

## **Birth pangs of life**

by Scott Grant

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### **The battle is joined**

A work of liberation rarely goes unopposed. It's true in warfare. It's true in spiritual warfare. In Exodus 5, a battle is joined. The battle is for the Israelites, the people of God. The question is, "Who do they belong to?" The Lord says, "They're mine." Satan, who uses his unwitting pawn, Pharaoh, says, "They're mine." When the Lord announces his intention to deliver his people from the Egyptians, Satan increases his opposition.

There is a similar battle for the modern-day people of God as well. The Lord would deliver us from bondage to sin, but his work of liberation does not go unopposed. When Satan gets a whiff of God's work of liberation, he turns up the opposition. The immediate result for God's people is affliction, sometimes tremendous pain and misery. But as can be expected in the case of any opposition to the work of God, it backfires.

### **Opposition that increases (5:1-9)**

Moses and Aaron's request of Pharaoh came "afterward" - after the people believed what Moses and Aaron told them about the Lord's plans to deliver them from Egypt and after the people worshiped in response (4:31). The people hear the word of the Lord, believe it and worship. They believe that the Lord is going to deliver them, and they are now primed and ready for deliverance. Hope surges.

There are times when we too hear the word of the Lord, believe it and worship. We embrace the Lord and his message of deliverance in a new way. We look forward to better days. Hope surges.

With renewed hope as a backdrop, Moses and Aaron approach Pharaoh. They ask that Pharaoh would let the people go to celebrate a feast in the wilderness, which involves a three-day journey to sacrifice to the Lord. The Lord had instructed Moses to ask for this (3:18). This is a request to serve the Lord. The feast and the sacrifice were ultimately completed on Mount Sinai (24:5-8). Although Moses had no intention of returning to Egypt after the sacrifice, he may have been instructed by the Lord to request permission for a three-day journey to show that Pharaoh was not even willing to grant this small request.

Moses was worried that if the people didn't leave to serve the Lord, he may "fall upon" them with judgment resulting in death. The same word used for "fall upon" (*paga'*) is also used in 4:24, where it is reported that the Lord "met" (*paga'*) Moses and sought to put him to death for his failure to circumcise his son. Moses was well familiar with the consequences for not serving the Lord, and the seriousness with which serving the Lord must be taken. Not serving the Lord means death. Of course, it ultimately meant death for Pharaoh and the Egyptians. It was they, not the Israelites, whom the Lord met with pestilence and with the sword.

Pharaoh's response to the request is, "Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice to let Israel go?" He also says that he doesn't know the Lord. The Lord will address his question rather emphatically with the 10 plagues in Exodus 6 through 14. By then, Pharaoh will at least know who the Lord is. Pharaoh arrogantly adds that even if he did know the Lord, he still wouldn't let Israel go. What matters to Pharaoh is power, and he will consider no challenge to it, not even from the all-powerful God of the universe. It doesn't matter to Pharaoh who the Lord is but who Pharaoh is. And in Pharaoh's culture, and in his mind, he is a god.

What does Pharaoh represent to us? In Pharaoh and Egypt, we see a picture of the world, which is opposed to God and his people. Behind the world is the god of this world, Satan (John 12:31, 2 Corinthians 4:4). Satan directs the world's opposition to God and his people. Pharaoh, Egypt and the world are unwitting pawns who

have no idea that they are being used by Satan.

Through Moses and Aaron, the Lord demands that Pharaoh let the people go so that they can serve the Lord. The only place Pharaoh will let them go is to their labors. The battle is thus joined for the people of God. The Lord says, "They belong to me; they will serve me." Pharaoh says, "No, they belong to me; they will serve me." Behind Pharaoh is the real enemy, Satan, who says, "You're all wrong; they belong to me, and it is me they will serve." The question then becomes, "Who are the people of God going to serve?"

As the battle is joined, Pharaoh makes life more difficult for the Israelites. In their brickmaking tasks, they must now gather their own straw. Without straw, the clay bricks would shrink, develop cracks and lose their shape. In requiring the Israelites to gather their own straw, he also requires them to meet the same quota - an impossible demand. This is what the world does - it places impossible demands on us, expectations we cannot meet even if we wanted to.

