

God reveals himself through his servant

by Scott Grant

Five is no problem

I have some friends, a couple, who have five children. When people see them in the community, they often ask: "Five kids! How do you do it?" In this day and in this fast-paced place, raising five children - and raising them successfully - is fairly rare. Their answer usually includes two words: "Jesus Christ." It is God's power in them that distinguishes them, and God reveals himself through them.

The Lord wants to be known. Therefore, he reveals himself. In the first three plagues, he reveals his power through his servant, Moses, thereby distinguishing between his servant and the Egyptian magicians, who are the servants of the Egyptian gods.

All four players or groups of players in the drama of the plagues have the opportunity to see the power of the Lord and therefore know who he is. The players are Moses, the Israelites, the Egyptian magicians and Pharaoh. In seeing how each reacts to God and his power, we can see how we react to him as well. We will likely see something of ourselves in more than one, or perhaps all, of these players.

The Lord reveals himself to Moses

Truth has no impact (7:14-25)

The Lord commands Moses to go to Pharaoh in the morning and station himself to meet the Egyptian king. This is a premeditated confrontation that requires determination on the part of Moses. Confronting his fears requires determination. Confronting our fears requires determination as well. We need to actively take on our fears, not passively stand by and hope they'll go away. Without premeditated determination to walk into our fears, our fears will forever control us.

But we are not alone. The Lord also commands Moses to take in his hand the staff that was turned into a serpent. This is "the staff of God" (4:20) and is a reminder to Moses of the power of God. Therefore, when we determine to walk into our fears, we know that God is with us. Like Moses actively took hold of the staff, we need to actively take hold of God in our battle against fear.

Confronting our fears usually has something to do with a person or persons of whom we are afraid. For Moses, that person is Pharaoh.

Moses receives the truth, believes the truth and speaks the truth. He obeys the Lord (7:14-20). However, the initial results of his obedience are less than satisfactory. The magicians duplicate the plague of blood, as they do the plague of frogs (8:7). Pharaoh hardens his heart and doesn't listen, as he does in the second and third plagues (8:15, 19). Moses is rejected. We move forward into our fears, believing and speaking the truth, and face similar rejection, which enflames our fears.

Rejection, though, is to be expected. In fact, the text says that Pharaoh rejected the truth just as the Lord said he would (7:22; 8:15, 19). Jesus also promises that we'll be rejected if we speak the truth (John 7:18-20). Therefore, God, promising rejection in advance, is sovereign over it. In this we can take comfort.

In the first plague, though Moses does "as the Lord had commanded" (7:20), the revelation of the power of the Lord through Moses has no apparent impact. There will be times when we believe the truth and speak the

truth, trusting in the power of the Lord, and see no impact. It falls of deaf ears. We're rejected.

Truth has limited impact (8:1-15)

In the second plague, the plague of frogs, Moses again is instructed to confront Pharaoh but also to convey hope that the future is not fixed, should Pharaoh listen to the Lord. In speaking truth, Moses holds out hope. When we speak truth, we're not to be battering rams. We're to hold out hope in the Lord, hope for change.

In obedience, Moses again confronts Pharaoh with the truth. The results are similar: The magicians duplicate the plague, and Pharaoh hardens his heart. There is a slight difference in Pharaoh's response this time, however. He asks Moses and Aaron to petition the Lord to remove the frogs.

Though Pharaoh's repentance proves to be false, Moses responds with deference and grace. Instead of responding with suspicion, he gives Pharaoh the benefit of the doubt. Similarly, instead of responding with suspicion, we can give people the benefit of the doubt. We can be believers in people, giving them every chance.

Moses then cries out to the Lord on behalf of Pharaoh, his enemy. Similarly, Jesus instructs us to pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44).

Pharaoh cracks a little. He has seen something of the power of the Lord through Moses. The revelation of the Lord through Moses shakes Pharaoh's world just a little, to the point that he seeks out Moses. If we believe the truth and speak the truth faithfully and persistently, over time it will have an impact. It will give people the opportunity to see reality differently, as it gave Pharaoh that opportunity.

Truth has a bigger impact (8:16-19)

Once again, Moses obeys the Lord, and once again Pharaoh hardens his heart, but this time the magicians can't duplicate the plague of gnats, and they recognize "the finger of God." The magicians, being tied into the occult, are aware of the spiritual world, and they know power when they see it. Often people involved in cults, the New Age and the occult end up being open to the gospel because, being open to spiritual things, they know about spiritual power. I have two friends who came out of the New Age and into faith in Christ.

Here, then, the revelation of God through his servant Moses has a bigger impact. In the first plague, there was no impact. In the second plague, there was some impact. In the third plague, there is even greater impact. The truth believed and spoken faithfully and persistently grows in impact.

Just as significantly, how do the first three plagues impact Moses? He entered them fearful and shaky. But as he faithfully believes the truth and speaks the truth, he's beginning to see impact. He's beginning to see the power of the Lord. As a servant of the Lord, he's beginning to see the power of the Lord through him, that the Lord has distinguished between him and the servants of the Egyptian gods. His faith is growing.

