

The Lord spares his people

by Scott Grant

A people observed

My first job out of college was working as a reporter and editor for a weekly newspaper in the Santa Cruz Mountains. From time to time representatives from Mount Hermon Christian Conference Center, which was a few miles away, would stop by to give us their press releases and briefly share a few words with the publisher. One day the publisher came away from one such interaction complaining in a jocular manner. He said something like, "These Mount Hermon people, they have it all. They live in the mountains, and they're convinced they're working for God." Although he was jesting, he was being honest as well. He was jealous. These Mount Hermon people were living differently than he was. The publisher didn't know it, but they were living differently because God, who had taken up residence in their lives, was blessing them.

God makes a distinction between his people and the people of the world, and that distinction is noticeable to the extent that it is a witness that calls all people to himself. He distinguishes between his people and the people of the world in order to reveal himself. We are a different kind of people, because God is in our midst, blessing us.

In the first series of plagues, plagues 1 through 3, the Lord distinguished between his servant, Moses, and the servants of the Egyptian gods, the magicians. In the second series of plagues, plagues 4 through 6, the Lord makes a distinction between his people and the people of Egypt, and that distinction is noticeable. It is, in fact, a witness that calls all people to God.

In the second series of plagues, the players are the same as those in the first series: Moses, the Israelites, the magicians and Pharaoh. In looking at each of these players, we see ourselves.

The Lord reveals himself to Moses

The Israelites treated differently (8:22-23; 9:4-7)

In order to be effective as the Lord's deliverer, Moses not only has to defeat Pharaoh, he has to convince the Israelites to follow him. Moses has been fearful that the people won't believe him, listen to him or follow him (5:1, 10; 6:12). The people were initially receptive (4:31), but hardships imposed by Pharaoh discouraged them (6:9). The first three plagues affected all the land of Egypt, including Goshen, where the Israelites lived, so Moses must view his task in convincing the people as harder than ever. He must be thinking, "Even if I'm effective with Pharaoh, I have a nation of people who won't believe me."

Beginning with the fourth plague, the Lord does something different with Israel. He sets Israel apart. The land of Goshen is spared. This is something that Moses can see.

We'll show up in the life of a brother or sister, seeking to love and serve, and often they'll frustrate us, as people often will. We won't see change or movement in their lives. But if we stick around long enough, we'll usually see something of the Lord in their lives, some way in which he has made a distinction between him or her and the world. We can see God in the life of another, which is one of the biggest joys any believer in Jesus Christ can experience.

Moses makes no compromise (8:25-27)

When Pharaoh bargains with Moses, the easiest thing for Moses to do is to compromise, but he doesn't. When Pharaoh offers Moses a deal that would allow the Israelites to sacrifice to the Lord within the land of Egypt, Moses replies with two reasons why this is not possible. The first is a practical reason and the second a moral reason.

Practically it wouldn't work because sacrificing animals that are sacred to the Egyptians would be an abomination to them and prompt them to stone the Israelites. More importantly, from a moral standpoint, the Lord has commanded that the Israelites sacrifice to him in the wilderness (3:18). Simply, Moses and the Israelites must obey the Lord.

Moses, no doubt, fears Pharaoh, but here it becomes clear that he fears God more. The Lord is working with his once-shaky servant, building into him faith and confidence. Moses trusts the Lord. It's what the Lord does with us as well.

Similarly, when the apostles were commanded by the Jewish officials not to teach about Jesus, Peter and the others answered, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:27-29). Earlier, during the trial of Jesus, Peter was more than shaky, having denied the Lord three times.

The Lord makes a mockery of false gods (9:10-11)

Moses stands before Pharaoh, one of the supposed Egyptian gods, but the servants of the Egyptian gods can't even stand before Moses, a servant of the Lord, let alone the Lord himself. When boils cover the Egyptian magicians, who are helpless against the power of the Lord, Moses gets a first-hand look at the failure of their gods when confronted with the true God.