In verse 4, Pharaoh asked why Moses and Aaron were drawing the people away from their work by filling their heads with starry-eyed dreams of deliverance. In verse 8 he comes up with his own answer: The people are lazy. This, of course, is not true. The Lord had appeared to Moses and instructed him to approach Pharaoh with the request. But Pharaoh has no capacity to see this as a motive, because the Lord is of no consequence to him. So he disparages the people. He completely misunderstands them.

Something deep within us cries out for understanding. One of the deepest cries of the human heart is to be understood. No one will ever understand us the way we want to be understood. Only God understands us. Everyone else, to one degree or another, will misunderstand us. And when it comes to the people of the world, they have no capacity to understand us, because God is of no consequence to them. Consequently, sinister motives will be ascribed to us where none exist. We can therefore expect to be misunderstood thoroughly and often, but we can also trust that God understands us.

The Lord is of no consequence to Pharaoh, but belief in the Lord is of great consequence to him. Pharaoh may not believe that the Lord, whoever he is, is telling him to let the people go, but if the people believe it, that belief poses a threat. An earlier king was worried that Israel, as it increased in population, would ally itself with another nation and fight against Egypt (1:10).

In order to believe in anything, one first has to hear something. The Apostle Paul says that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). So if belief is a threat, and belief comes by hearing something, what courses of action are available to the one threatened? He has two options: hinder the speaker or hinder the listener. Here Pharaoh chooses to hinder the listeners. He makes their labor more difficult so that "they may pay no attention to false words."

The people of God are in bondage to Egypt, serving Pharaoh. It is not a happy state of affairs. The Lord wants to do something about it. His word comes to Moses, and he proclaims to Pharaoh, "Let my people go." To one degree or another, we are all in bondage to sin. At the worst, we think we are serving ourselves, protecting ourselves or advancing ourselves, but in reality we are serving sin, which means we are serving Satan. This is not a happy state of affairs. The word of God comes to us in which God says, "You belong to me." When the word is met with faith, hope bubbles up.

If you were Satan, what would you do? You'd try to crush the hope by crushing the faith. And you'd crush the faith by plugging up the ears of the one who is listening to words that are being believed. That's exactly what Satan does: He hinders us from listening to the truth, which comes to us through the word of God. He even portrays the truth as "false words" (5:9).

His strategy is rather ingenious. Consider his tactics through Pharaoh. Moses tells the people that the Lord will deliver them from bondage to Egypt. Pharaoh responds by making life more difficult for the Israelites, making the word of deliverance, which is the word of truth, look like nonsense. We look at all this wonderful, liberating, hopeful truth in the word of God; then we look at all the painful, constricting, crushing pain in life. The word of God looks like a lie, a collection of "false words."

Satan, then, uses affliction for the purposes of distraction. He wants to distract us from "paying attention" to the word of God, which is full of hope, by making life so miserable that the word of hope seems like nonsense. Through affliction, Satan is telling us, "Don't listen to the word. Don't read it. Don't believe it. Don't trust it. Discard it. Forget it. It's a lie! Don't believe God exists. Don't believe he's good. Don't believe he loves you. Don't believe he has good plans to take you to a better place. It's a lie!"

Ellie Wiesel in his book "Night," which recounts his personal experience with the Holocaust, tells of a neighbor in a concentration camp who examined the painful evidence and decided that God was not to be believed. The man said, "Don't let yourself be fooled with illusions. Hitler has made it very clear that he will annihilate all the Jews before the clock strikes 12, before they can hear the last stroke. ... I've got more faith in Hitler than in anyone else. He's the only one who's kept his promises, all his promises, to the Jewish people."

The pain often makes it more difficult to believe the truth.

### **Opposition that is implemented (5:10-14)**

Pharaoh's taskmasters implement his plan. The result for the Israelites is more work, unrealistic expectations and beatings for not meeting the unrealistic expectations.