In our lives, the truth believed and spoken has increasing impact over time. This demonstrates the power of God in our lives, which in itself has impact. As we step out into our fears, speaking the truth, we begin to observe the power of the Lord in us, his servants, and our faith grows. The Lord wants to turn us from timid, fearful people into his bold and confident servants.

I moved into a house in San Jose a few years ago that I'm sure at one time had a good roof. But over the years the weather wore it down. It so happened that it was a particularly wet winter that year. When the rains started, the roof held up fine. But the persistent rains had an impact. Eventually, leaks developed along one beam, and we broke out our pots and pans to catch the drips. As the rain continued, the leaks got worse. It sounded like a symphony as drops - almost streams - of water pounded into the various cookware. Like persistent rain, the truth received, believed and spoken over time has an impact.

The Lord reveals himself to the Israelites

Plagues affect Israelites (7:21, 8:6, 8:17)

Each of the first three plagues affects all of Egypt, including Goshen, the land where the Israelites live (7:21, 8:6, 8:17). The Israelites are seeing the power of God, all right, but God is seemingly afflicting them just as much as the Egyptians.

Moses had promised deliverance, but this is affliction, something not at all akin to deliverance. Their reaction is not recorded, but it must have been similar to their reaction after Pharaoh imposed stricter working conditions on them, when they complained bitterly to Pharaoh and to Moses and Aaron (5:15-21).

Why does the Lord, in the first three plagues, equally afflict the Egyptians and the Israelites? Because the Israelites need to be jolted out of their complacency. Fearful, they are secure in Egypt. But they are in bondage; they are not free. In order to be free, they need to want to be free. They need to be shown the reality and misery of their condition as slaves. Similarly, we need to be jolted out of our complacency. We become comfortable with sin, which nevertheless restricts us as we are comfortably fearful. Through affliction, the Lord gives us the opportunity to want to be delivered.

The Israelites saw the power of the Lord in Moses, the servant of the Lord. These people had never seen one of their own believing and speaking the truth with power. Moses, as their leader, is therefore an example. And we all need an example or two in our lives.

One such example for me is a friend who took over as a pastor of a small church in Idaho some years ago. He began teaching the word of God consistently - something this church wasn't used to and something many of the people in the congregation didn't like. Many people have left the church. My friend jokes that he has "the gift of reduction." But he won't back down from speaking the truth.

The Lord reveals himself to the magicians

Magicians duplicate plagues (7:22, 8:7)

The Egyptian magicians duplicate the first two plagues, the plagues of blood and frogs, using their "secret arts." They are trying to get their gods to do what they want them to do. Cults, the occult and every false system of belief, including the idolatrous systems adopted by believers in Christ, specialize in "secrets." The idea is to learn and apply the appropriate secrets to life so that we have no need for a dependent, worship-based relationship with God.

But the "secret" to life is no secret at all. The Lord couldn't have made it clearer in the book of Exodus. He keeps telling everyone, "Know me." That's it. That's the secret.

In the first two plagues, the magicians do, in fact, get their gods to do what they want them to do. It looks like what the Lord does. This is what makes idolatry compelling. It holds forth the hope of satisfaction and gives us just enough of a taste of it for us to think complete satisfaction is just around the corner, so long as we learn the proper secrets.

But even in their duplication of the first two plagues, there is one thing the magicians can't do: reverse their effect. What good, in fact, does their duplication of the plagues do them? It's not helping the situation; it's making it worse. The helpful thing would be to reverse the effect, but they can't do it.

Pharaoh recognizes this and therefore goes to Moses and Aaron, not his magicians, in seeking relief from the frogs.

Magicians fail to duplicate plague (8:18-19)

Not only can the magicians not reverse the plagues, they can't duplicate the third plague, the plague of gnats. Not even a third of the way through the 10 plagues, the magicians see that their gods cannot do what the Lord does through his servant Moses. Their gods, therefore, are failures.

Whether they recognize their gods as failures or not is unknown, but they do recognize "the finger of God" - they recognize the power of the Lord through Moses. Whether they came to faith in the Lord is also unknown. But when the Israelites left Egypt, they were a "mixed multitude" (12:38). Perhaps some of the magicians were among them.

We cling tenaciously to our idols: success, validation, relationships, children, sex, money, power. For a while, it seems that they do for us what we want them to do. It appears as though they do what the Lord does. Even when we find them unsatisfying, they leave enough of a taste in our mouth to make us think that just one more bite will be eternally enough. But if we keep our eyes open, we'll see a Moses or two around, who in dependence on the Lord, not false gods, has the confidence to move forward into life, to take new ground. And it will be clear that our false gods do not do what the true God is doing in another.

When I visited the town of Veleiko-Turnavo in Bulgaria in 1992, I worshiped with Bulgarian believers in the former meeting place of the Communist Party. Here was a building constructed and maintained for the purpose of advancing the false gods of the Communist Party. It was a monument to idolatry. But the false gods finally came tumbling down in 1989, and the building was being occupied on Sundays by, of all things, a church. It afforded those who had put their faith in the false gods of the Communist Party to see the failure of those gods over and against the power of the true God, who was being worshiped in their former building.

