

There is no one like the Lord

by Scott Grant

A different league

When I was a youngster, I entered a few tennis tournaments. One tournament particularly sticks in my mind. I won the first match fairly easily, and I thought things were looking good. But in the next match I got hammered. I had a meager serve, an adequate forehand, no backhand and even less of a net game. This fellow had it all. I had never seen anything like him. I knew I was in trouble during warm-ups. In the process of getting waxed by this guy, it became clear to me that he was in a completely different league - way over my head. To me he seemed other-worldly. That day he distinguished between himself and me - and the rest of the field, I'm sure.

The Lord distinguishes between himself and everyone else. In the first six plagues in the book of Exodus, the narrative has been moving toward this conclusion. In the first series of three plagues, the Lord distinguished between his servant, Moses, and the servants of the Egyptian gods, the magicians. In the second series of three plagues, the Lord distinguished between his people, the Israelites, and the people of the world, the Egyptians. The purpose in each case was to reveal himself, particularly his power. That purpose becomes the focal point in plagues 6 through 9, where he reveals himself by showing that "there is no one like me in all the earth" (9:14).

The narrative for these three plagues is much longer than that of the previous two series, representing an intensification in revelation. The severity of these plagues, unlike the others, is without precedent (9:14, 18, 24; 10:6), and the extent of them is comprehensive (9:22, 25; 10:5, 6, 12, 14, 15, 22). The Lord, then, is making himself more and more obvious - the same thing he does in our lives.

Once again, four players or groups of players are exposed to this revelation: Moses, the Israelites, the Egyptians and Pharaoh. How does each respond? How do we respond?

The Lord reveals himself to Moses

Dependence become habitual (9:22-23, 10:12-13)

In both 9:22 and 10:12, the Lord instructs Moses to stretch out his hand. In both 9:23 and 10:13, Moses stretches out his staff. At the commencement of the plagues, the Lord commanded Moses to take the staff in his hand (7:15). The staff is actually the staff of God and symbolizes the authority and power of the Lord (4:20). So when Moses takes the staff in his hand, he's depending on the Lord.

At first he has to be instructed to take the staff in his hand; he had to be instructed to depend on the Lord and not himself. He took the staff in his hand repeatedly, throughout the plagues. For Moses, dependence on the Lord has now become habitual. If he's told to stretch out his hand to bring on a plague, he knows he must depend on the Lord; so he takes hold of the staff of God.

Like anything else practiced repeatedly, dependence on the Lord becomes habitual. But in order for it to become habitual, it needs to be put into practice repeatedly. Dependence on the Lord is a discipline that must be practiced and repeated over and over again. Conscious, pro-active choices to trust in the Lord and move forward into fears must be made, and made repeatedly. Slowly, dependence on the Lord, not ourselves, will become habitual.

Pharaoh becomes irrelevant (10:6)

After the first plague, Pharaoh "turned" and went to his house, completely unconcerned (7:23). Now, after announcing the plague of locusts, it is Moses who turns and leaves Pharaoh, completely unconcerned. The irony here is rich.

When Moses began his fanciful confrontation of Pharaoh, all odds were against him. Even his own people refused to back him (5:20-21). It was one man against a nation. But God plus one equals a majority. Moses, increasingly believing in the power of the Lord, increasingly trusting in the Lord, sees that Pharaoh, with all the power at his disposal, is, of all things, irrelevant. He is a non-issue. Moses, unconcerned, turns and walks away from Pharaoh.

When we increasingly believe in the power of the Lord and increasingly trust him, the things that inspire our fears become irrelevant. They are no match for the power of the Lord.

Boldness becomes non-compromising (10:8-11, 24-26)

When Pharaoh asks Moses who of the Israelites will be leaving Egypt, Moses is bold in his response: Everyone and everything, even the animals, will be leaving. Of the livestock, "not a hoof will be left behind," Moses says. Moses' boldness has become comprehensive. He won't back down on a thing. His boldness is also definite. In both 10:9 and 26, a Hebrew tense that is translated into an English future tense is used. In Moses' mind, there is no question that these things will happen. His boldness, then, is non-compromising. He will make no deals.

We may be tempted to cut corners to make things easier, to back away from righteousness because it is the path of least resistance. But we should cut no deals with the world, the flesh or the devil.

