

Followers of the Way

Confronting false gods

Philp Quenby, 15 January 2023

Exodus 12:1-20

The passage we just heard read takes place as the battle to free Israel from slavery in Egypt nears its climax. Nine plagues of increasing intensity are about to reach their culmination in a tenth, the death of Egypt's firstborn, finally persuading Pharaoh to let the people go. It's an extraordinary moment in redemption history – a point at which God resets Israel's calendar by telling Moses and Aaron, "This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year" (Exodus 12:1-2), at the same time establishing for His people "a lasting ordinance" (Exodus 12:14) in the form of the Passover meal. During the terrifying events of this first Passover night, as a "destroyer" (Exodus 12:23) brings death throughout the land of Egypt, God's promise to Israel is, "when I see the blood [of the Passover lamb], I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt." (Exodus 12:13).

Today we start a sermon series looking at the Clash of Kingdoms – the kingdom of God on one hand versus the kingdom of this world or the kingdom of Satan on the other. It's a conflict we see playing out from almost the first page of the Bible right up to the very last – from the serpent's temptation in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-20) through to the "war in heaven" (Revelation 12:7-9) described by the apostle John. It's a war still being fought today: over individual souls and within families, across people groups and cultures, between nations and empires. It manifests itself in the realm of ideas and ideologies, but expresses itself in physical violence, too. As this war builds towards its closing stages, more than ever, we need to be aware of what's going on, and what part we have to play in the fighting.

Throughout the book of Exodus, we see God making distinctions. Right from the start of Creation, we read He's a God who separates – light from dark (Genesis 1:3-5), sea from sky (Genesis 1:6-8), water from dry land (Genesis 1:9-10), day from night (Genesis 1:14-18), and in due course, holy from unholy. Exodus involves Him separating out an entire nation for Himself, and He makes explicit the fact that He's on one side and those who stand against Him are on another. So, during one of the earlier plagues God says, "I will deal differently with the land of Goshen, where my people live; no swarms of flies will be there, so that you will know that I, the LORD, am in this land. I will make a distinction between my people and your [Pharaoh's] people." (Exodus 8:22). Later, "The only place it did not hail was the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were." (Exodus 9:26). Israel's firstborn didn't die like Egypt's, and when the Israelites finally fled Egypt but were pursued by Pharaoh's chariots, God's pillar of fire and cloud came "between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side, so neither went near the other all night long." (Exodus 14:20).

The consequence of God separating and making distinctions is, there are things He's for and things He's against. It's important we set this in context. He's on our side. He wants the best for us, longs for us to "choose life, so that [we] and [our] children may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19), "[takes] no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but [would] rather that they turn from their wicked ways and live" (Ezekiel 33:11) and yearns for us to be reconciled to Him by accepting Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. He's a God who "does not show favouritism" (Acts 10:34) and when Joshua asked "Are you for us or for our enemies?" (Joshua 5:13), the reply was, "Neither ... but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come" (Joshua 5:14). The question, in other words, is not whether God's on our side, but whether we're on His. We need to keep all this constantly in mind in the battles ahead, remembering too that, as the apostle Paul was careful to underline, "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12).

This is the background for understanding what Exodus tells us God has set Himself against, and how His people need to position themselves to align with Him. Before we get into the meat of that, three points just to make sure we read the Exodus text the right way:

The first is, **it was Egypt which picked a fight** by targeting God's chosen people, Israel. A previous Pharaoh had said, "Come, we must deal shrewdly with [the Israelites] or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country." (Exodus 1:10). There followed the first attempted genocide of the Jews as Hebrew midwives were told, "if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live" (Exodus 1:16) and, when that didn't work, "Pharaoh gave this order to his people: 'Every [Israelite] boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but every girl let live.'" (Exodus 1:22). Then and in later generations, Pharaoh "set [himself] against [God's] people and [would] not let them go." (Exodus 9:17). Taking this stand against God's plans and purposes inevitably brought conflict with the Almighty, leading God to "stretch out [His] hand against Egypt" (Exodus 7:5) and "send the full force of [His] plagues against [Pharaoh] and [his] officials and [his] people, so [they] may know that there is no-one like me in all the earth" (Exodus 9:14). This wasn't His petty vengeance or megalomaniac exercise of might, simply one particularly powerful example of the Clash of Kingdoms. The repeated use of the word *against* in Exodus (see also Exodus 10:16, 14:25, 14:31) highlights the opposition between two mutually antagonistic realms. The narrative strips back layer upon layer until we come to the essential spiritual reality underlying what we perceive with our five senses. We'll get to that in just a moment.