The Lord reveals himself to Pharaoh

Pharaoh hardens heart (7:14-25)

In the Egyptian system of worship, Pharaoh is a god. He thinks he's a god, in total control. Therefore, his heart is stubborn, and he won't listen to anyone else claiming to be the true God.

Through the plague of the blood, the Lord tells Pharaoh that he will know that "I am the Lord." The Lord, not Pharaoh, is God. Pharaoh will find this out in the plagues, which he will be powerless to stop. In other words, Pharaoh, a supposed god, will be completely out of control. Being out of control, he will have the opportunity to recognize the one who is in control. The plague of blood takes place "in the sight" of Pharaoh, giving him a first-hand account of the power of the Lord. But when his magicians duplicate the plague, Pharaoh hardens his heart, refuses to listen to the word of God and turns away unconcerned.

Precious opportunities will crop up in our lives when it will be clear, despite our best efforts, that we are not God, that we are not in control. This was the case for a friend of mine, who after nearly dying in childbirth reached out to God because she realized, "I'm not in control."

Pharaoh repents - apparently (8:1-15)

Pharaoh receives ample warning from the Lord that unless he repents, life will be a lot worse. Ample warnings come to us as well, through the word and through those God sends to us. Not long ago someone painted a picture of the future of my life if I continued in a particular sinful pattern. It wasn't a pretty picture. But it was a welcome warning.

With the plague of the frogs, Pharaoh's world begins to crack a little. He has to ask Moses and Aaron for help. Pharaoh promises that if Moses and Aaron are successful in getting the Lord to remove the frogs, he'll repent and let the people go. Perhaps he believes this himself at this point. Such is the deceitfulness of sin. How often do we think, perhaps vow, that our lives will be different if the Lord gets us out of whatever jam we're in?

Moses gives Pharaoh the opportunity to specify the timing of the reversal of the plague so that he may know that the Lord is the one doing it. Moses intercedes for Pharaoh, the Lord answers Moses' prayer and the frogs pile up in heaps, providing all the evidence anyone would need to believe in the Lord.

But when the frogs die, Pharaoh again hardens his heart. The key word is "relief." When Pharaoh sees there is relief, he hardens his heart. Perhaps unknown even to himself, his repentance was not genuine. He didn't

want to know the Lord, worship the Lord, serve the Lord; he simply wanted relief. He wanted life to work. He wanted to return to his state of perceived control.

Like Pharaoh, we too have fits of "repentance" in the pain of the moment. But when life returns to normalcy and the urgency of the hour has passed, it becomes clear that what we wanted was not the Lord but relief. We wanted life to work, and we wanted to return to our perceived state of control. Thankfully, the Lord doesn't give up on us and continues to lead us into true repentance.

Pharaoh strengthens his resolve (8:16-19)

Pharaoh's magicians fail to duplicate the third plague, providing more evidence of the power of the Lord. They even proclaim that the third plague is "the finger of God," thus providing not only evidence of the power of the Lord but testimony from his own people, who are intimately acquainted with spiritual things. Despite all this, Pharaoh hardens his heart and refuses to listen to truth.

Our hearts can be similarly resistant to truth - extraordinarily resistant to truth. Despite mounds of evidence that we are not in control, we tenaciously cling to this false belief. Wave upon wave of evidence and testimony beat against our hardened hearts, but they fail to give way. Sometimes we'll defend our dream worlds, in which we rule from within our safe and secure fortresses of control, to the last illusion.

Ellie Wiesel in his book "Night," which is a personal account of the Holocaust, writes that the Jews of his little town in Transylvania, Shiget, were completely resistant to the truth about the Nazis. He writes, "The Germans were already in the town, the Fascists were already in power, the verdict had already been pronounced, yet the Jews of Shiget continued to smile." Later the Germans rounded up all the Jews of the town into a ghetto. "The general opinion was that we were going to remain in the ghetto until the end of the war, until the arrival of the Red Army. Then everything would be as before. It was neither German nor Jew who ruled the ghetto - it was illusion. Illusion ruled over Pharaoh, just as it often does over us, and hardens our hearts.

Who are you?

Where do you see yourself in this story? Are you Moses, whose obedience to speak the truth gets no results, only rejection, but do you continue to move forward, faithfully and persistently receiving, believing and speaking the truth, giving yourself opportunities to observe the power of the Lord? Are you one of the Israelites, whose hopes for deliverance are crushed by affliction, but who now have the opportunity to be jolted from your fearful complacency? Are you one of the magicians, whose gods partially satisfy you, dangle forth the hope for complete satisfaction but fail in the end? Or are you Pharaoh, envisioning and promising repentance in times of need only to return to your fortress of control once relief arrives?

Perhaps like me, you see yourself in all four of these players. No matter where each of us is, all of us have the opportunity to see his power and know the Lord not only in our own lives, as servants of the Lord, but in the lives of other servants of the Lord as well.

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