Confidence becomes indefatigable (10:28-29)

Pharaoh makes a brazen threat against Moses' life. Forty years earlier, when Moses got wind that a different Pharaoh wanted him killed, he ran in fear (2:15). On Mount Sinai, when the Lord asked Moses to confront Pharaoh, Moses said, "Who am I?" When Moses returned and demanded that Pharaoh let the people go and Pharaoh increased the burdens on the people, Moses was lost (5:22-23). Before the onset of the plagues, Moses wondered how he could get Pharaoh to listen to him (6:12, 30).

Now look at Moses. Forty years earlier, when an Egyptian king threatened his life from a distance, Moses headed for the hills. Now an Egyptian king is threatening his life face to face, and Moses stares death right in the face. Before, he was shaking like a leaf. Now he's solid as a rock.

What happened? First, 40 years in the wilderness made Moses open to relationship with God and obedience to him. Second, Moses consistently obeyed the Lord's call to walk into fear, depending on him.

The Lord will send us to the wilderness for a while, where life seems dry, barren and lonely, making us thirsty to hear his voice calling us near and to obey his call to enter into life. The Lord turned Moses from a shaky leaf into a solid rock. He can do it with us.

Although I am not a big fan of cats, I am intrigued by them. They make an interesting study. Some are friendly. Some are petrified. The ones whose temperaments are in between are the most interesting. They so much want human affection, but they are terrified of it. When I go for walks, often I'll try to coax these cats to come near. They'll often take a tentative step, then slow down or back off in fear. It takes an effort to earn their trust. But once they come near and rub up against a leg a few times, and find that leg to be benevolent, they don't want to leave. They gobble up all the affection they can get. Once they were terrified; now they are confident. I am trustworthy; that is true. But the cat isn't sure. It is only as it moves forward and rubs up against a leg a few times that it becomes convinced. Moses moved forward into his fears and found the Lord to be trustworthy. His confidence, therefore, surged. As we move forward into our fears and find the Lord trustworthy, our confidence will surge as well - our confidence in the Lord's trustworthiness, which is true

confidence.

The Lord reveals himself to the Israelites

The Lord spares his people (9:26, 10:23)

The Israelites felt the full force of the first three plagues. Beginning with the second series of plagues, the Lord set apart Israel and spared it from the impact of the plagues. Specifically, the text says that Israel is spared the impact of the seventh and ninth plagues. Presumably, it was spared in the eighth plague as well.

The plagues in this series are increasing in severity, yet Israel is spared. It would be easy for them to look around and see how much more difficult life is getting for the Egyptians. It would also be easy for them to conclude, "If not for the grace of God, that could just as well be us."

For those of us who have known the Lord for a while, it's not difficult to imagine what life would be like without the Lord. All we have to do is look around - look at family members, look at peers, look at co-workers. Although we have suffered our share of hardship, the Lord has spared us from some ugly things. Oh, what he has saved us from!

The Lord gives his people a story (10:1-2)

The Lord hardens the heart of Pharaoh and his servants for the sake of demonstrating his power. As we have seen before in Exodus, the Lord sets in motion circumstances that lead to affliction in order to demonstrate his power to redeem, which gives his people the opportunity for faith, which is what we really need.

The Lord says that "you" will have the opportunity to tell children and grandchildren about what the Lord did in Egypt. The pronoun in singular, meaning Moses is in view. But when the Lord says he is doing these things "that you may know that I am the Lord," the second-person pronoun is plural, meaning that the Israelites are in view. So both Moses and the rest of the Israelites see and experience the power of the Lord. Therefore, the Israelites also have a story to tell to children and grandchildren.

For those of us who believe in Jesus Christ, the Lord has set us apart, he has spared us and he has redeemed us. He does this not only for our sakes but for the sake of others. How do others benefit? They benefit insofar as we tell them the stories of what the Lord has done in our lives. Each of us has a pocketful of stories to tell. We convince ourselves, or let others convince us, that we don't have much of a story to tell. But these are powerful stories, because they are stories of the Lord's work of grace in our lives. Your stories are worth telling. All of us need to hear them.

Sometimes I try to imagine what path my life would have taken if the Lord hadn't redeemed me at age 16 and walked with me every day since then. I was an intensely shy, introverted and self-absorbed. Would I have become completely isolated? Would I have been so distraught by the isolation that I would have tried almost anything to deaden the pain? I don't know. But I do know that because of the grace of God, I am not what I was and I am not what I would have been. And I have a story to tell. So do we all.