The second point is that **God doesn't have one law for His chosen ones and another law for everyone else.** When Moses pleaded, "O Lord, please send someone else to do it [free Israel, because] Then the LORD's anger burned against Moses" (Exodus 4:13-14). God will be against anyone who's opposed to Him, His laws, His ways, His plans and His purposes. It doesn't matter what our pedigree is, how greatly gifted we might be, or what wonderful work we might have done in years gone by. In the great Clash of Kingdoms, it's

important not only that we choose the right side, but that we make every effort to stay on it.

The third point is, **we're not condemned by birth or any other outward circumstance to be separated from God.** Quite the opposite: when the Israelites left Egypt, "Many other people went up with them" (Exodus 12:38). We can't know for sure whether these were simply the slaves and downtrodden of subject races or classes, or whether they perhaps included "officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the LORD" (Exodus 9:20), but clearly it wasn't Hebrews alone who recognised the presence and activity of the one true God. The LORD wants us all to come to a place of freedom and use that freedom to accept Him into our lives – to choose life. If you haven't already done it, why not tell Him today that you'd like that, too?

Having set the scene, let's look in more detail at where and why the hammer blow of the Tenth Plague fell, as that's key to seeing how the Clash of Kingdoms plays out during all that Exodus describes. God says that in striking down the first-born of Egypt, "I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD." (Exodus 12:12). Characters and events in this story are historical, but also archetypes and forerunners. Pharaoh is an Antichrist figure, the front man for malign forces, the snake king: as a mark of divinity or authority, Egyptian gods and kings were often depicted wearing the *uræus*, a headband with a rearing cobra's head, whose job was to spit poison into the eyes of the wearer's enemies. One of the first times Moses and Aaron went before Pharaoh, snakes were conjured up by the Egyptian magicians (Exodus 7:11-12) – a serpent being the creature which tempted Adam and Eve: "Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1).

Ancient Egypt was one of the most polytheistic societies of all time. Over a hundred gods/goddesses have been identified for sure, and there were almost certainly plenty more. Pretty much everything was deified, from the sun and the Nile River to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field. This was the spiritual reality behind the impressive outward appearance of Egyptian civilisation – a land where *everyone* was a slave, because the Egyptians themselves were in bondage to dark forces, treated by Satan as cannon fodder and collateral damage in the great Clash of Kingdoms.

The plagues were expressly designed to show that the Egyptian deities were false gods and to reveal their powerlessness in the face of the Almighty. They weren't aimed primarily at human beings, but at the evil holding people captive, with each plague directed at specific Egyptian deities. They showed these idols to be exactly what the prophet Isaiah described hundreds of years later: "gods who cannot save" (Isaiah 45:20). So, at the start of the Old Covenant era instituted through Moses, we see God comprehensively defeating His enemies and making a public spectacle of them, just as Jesus did at the start of the New Covenant era when, "having disarmed the [spiritual] powers and authorities [of evil], he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." (Colossians 2:15). A necessary first step on our journey of freedom is to see false gods for what they are, but just as (if not more) important is what comes next.

God immediately follows the declaration, “I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt” with the proclamation, “I am the LORD.” (Exodus 12:12). Having set us free to choose, God’s desire is to take us through the waters of baptism and rebirth (prefigured in Exodus by crossing of the Red Sea), cause us to receive and obey His commandments (Sinai) and bring us to salvation (Canaan, the Promised Land). It’s a journey that requires we make Him and nothing or no-one else the object of worship: what God says in Exodus 12:12 feeds directly into the words of the first of the Ten Commandments: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:2-3).

For anyone who’s not yet allowed God to take them on this wonderful adventure of Red Sea, Sinai and on to Canaan, why not start today? But for those already on the way, the question is: what part do we have to play here and now in the still-unfolding Clash of Kingdoms, and how should we go about it? (By the way, as we talk about a Clash of Kingdoms, it’s important to recognise this isn’t a fight between more or less equally matched foes. It’s a battle in which God is not only overwhelmingly superior, but has already shown Himself the victor. That’s not to say there isn’t hard combat ahead, though, since while “the battle belongs to the LORD” (2 Chronicles 20:15), there are still things we need to do.)