We see such failure all around us - the utter failure of a lives in which Jesus Christ is not the center. We see the failure of idolatry in the broken lives, the empty faces, the lifeless eyes. As much as we can see the life of God pulsating in the lives of those who have made Jesus Christ the center of their lives, we can also see death in the lives who have worshiped other gods that have failed them.

My biggest crisis in faith came about a year after I finished college. I had been a believer for seven years, but serious doubts began to emerge. I entertained the possibility of choosing another path, and I may have done so but for one observation: All the other paths that my college friends took seemed lifeless. I observed their lives, and their gods were temporarily exhilarating but permanently lifeless. Their gods were failures.

Moses sees how the Lord treats the Israelites and how he treats the Egyptians. He sees that the Lord spares the Israelites, and he sees that the Egyptians' gods are failures. If we are observant, we will see similar stories in the lives we observe. In this way, the Lord is revealing himself to us - his presence in the life of a believer, his absence in the life of an unbeliever.

The Lord reveals himself to the Israelites

The Israelites treated differently (8:22-23; 9:4-7)

Despite Moses' preaching, the Israelites did not respond to the word of deliverance because they were despondent over the cruel treatment meted out by Pharaoh (6:9). God's word, which promised deliverance, didn't seem to match up with reality, which looked to be nothing but ever-intensifying slavery. But with the fourth plague, things begin to change. All along the Lord has been forming his people, preparing them to leave Egypt. It just didn't appear that way. Now what's always been true becomes unmistakably clear: The Lord has blessed his people.

It isn't always plainly evident to us that the Lord has set us apart - that he has blessed us. But over time, if we open our eyes, it will become clear that the Lord has truly blessed us, and blessed us tremendously. Even a superficial understanding of the blessings mentioned in Ephesians 1:3-14 ought to stir our souls. The Lord reveals himself to us individually in that he sets us apart, in that he blesses us.

Not long ago I was complaining about life to a friend who stopped me and said, "Scott, the Lord has really blessed you." Then he pointed out three or four clearly identifiable ways in which the Lord has blessed me. I've been thinking about it ever since: "Scott, the Lord has really blessed you."

The Lord reveals himself to the magicians

The Lord makes a mockery of false gods (9:10-11)

The magicians duplicated the first two plagues, but they couldn't duplicate the third, and they then recognized "the finger of God" - his power (8:19). They are featured prominently in the first series of plagues, but they only show up in the second series here.

Because they are described as standing before Moses (9:11), it is likely that they are still hard at work, trying to match Moses plague for plague. They've been working overtime to inspire their lifeless gods. Now, while dueling with Moses, they are covered with boils as Moses summons the Lord to bring on the sixth plague. This scene comically depicts the futility of idolatry. The Old Testament, in fact, specializes in poking fun at false gods (Isaiah 46:1-2).

Like the magicians, we too work overtime to inspire our lifeless gods - the things we want, the developments we hope for - in an effort to make life work. But it doesn't matter how hard we work to get our gods to work. They simply don't work. Everything we try outside of a trusting, worshipful relationship with God fails us. And every false god is powerless when the true God lifts his finger. God in his grace shows us this - the utter failure of false gods. And in showing us this, he shows us himself.

In the movie "Casablanca," Nazi soldiers gather around the piano and sing in Rick's Cafe American. Victor Laslo, a leader of the underground, inspires the band to play the French national anthem. The entire cafe joins in, and the Germans respond by singing louder, but they are drowned out and eventually they give up. Similarly, the worship of false gods seems temporarily fruitful, but when God strikes up his band, so to speak, unleashing his power, our false gods are shown to be utter failures. Then, of course, we have an opportunity to worship the true God.

The Lord reveals himself to Pharaoh

The Israelites treated differently (8:22-23; 9:4-7)

The Lord's stated purpose in treating Israel differently is actually for Pharaoh's benefit, that he may know that the Lord is "in the midst of the land." The Lord is in the midst of Pharaoh's land - the land he rules. The world of Pharaoh, who thinks he's a god, has been invaded by the one true God.