The Lord reveals himself to the Egyptians

Recognized power, unrecognized love (9:19-21, 10:7)

The plagues narrative earlier featured the Egyptian magicians. Now it features Pharaoh's servants. These may be one and the same, inasmuch as the magicians were Pharaoh's servants. At any rate, whether magicians or servants, they are representative of the Egyptian people.

Some of the servants recognize what should be obvious by now: When Moses promises pestilence, pestilence happens. They therefore take precautions to protect their livestock from the predicted hail. They have identified power, but they are not people of faith (9:30, 34; 10:1). Their "faith" is completely utilitarian. They believe in something of the power of the Lord; therefore, they protect their interests against that power. But they know

nothing of the goodness of the Lord.

The writer of Hebrews says that "he who comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him" (Hebrews 10:6). These servants may believe that God exists, but they see him as a punisher, not as a rewarder. Some of them may be on the road to faith, however, for when the Israelites left Egypt, they left as a "mixed multitude" that evidently included some Egyptians (12:38).

While some of the Egyptian servants at least acknowledged the power of the Lord, others, amazingly enough, were completely ignorant despite the evidence of six plagues. They left their livestock in the field, where it would be destroyed by hail (9:25). Sin is deceitful, and leads us far away from reality.

The Egyptian servants not only recognize the power of the Lord, after seven plagues they confront their ruler with advice to let the Israelites go in order to avoid further pestilence. This is still not faith, for they call the Lord "the Lord their God." They have correctly attributed the destruction they see to Pharaoh's refusal to release the Israelites. And they offer what seems to be a practical solution: Let the people go. But they don't buy into the only permanent solution: faith.

Many people can see destruction in their lives. Many can also tie such destruction to particular choices. Many then offer seemingly pragmatic solutions to the problem: a new philosophy, a new lifestyle, renewed determination. But the only permanent and effective solution is faith in the living, eternal God.

If the power of the God is recognized but the goodness of the Lord is unrecognized, faith is lacking. And if only the power of God is recognized, we'll embark on a mad dash to make the right choices to avoid getting zapped by that power. This isn't faith, and it's a paralyzing way to live.

Recognized power apart from appreciated love is the phenomenon the Apostle Paul describes in Romans: "For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Romans 1:20-21). The power of the Lord is evident in his creation, and many recognize it and therefore know something of God. But most don't want to trust their lives to him, because they don't think he's good - so they neither honor him nor give thanks.

The Lord reveals himself to Pharaoh

The truth: You are not in control (9:14-16)

The Lord is judging Pharaoh for his hard heart by sending plagues in increasing severity. But the Lord has also been gracious to Pharaoh, holding back. Had he unleashed all his power, Pharaoh would be dead by now. Both the Lord's judgment and his grace are for the purpose of revealing himself to Pharaoh. He wants Pharaoh to know that "there is no one like me," and he wants to show Pharaoh his power.

The word "earth" appears three times in these verses. There is no one like the Lord in all the earth (9:14), Pharaoh would have been cut off from the earth (killed) if the Lord had released all his power (9:15) and the Lord will proclaim his name through all the earth (9:16). Pharaoh, as ruler of a powerful nation, thinks he controls the earth, or at least his little corner of it. But all the earth belongs to the Lord, who could easily cut off Pharaoh from it. Pharaoh thinks he's in control, but it's an illusion.

Like Pharaoh, we think we're in control of our domain. But the Lord is sovereign over all, and he has invaded our domain - even the secret domain where our fantasies reign. The Lord is there - even there. And he wants to reveal himself to us even there, to escort us into the real world, where he controls everything, where he calls every shot.

Loss of control yields false repentance (9:27-35)

Pharaoh says he has sinned "this time." What about the last time and the time before that? That Pharaoh only in

this particular instance acknowledges sin is indicative that his repentance is false. Pharaoh's repentance is motivated by his contention that "there has been enough of God's thunder and hail." This too is indicative of a false repentance, motivated solely by the desire for relief from distress. Although Pharaoh may not even know that his repentance is false, Moses sees through it and knows that Pharaoh is seeking no relationship with the Lord. As we could have predicted by now, when relief comes, Pharaoh changes his mind, because relief is all he's after.