In Exodus 12, we don’t read of the Israelites doing any physical fighting. Yet there’s a clear warfare element involved, hence God talking of bringing “your divisions out of Egypt” (Exodus 12:17, see also Exodus 6:26, 7:4, 12:41, 12:51 and the references to Israel’s army in Exodus 14:19-20). While God is dealing with the false gods of Egypt, His people’s task is to adopt the right posture through:

Placing themselves under God’s protection by applying the blood of the lamb to their doorposts and lintels (Exodus 12:7). (In the New Covenant dispensation, the blood of Jesus – our Passover lamb – is for cleansing and salvation, not warfare.)

Being precise in their obedience (Exodus 12:8-10), alert, watchful and prepared (Exodus 12:11). This is an issue of army discipline.

Faithfully recording and remembering what God is doing – not just for the benefit of the “generations to come” (Exodus 12:14) but also to tell others in their own day. Hearing from Moses what happened in Egypt, his father-in-law Jethro exclaimed, “Now I know that the LORD is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly.” (Exodus 18:11).

Dealing with the leaven of sin in their lives (Exodus 12:15-20). The “sinful nature ... and the Spirit ... are in conflict with one another” (Galatians 5:17) – the Clash of Kingdoms can even play out within us.

Being uncompromising towards evil: “whoever eats anything with yeast in it must be cut off from the community of Israel, whether he is an alien or native-born.” (Exodus 12:19).

These become the springboard for Israel's subsequent warfare. They give rise to **an attitude of radical praise** following the crossing of the Red Sea: Moses and the Israelites sang, "Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" (Exodus 15:11). And they enable the people to **take the battle to the Amalekites** in Exodus 17:8-16. Under the guidance of God and the inspired leadership of Moses and Joshua, shortly after leaving Egypt a ragtag rabble of former slaves became a formidable fighting force. Praise is key in our present-day warfare: it **lifts up the Son of Man** to draw all people to Himself (John 12:32), **encourages** His people, gives us the right focus by **fixing our eyes on Jesus** (Hebrews 12:2), **puts false gods in their rightful place**, creates an atmosphere **God delights to inhabit** (Psalm 22:3, KJV) and **demons must therefore flee** and causes **the enemy to turn on itself** (2 Chronicles 20:22-23).

As we consider warring for God's kingdom through the way we live out our walk of faith, notice God's (concentric and overlapping) designated spheres of operation for Israel – from the whole community down to family, household and neighbour (Exodus 12:3-4). The Bible endorses neither the atomised individualism of modern Western culture, nor the collectivism of totalitarian regimes, but requires that we hold the collective and the individual in tension. We alone have responsibility for "[working] out our salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12), yet we're also called both to support and care for fellow believers and to be active in wider communities, whether local, regional or national.

Exodus has a great deal to say about warfare. The combat it describes is multi-layered – physical and spiritual, internal and external, past, present and future. It involves battles fought on our behalf, battles deferred, battles lost and battles won, battles in the heavenly realms and battles on earth. It describes war against a neglectful prophet (Exodus 4:18-26) a disobedient people (Exodus 32:26-35), a recalcitrant enemy (Exodus 14:13-31) and an implacable foe (Exodus 17:8-16). It takes conventions of human conflict and turns them upside down, inside out and back to front. In the process, the utter powerlessness of the strongest earthly potentates and most malign spirits in the face of Almighty God is demonstrated beyond all argument, for He is revealed as Lord of Hosts, "mighty in battle" (Psalm 24:8) and "a strong tower against the foe" (Psalm 61:3).

Last week Lynda spoke about there being no compromise with evil. The sad fact is that in this nation we've compromised with evil over and over again during my lifetime. We've done it out of cowardice and fear of man, through carelessness and laziness. But we've also done it for what might have seemed at the time like commendable reasons – out of politeness or tolerance or a desire to welcome others. Now we see clearer than ever where this has led. We must no longer give evil our assent, but should confront it and resist it. Our compromise has allowed evil's foothold to become a stronghold that's in danger of turning into a stranglehold. To play our part in the Clash of Kingdoms, we need to separate ourselves from it, place ourselves firmly on God's side, renounce and repent of all false worship, "give glory to the LORD and proclaim his praise in [these] islands." (Isaiah 42:12). Amen.