Aaron first went to Pharaoh to ask him to let the Israelite people leave the land, Pharaoh asked, *"Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go!"* So God introduced himself to Pharaoh by bringing plagues on the land of Egypt. *"And the Egyptians will know I am the Lord when I stretch my hand out against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it."*

Each plague was leveled at a different god of Egypt in which there were 1000's of temples and millions of idols and about 3000 gods. Exodus 12:12, speaking about the Passover, God said, *"On that night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn, both men and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord."*

- Water turned to blood was a hit against the fertility god Osiris.
- The plague of frogs was a hit against Heka, a frog-headed goddess. Because of her frogs were seen as sacred.
- The plague of lice was a hit against the earth-god Geb. Remember God made the dust of the earth rise up to become lice? The earth which was sacred to them because of Geb, they now despised.
- The plague of flies is thought by some to have been masses of the sacred beetle, because the Egyptians worshipped Khepara, a beetle-god. Many of these beetles are found in Egyptian tombs as a sign (they thought) of eternal life.
- The plague of sick animals was a direct hit against the second largest temple the Egyptians ever built for the purpose of worshipping the black bull Apis.
- The plague of boils was a hit against the pagan priests themselves who had to be spotless in order to serve in the temples. This plague was a judgment on the entire false-god religion of Egypt.
- The plague of hail was a hit against the sky-goddess who was shown to be powerless in stopping the hail in her domain.
- The plague of locusts hit the insect gods. Yes, they even had insect gods.
- The plague of darkness was a major statement by God against the chief god worshipped in Egypt - Ra - the sun god. The sun disc is the most familiar symbol found in Egyptian ruins. The plague of darkness showed the utter helplessness of Ra.
- The plague of the firstborn, so difficult to read about and accept, but here's what we know. According to the false-god religion of Egypt, the firstborn belonged to the gods of Egypt. The One True God took what was set aside for the gods of Egypt, displaying their lack of power and authority over him.

God showed his invincible power to Pharaoh, to the people of Egypt, and to his own chosen people, the Israelites. There was nothing arbitrary (unreasonable or careless) about the plagues that were brought upon the Egyptians.

Now, what about the hard-heartedness that God sent against Pharaoh? First of all, let's not make the mistake of thinking this guy Pharaoh was tenderhearted to begin with. Remember, this is the guy who gave the order to throw all the baby boys into the Nile River to drown them because he was afraid the Israelites were becoming too numerous and too powerful. This is the guy who ordered brutal slave treatment upon the Israelites. So let's be clear: God did not do anything to Pharaoh and his heart that Pharaoh had not already started all by himself. Pharaoh had already decided who he was going to listen to and it was not the One True God. When you read carefully through the full account of the plagues, we find that it wasn't until after the plague of boils that the Lord himself hardened Pharaoh's heart. Up until then, Pharaoh's unyielding heart was his own business. What happened here is that God revealed Pharaoh for who and what he really was: He was not a man after God's own heart, he was a man who was against the will of God, who only wanted to do his own will and exert his own power over his own life and over everyone else's life within his sphere of influence. And this is what God will do for us.

God made us with free will. We can either choose for God or against God. Just sitting in church does not necessarily mean you have chosen for God. That choice has to happen in your heart, not in your pew. If the choice has not happened in your heart, what we see is that we ourselves are arbitrarily obeying God in this thing, but not in that thing. We are essentially using God to make us look good in this part of our lives, but that part, God has no part over there. But listen, friends, this story shows us that eventually God will reveal us for who we are and what is really inside. We may think we can hide what we're doing from God, but he sees, and eventually it's coming out. In a way, it's like many of the politicians of today who will not say what they actually mean, but they try to manipulate and deceive in order to get what they want.

Let's take this story and use it as a wake-up call. Let's be willing to ask ourselves, "Where am I pretending to obey God on the surface, but not really obeying him deep down where it counts?" Have I truly chosen God in my heart, chosen to live for him, wanting to honor him wherever I am, whoever is around me, in the light or in the dark, here at church and back at home? Have I truly chosen to give my heart to the Lord? God is not a God to be messed with. In Revelation 3:16 we read that if you are lukewarm towards him, he spits you out. Remember, God will always first do his work **IN** you before he will truly start working **THROUGH** you. Allow your heart to soften to him. His love and his ways are perfect for you and will bring you freedom unlike anything you've ever known. *Heavenly Father, please give us courage to soften our hearts towards you. Even now, may we let go of our fears and our hurts and our self-inflicted shame and come to you - really come to you with a trust and a faith that feels very fragile in this moment. Strengthen us to stop pretending and really BE what you created us to be - FREE in Christ! Free to love, free to forgive, free to let go, and free to hold on. Thank you that your word tells us that you will give us a new heart and put a new spirit within us; that you will remove our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh." We open our arms to you in this moment as an act of faith and hope. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.*