When Moses and Aaron returned, the people embraced the word of deliverance. They believed the Lord was concerned about them, and they worshiped. Life was looking up. Immediately after believing the word and worshiping the Lord, life gets worse - a lot worse. This is worse than unfair; this is absurd. God announces his plans to deliver them, and life gets worse. From our perspective, this represents a cosmic contradiction. Pain speaks louder than the word of God, and it often wins our ear.

What do we do, then, as we listen to our pain? We get angry. What do we do with our anger? The same thing mankind has done from the beginning: look for someone to blame. Our minds race to blame with lightning speed and thunderous ferocity.

### **Opposition that prompts blame (5:15-21)**

There is an apparently clear line of responsibility for the people's pain. It can be traced through Pharaoh to Moses and Aaron. Pharaoh made life more difficult, and the demand of Moses and Aaron prompted Pharaoh to make life more difficult. It seems pretty obvious that blame should be placed at the feet of these three men, and that's exactly what the Israelites think. First they blame Pharaoh; then they blame Moses and Aaron.

Often, we don't have to look very hard for someone to blame: "My parents didn't love me. This man abused me. This teacher didn't choose me. This man abandoned me. This woman never wanted me. This church didn't encourage me. This employer didn't hire me. This friend didn't appreciate me. This person betrayed me. That one lied about me. The other one misunderstood me."

Although the pain is real, and there are real people who inflict pain, we're not seeing the big picture when we blame them for it. There are two other players in the blame game that the Israelites overlooked: God and themselves. The same is true for us. We forget about God, who wants to liberate, and we forget about ourselves, who need liberation but don't necessarily want it.

So the Israelites do the same thing we would do. They march up to the one responsible for their affliction and blame him and their Egyptian oppressors. We often think that our circumstances are someone else's fault. If someone else would just change the way he or she is treating us life would be better, we think. Pharaoh, of course, doesn't listen. Now he thinks that they are not only lazy (5:8) but "lazy, very lazy."

The people forgot that God is sovereign, something we are prone to forget as well. He created the pharaohs of the world. He raises them up, and he topples them. A step in the right direction, if we're angry and looking for someone to blame, is to recognize that we're ultimately angry at God.

The line of responsibility can not only be traced through Pharaoh to Moses and Aaron but to God as well. Yes,

Moses and Aaron approached Pharaoh, and, yes, Pharaoh responded by increasing the workload, but it was the Lord who got the ball rolling. It wasn't Moses' idea to demand that Pharaoh let the people go; it was the Lord's idea. Moses was simply following orders. And the Lord even told Moses that Pharaoh would not listen, at least at first (3:19). If the Lord hadn't spoken to Moses, life for the Israelites would be easier than it is now.

Why would the Lord do such a thing? Why would he set off a chain reaction that he knows, and even predicts, will result in great affliction? If he wants to deliver the people, why not simply deliver them? What purpose does all this affliction serve? Why does the Lord do things that make life so painful for us?

Before we answer this, we need to consider the other overlooked player in the blame game: ourselves. In addressing Pharaoh, the Israelite foremen three times in three sentences identify themselves as his servants. This is a state of affairs the Pharaoh heartily endorses. He tells the foremen, "So go now and work." The words for "go" (*halak*) and "work" (*obed*) were used in 4:23, when the Lord said, "Let my son go (*halak*), that he may serve (*obed*) me." Through Moses and Aaron, the Lord speaks often to Pharaoh with the refrain, "Let my people go, that they may serve me" (7:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3).

The question, once again, is whose servants are the Israelites? The Lord says, "They're mine." Pharaoh says, "They're mine." The people agree with Pharaoh. They identify themselves as his servants. Why would they agree with Pharaoh? Because it's comfortable. Egypt on the whole has been pretty comfortable up to this point.

If we're looking for someone who is responsible for our misery, we can look to ourselves, who have chosen to find refuge in sin. The character in Jimmy Buffet's song, "Margueritaville," comes to this conclusion. As he is drowning his sorrows in margueritas, he sings at the end of the chorus, "Some people claim that there's a woman to blame, but I know it's nobody's fault." The next time the chorus comes around, he sings, "Some people claim that there's a woman to blame, but I think it could be my fault." When he sings the chorus a third and final time, he concludes, "Some people claim that there's a woman to blame, but I know it's my own damn fault." We are responsible for remaining comfortable in sin.