The Lord uses his power here not only to judge the Israelites with these plagues but also to separate Israel. The way that he treats Israel, then, is a witness to Pharaoh. After the fourth plague, Pharaoh had the land of Goshen investigated, and sure enough, the place where the Israelites lived was spared.

Like Pharaoh, the world is watching. The people of the world, hungry to make life work, are looking for a way to make it happen. When they see life, the life of God pulsating through a believer, they take notice.

Bargaining with God (8:25-28)

In trying to cut a deal with Moses, the servant of the Lord, Pharaoh is trying to cut a deal with the Lord. First he says to Moses, "You can sacrifice, but stay where you are." Then he says, "You can sacrifice, but don't go very far."

What motivates his penchant for deal-making? He wants to stay in control. We are wont to cut any deal with God we can to maintain as much control as we can. We'll play mind games in which we offer God one area of our lives if he'll let us keep control over another. It's difficult for us to hear the truth, respond to it and let go, because we're afraid of what God might do.

The grace of God (8:29-31)

The Lord is gracious to Pharaoh and removes the insects. Not even one remained. The plagues represent God's judgment on Pharaoh, but the rescinding of this plague represents God's grace. Pharaoh, then, has the opportunity to recognize God not only in his judgment but in his grace. The kindness of the Lord witnesses to Pharaoh.

Clear evidence of God (8:23, 29; 9:5; 8:31; 9:6-8, 10)

Verses 8:23, 8:29 and 9:5 all contain the word "tomorrow." Not only does the Lord display his power, he successfully predicts when he will display it - namely, tomorrow. These fulfilled prophecies are strong witnesses. The Lord's power is prophetic.

In 8:31, 9:6 and 9:7, the words "not one" appear. Not one of the insects remained when the Lord rescinded the fourth plague, and not one of the animals of Israel was affected by the fifth plague. The Lord's power is not only prophetic, it is complete.

In 9:8 and 10, Moses carries out his actions "in the sight of" and "before" Pharaoh, so that there can be no doubt of the connection between Moses' actions and the plagues. This is clear evidence that the Lord is responsible for the plagues.

The evidence of the presence of the Lord is overwhelming, yet Pharaoh remains unconvinced.

Pharaoh hardens his heart (8:32; 9:7, 12)

After the fourth plague, the text reports that Pharaoh hardens his heart (8:32). After the fifth plague, his heart is hardened (9:7). And after the sixth plague, the Lord himself hardens Pharaoh's heart (9:12). Pharaoh refuses to listen to the truth, and when the Lord hardens his heart, he's just confirming Pharaoh's choice.

The evidence of the presence of God is insurmountable. He separates his people for special treatment, he graciously rescinds the fourth plague, and his power is successfully prophetic, complete and clear. Why does Pharaoh resist such evidence and harden his heart? For the same reason we do. The evidence says that God is in control - something neither Pharaoh nor we, in our flesh, are thrilled with. The evidence points to something we are not pleased with, something that is traumatic: We are not in control. So what do we do with traumatic information? We resist it. We ignore it. We suppress it.

The Apostle Paul in Romans 1:18-23 describes this dynamic better than any modern-day psychologist. Paul says that people "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18).

Take notice

The Lord makes a distinction between his people and the people of the world in order to reveal himself. Each player in the drama of the plagues has the opportunity to take notice of this difference and acknowledge the Lord. So wherever we see ourselves in this story, we have that opportunity. If we're like Moses, involved with frustrating brothers and sisters who show no apparent movement toward God, we can stick around. If we're like the Israelites, burdened by life, we can wait on the Lord and observe how he has blessed us. If we're like the magicians, we can acknowledge the failure of our false gods. And if we're like Pharaoh, utterly resistant to truth, we can acknowledge the obvious: the Lord is in control.