The text says Pharaoh "sinned again." Up until now, Pharaoh thought he only sinned once. By saying that he sinned again, the text subtly shows that this is a pattern, not an isolated incident.

When we find control slipping away, one of the things we'll do is "repent," and convince ourselves that we're repenting. But our so-called repentance is often motivated simply by a desire for relief from pain and a return to our state of control, or perceived control.

Loss of control yields power play (10:7-11)

Pharaoh receives strong testimony from his own people, who have the courage to confront him with the truth and advise him to release the people. His servants present the evidence: Egypt is destroyed. This is what clutching for control does: It destroys. We think it protects us, but it destroys us, and those around us as well.

The desire for control also distorts things terribly. Pharaoh tells Moses that "evil is in your mind." Moses intended to leave Egypt with the Israelites. This isn't evil; it's good. But the desire for control calls good things evil.

Pharaoh knows the weakness of his position. He's been outgunned by Moses every time. So he simply gives Moses an order, allows for no response and drives Moses and Aaron from his presence. This is a power play borne solely out of weakness. Moses won't listen to Pharaoh's bargaining ploys, so Pharaoh will allow for no more discussion. In sending Moses away, he's hoping not to have to deal with him anymore and still maintain whatever control he has left.

At times we too may assert our wills out of weakness. Knowing that we're out of ammunition, we blow smoke, put an end to all discussion of whatever the matter is and hope that the problem will simply go away. This approach may buy us temporary relief, but the problem doesn't go away. It didn't go away for Pharaoh, either.

Loss of control yields utilitarianism (10:16-20)

Pharaoh's language is sounding more like true repentance. He simply says that he has sinned, and not just "this time." He also identifies three victims of his sin: the Lord, Moses and Aaron. He even asks for forgiveness. But all he is really interested in is relief for himself. He asks that "this death be removed from me." He never even mentions the trials he has put his own people through.

The Lord drives the locusts into the Red Sea, and not one remained. This poetically foretells the fate of Pharaoh and his army, which were driven to their deaths in the Red Sea, where not one remained (14:28).

Pharaoh, in mouthing the words of repentance, has learned to talk the talk. He wants relief. His efforts to this point have failed. But he's a quick study. He's learned the rules of this game. If repentance is required for relief, well then, he'll give them repentance - or everything that looks like it, at least.

When it comes to getting what we want, we can be quick learners. We learn the rules, play the game, give them what they want.

Loss of control yields anger (10:24-29)

Pharaoh just can't let go. There has to be something that he keeps holding onto. In this case, it's the livestock. Moses' refusal of even the deal to take everything but the livestock is met with even more intensity from

Pharaoh. Pharaoh is watching his world slip away. Everything he has tried has failed. There is little left to do but vent his anger and utter threats.

When we watch our worlds slip away, our cherished dreams that were going to keep us in control, the emotion that often takes over initially is anger. But our world slips away because we've been living in the wrong one and hardening our hearts against the truth of the beautiful world of reality, where God wants us to dwell and where he is in control.

Control is only an illusion, but like Pharaoh, we'll go to great lengths and take increasingly desperate measures to maintain that illusion. We'll take measures such as false repentance, power plays borne out of weakness, learning the game and following the rules. When it all fails, maybe, like Pharaoh we explode in anger and utter threats, if only on the inside.

Lenny, a character in John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men," liked to touch and pet soft things like animals and soft hair. But when anything he petted started to squirm, he panicked and held on tighter, trying to maintain control. Tragically, he killed those creatures. When things get out of control, we'll often hold on tighter, trying to control our environment and people. But grasping for control is actually destructive - it damages ourselves, others and relationships.

We are there

We see something of ourselves in all these players. Perhaps like Moses we're seeing the power of the Lord and trusting him more thoroughly and therefore growing in confidence. Perhaps like the Israelites we've seen how the Lord has spared us and are ready to tell some stories of his grace. Perhaps like the Egyptians we see something of the power of the Lord but his love for us is a foreign concept. Perhaps like Pharaoh, we desperately hold onto control only to have it blow up in our face. Wherever we're at, the Lord wants to distinguish between himself and everyone else. He wants us to see that there is no one like the Lord.

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