

JANUARY 23

Exodus 5-7 (also referenced Jan. 22)

Exodus 8:1-32

Today you read Exodus 5-8:32 and have viewed the results of Moses' initial encounter with the Pharaoh of Egypt.

We need to remember here that Moses was about 80 years old when all of this was taking place. Stephen's speech in Acts 7 gives us that information. It is an amazing sight really. Two old men over eighty years old, standing in front of one of the most powerful kings in the world, asking for the freedom of their people to hold a three day festival for worship out in the desert. Moses and Aaron reveal only a portion of their agenda. Their request at this point is a modest one, which Pharaoh refuses out of hand. Perhaps the modest nature of this initial request was meant only to underscore how harsh and unreasonable this Pharaoh really was.

It is Pharaoh's response to Moses' request that shapes the entire series of events to follow. *"Who is the Lord that I should obey Him...?"* 'I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go!' The gauntlet is, by this retort, thrown down, and the battle lines are drawn for the great contest between Jehovah and the gods of Egypt. Pharaoh himself was considered to be a god. His official title was 'Lord of the World.' He was, in the Egyptian belief set, the direct descendant of the creator, who had become the first Pharaoh on the day of creation. Pharaoh, the 'Lord of the Earth,' was not about to accede to the demands of an unknown God of a desert tribe. That would be unthinkable.

Pharaoh was not the only God in Egypt. In fact, the religion of Egypt was one of the most complicated mixes of polytheistic confusion that ever existed. Even to this day we are not certain of the total number of gods they worshipped. Most lists include about 80 known deities with overlapping characteristics and domains.

Each of the plagues brought down by the hand of God was directed at a specific god, like Osiris, the god of River Nile, whose domain was attacked when Moses turned the waters of that great river to blood. All of the plagues were an assault on the position and power of the Pharaoh, the 'Lord of the Earth'!! This whole encounter, in fact, should be understood as a 'power encounter', an open clash between the Kingdom of God and the Prince of Darkness, whose demonic forces lie directly behind all of the false religions and gods of the earth.

One thing you must understand to properly process the information given concerning this or any other power encounter, is that the gods of Egypt were not 'nothing.' What I mean is, that while they were false gods, (the Bible's consistent claim is that there is only one true God), they were not mere figments of the imagination either. The gods of Egypt were demonic beings and they had real power - enough power so that the magicians of Pharaoh's court could reproduce the initial miracles that flowed from the staff of Moses - though it was quite clear that their power was less strong. (That's the point of the detail concerning the fact

that Aaron's snake swallowed up the snakes of the magicians' staffs.) "It's like...my snake is bigger than your snake, so my God is bigger than your God!" It is almost amusing, that when Moses demonstrated the power of God by turning the Nile River to blood, the Pharaoh's magicians responded by doing more of the same, and compounding, rather than solving Pharaoh's problem. God allowed them to reproduce the miracle, but they could not REVERSE it.

The demons behind the religions of Egypt were real, and they had real but limited power which was evidenced just as soon as the power of God began to be extended on behalf of His people.

That teaches us a second thing about power encounters. They are likely to begin whenever the power of God is being evidenced - whenever a forward leap is occurring in the process of redemption - God is about to redeem Israel and to establish the Mosaic covenant.

Power encounters still occur today. They still tend to be more in evidence when a significant step forward is being taken in the work of redemption. For that reason alone, we often find that pioneer mission fields are overflowing with stories of angels and miracles and demons, while in areas where a gospel witness is more established, they are less obvious. May I make one last comment? Then we must move on - when you encounter other religions and other gods, you may be certain that they are false, but do not quickly assume that they are 'nothing!' If you do, you may have a very ugly surprise waiting!

I want you to notice with me that the instrument, by which the miracles in this story were produced, is the staff that Moses, the shepherd, had carried. On that day, when he had stood in the presence of God on the side of Mt. Horeb, (the other name of that mountain is Sinai,) Moses had asked what to do when Pharaoh and the children of Israel said they did not believe him. You remember their conversation I'm sure. "Moses, what is that in your hand?" "My staff, what of it?" "Throw it down." - "O.K." (Moses throws down the staff. He then quickly retreats to avoid the snake, which has appeared!) "Now pick it up." Moses carefully does just that and the staff reappears. "If they question you," God says, "just do that!"

The point I'm making, of course, is simply this. God has a remarkable habit of taking whatever happens to be in our hands and using it in unbelievably mighty ways - IF (and only if) we will simply yield it to him. Moses' plain old staff - his walking stick - became the staff of God. (That's actually what it will later be called) because he obeyed God and let him use it. The question to us is pretty obvious - "What is in our hands?" Keep your eyes open for the mention of that staff as this exodus story progresses. It gets to be pretty impressive, this piece of wood.

The account of the contest between the Pharaoh of Egypt and the God of Israel, furnishes us with a remarkable backdrop for studying one of the most perplexing subjects in the whole of Christian theology: the relationship between the sovereignty of God (who can resist His will?) and the free agency of the will of man,

who is made in the image of God, and is fully responsible for his choices and actions. Now I do not suppose that any of us will ever fully understand how these two things fit together, (at least on this side of glory,) but this story is as good a window as we will ever get for looking into the problem.

Let's start with what we can clearly establish. God knows ahead of time that Pharaoh is not going to respond by obeying His command to let the children of Israel go from bondage. He told Moses that while he was still standing in front of the Burning Bush; He reminded him of that fact while Moses was journeying back to Egypt from Midian, telling Moses that He would *"harden Pharaoh's heart so that he would not let them go."* In chapter 7, that curious phrase occurs again. *"I will harden Pharaoh's heart..."* God is sovereignly working here. Romans chapter 9 says that God raised up Pharaoh for a very specific purpose... *"that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth"* (Romans 9:17). As the sovereign God, Jehovah has the right to do with Pharaoh whatever He pleases.

BUT, having said this, it is equally clear that Pharaoh was not a passive blob in this whole process. In chapter 8, which we will read tomorrow, we are told that he hardened his own heart against the word of God through Moses. It is clear that He was making real choices to oppress God's people, to refuse to listen to Moses and Aaron, to pridefully assert that the world and everything in it revolved around him. Pharaoh is undoubtedly one of the *"vessels of wrath"* that Paul speaks of in Revelation 9 - prepared for destruction, and raised up so that the power and glory of the God of Abraham might be seen - but that does not mean that God was in anyway unfair to Pharaoh, or that he did not make his own choices; he clearly did.

For most of us, that will leave the tension undisturbed. It is still hard to see how God can be sovereign, using kings, nations and ordinary people like you and me, *"to work all things after the fashion of His will."* And at the same time, how man can be both free and responsible for the choices he makes. J.I. Packer, in one of his books, calls it an "antinomy," a paradox, an apparent (but unreal) contradiction that will only be resolvable when we "know as we are known." (Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God/Packer/IVP)

Here is the bottom line - God is sovereign - no one can thwart His will - and His plan for redemption always has a flipside - that of judgment. The second truth, which can never be unlinked from that, is this - Men and women are fully responsible for all of the choices and actions they make.

Redemption and judgment are two more themes that always go together. In order to redeem Israel, God had to judge Egypt. Just as He has the right to free His people from bondage, so He also has the right to judge sin and the sinner at any point that He chooses.