Whose servants are we? To whom do we belong? We say we are servants of the Lord, but we're more comfortable serving sin. It is the place of comfort. It freely allows us to escape reality. It lets us construct a fantasy world where we enthrone ourselves, protect ourselves, defend ourselves, advance ourselves and isolate ourselves. It doesn't challenge us, and it never confronts our fears. There's one significant problem with the world sin allows us to create: It isn't real. And if it isn't real, though it may be comfortable for a while, it won't hold up. Sooner or later, it will come crashing to earth, taking us along with it.

There is only one way to be free from this fantasy world: to be miserable in it. In order to be delivered from sin, we have to want to be delivered from it. No one wants to be delivered from what he or she perceives to be a comfortable place. It is only when it becomes uncomfortable that one wants to leave. Before Jesus healed the sick man at the pool of Bethesda, Jesus asked him, "Do you wish to get well" (John 5:6). It is a good question. In order to want to be well, we have to be aware that we're miserable in our present condition.

Therefore, God through his word says something like, "Let him go, that he may serve me. Let her go, that she may serve me." It impacts us. We receive it. We believe it. At least initially. Then Satan springs into action. It is always his intention to destroy new life (Mark 4:15). He makes life miserable so that we won't listen to God. What is it that we need to be freed from the fantasy world of sin? We need to be miserable! We need to be so horrified by the unreal world that we have constructed that we want to flee it. We will cling to it tenaciously unless we are absolutely miserable in it. We need to be miserable; Satan makes us miserable. Brilliant fool that he is, he plays right into God's hands.

But for us, when we're miserable, we don't usually see all this. It just seems miserable. The Israelite foremen thought that Moses and Aaron "put a sword" in the hand of the Egyptians to kill them. All they could see was misery and impending death. We need to back up and see the big picture. Who is it who suffers death? It is not the Israelites but the Egyptians, in the plague of the first-born and in the Red Sea, when it collapses on them. The Lord carries the sword, and he will wield it not against Israel but against Egypt. What seems like death for

Israel, amazingly enough, is the death of Egypt. What seems like death for us is the death of sin's stranglehold on us.

Affliction does not mean death. In fact, the affliction of the Israelites here means quite the opposite: It means life. It means being freed from Egypt and being brought into intimate fellowship with God on Mount Sinai, where they serve him. For us, it means finding our identity as servants of the living God. The pain that seems like death is the birth pangs of life.

This is what the Lord is doing. What purpose does all this affliction serve? Why does the Lord do things that make life so painful for us? It's because he wants to liberate us from service to sin and Satan in order that we might serve him. But because sin is so tenaciously comfortable, we need to be made uncomfortable to want liberation from it.

Ellie Wiesel, also in his book "Night," describes a time when the concentration camp he was in was being bombed. Although the bombs could have meant death to the prisoners, the camp was filled with hope. Wiesel writes: "We were not afraid. And yet, if a bomb had fallen on the blocks, it alone would have claimed hundreds of victims on the spot. But we were no longer afraid of death; at any rate, not of that death. Every bomb that exploded filled us with joy and gave us new confidence in life." The bombs represented not death but life. So it is with the bombs in our lives. They are the birth pangs of life.

And if this is what the Lord is doing, what of those who make us uncomfortable? What of the Pharaohs and Moseses and Aarons of the world, those we seek to blame? What of those who have abused us, overlooked us, rejected us and abandoned us? They are, of all things, gifts from God. For if we need to be made miserable to give up the comfort of sin and they make us miserable, they are gifts from God indeed. And we can be thankful for them.

### **Give thanks**

The word of God speaks to us and offers us hope. If we believe it, that belief will be opposed. Satan opposes our freedom from sin and makes life more difficult. Life gets worse, not better. Because life gets worse, we get angry. Because we get angry, we look for someone to blame. But all the while, God is granting deliverance from sin. In order to be delivered, we have to be miserable to the point that we're willing to abandon the comfort of sin. So rather than blame those who cause us discomfort, we can give thanks for them.

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