With softened hearts I pray, let's press on. In the final plague against the firstborn, God protected his people by instructing them to put the blood of a lamb on their doorposts. *"These are your instructions for eating this meal: Be fully dressed, wear your sandals, and carry your walking stick in your hand. Eat the meal with urgency, for this is the Lord's Passover. "On that night I will pass through the land of Egypt and strike down every firstborn son and firstborn male animal in the land of Egypt. I will execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt, for I am the Lord! "But the blood on your doorposts will serve as a sign, marking the houses where you are staying. When I see the blood, I will pass over you. This plague of death will not touch you when I strike the land of Egypt. "This is a day to remember. Each year, from generation to generation, you must celebrate it as a special festival to the Lord. This is a law for all time. "For seven days the bread you eat must be made without yeast. On the first day of the festival, remove every trace of yeast from your homes. Anyone who eats bread made with yeast during the seven days of the festival will be cut off from the community of Israel."*

God protected his people through the blood of a lamb - a clear foreshadowing of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world by his blood shed for us. A clear foreshadowing. Thanks be to God!

But what of the yeast? So much is made of the yeast. Did that strike you? Don't make any bread with yeast, and in fact, if you have any in your house, remove it from your house. Remove the temptation to use it. Take it far, far away so you will not be cut off from the community of Israel.

Now, to be quite honest, I don't know a lot about yeast. I'm not a big baker. As I thought through my adult life, I did remember one time I tried to do something with yeast, and I don't think it turned out well. Did you know that when I was in a period of discernment about coming to be the pastor here in the summer of 2002 that a friend of mine said to me, "They have a lot of Bakers over there." And my first thought was, that sounds good. Perhaps there are lots of cakes and pies in my future! But that wasn't what my friend meant. He meant there were a lot of people with the last name 'Baker' over here. But what he didn't know and I know now, is that the Bakers are also bakers. So, we were both right!

What's with the yeast? Why was God so insistent about not using yeast even to the point of instructing them to remove it from the house? It's all about readiness. Readiness. If you have bread made with yeast, it takes time. It has to rise. You have to knead it. You have to wait, and wait, and wait. God is telling his people that though they have to wait on Him, though they have to wait for him to make the first move, they have to be ready to move when he says NOW! Now we go. Think about firefighters. Everything has to be ready in a certain way so that when the call comes in, they are ready to go NOW.

Henry Blackaby in his study *Experiencing God* wrote this, "*Often our struggle as Christians is not in deciding whether we should obey Christ but in obeying immediately. We may acknowledge our need to follow Christ and commit ourselves to do what He has told us. Yet when God reveals His will to us, that is the time to obey! God's revelation of His will is His invitation to respond immediately. Invitations from God come with a limited opportunity to respond. Some opportunities to serve Him, if not accepted immediately, will be lost. Occasions to minister to others may pass us by. When God invites us to intercede for someone, it may be critical that we stop what we are doing and immediately adjust our lives to what God is doing. When an invitation comes from God, the time to respond is now.*"

I think this is the lesson God was beginning to teach his people – including us – when he kept talking about the yeast. "*Be ready. When I say its time to go, its time to go. When I tell you its time to keep your mouth shut, its time to keep your mouth shut. When I tell you its time to get on your knees and pray, its time to get on your knees and pray. When I tell you that that relationship is taking you down the wrong road and you need to cut it off, its time to cut it off. When I tell you to take better care of your body, its time to watch what you're drinking, what you're eating, and pay better attention to your overall health. When I tell you its time to step forward and serve in the church, its time to step forward and put your hand up. When I tell you its time to*" You get the point, right? It's sort of the same point as was made before.

If you're really IN as a follower of Jesus Christ, then be IN. Be ready. Wait expectantly for what is next. And when God says that now's the time, then make the adjustments you need to make, and follow his lead. Think about what he did for his people! He got them out of 400 years of brutal slavery to the Egyptians with an awe-inspiring, supernatural, stupendous act of deliverance: He parted the waters of the Red Sea, dried the sand underneath their feet so that they could quickly move through, young people, old people, flocks, herds, wagons of stuff, 600,000 men on foot, then add the women and children – we're talking well over a million people walking between those walls of water – looking behind – just waiting for the Egyptians to rush in and drag them back to slavery. But it didn't happen. God opened the way for them to be free. Free to follow him and worship him without restrictions. And he has and he will do the same for you and for me. We read this truth in our call to worship from Galatians 5:1, "*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*"

Because of Jesus Christ we are freed to be free. We are free to love the One True God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. With soft hearts and feet ready to go, let's do it, and show the world what real freedom looks like - that God's love changes people, changes me, and changes you - and through us, can change the world! Amen.