

*Exodus: A Journey Toward Liberation*  
*The Challenge of Liberation*

Exodus 5:1 – 11:10

Michael Barrett preaching, August 6, 2017

This morning we will reflect on the challenges of liberation as expressed in Exodus 5:1- 11:10. This is the second segment of our journey and now the drama intensifies. As we travel along this course please continue to pay attention to three things. Note how the conflict between oppressor and oppressed escalates at virtually each step. Please note the symbiotic relationship between the divine actions of Yahweh and the human work of Moses. And finally, note the two driving imperatives of “You shall know that I AM Yahweh” and “Send My People Out” (or in its gentler form “Let My People Go”) and how those two commands relate.

Today, we will focus on three points. First, we will look at the challenge and cost of confronting oppression in terms of reaction from the oppressor (Bricks and Without Straw, 5:1 -6:1). Second, we will look at the challenge and cost of confronting oppression by examining reactions of the oppressed and of Yahweh (I Am Yahweh, 6:2-30). And finally, we look at the plagues or the ‘signs and wonders’ themselves -- the prologue to them, their themes, the necessity for them, and their meaning and order (Aaron’s Staff, Nine Plagues, and the Warning of a 10th Plague, 7:1 – 11:10).

Brick Without Straw – The reaction of the oppressor.

In this passage we actually see two hostile confrontations. The first is between Moses and Aaron on one hand, and the pharaoh and his advisors on the other. The second is between the pharaoh and the Israelite foremen. Both confrontations are important to consider.

In the first, Moses and Aaron inform pharaoh of Yahweh’s command (This is what the Lord says) to hold a festival in the desert to glorify Yahweh. Doing so indicates a loyalty to Yahweh rather than to the pharaoh and also proposes traveling to an area outside pharaoh’s control. The request is not unusual – other slaves have from time to time been given time off to worship their own, non-Egyptian deities.

Pharaoh responds in a manner dismissive, insulting, and threatening. *Who is the Lord? Why should I obey him? I do not know the Lord. I will not let*

*Israel go. Get back to work!* He confesses ignorance, but seeks no enlightenment (although he and certainly his advisors were well versed in the nature Semitic gods). He refuses to recognize any authority other than his own. He considers only the economic needs of his empire and not the well being of his subjects. Further, the pharaoh decides to commit himself to a greater abuse of his slaves by withdrawing supplies of the straw needed to make stronger bricks. He forces the slaves to gather straw on their own, thus lengthening work hours. *This is what pharaoh says* he mocks

These brick making slaves are already working in 100-degree heat; driven by impossibly high quotas, wear only brief aprons and no hats. Their hands and feet are abraded. They are often dehydrated, experiencing kidney failure. Of course, under these conditions, the new quotas cannot be met. The Egyptian slave drivers beat and punish those Israelites acting as foremen and we witness a rupture between these two classes of workers. The Israelite foremen decide to approach and to appeal to the pharaoh. They do not cry out to Yahweh. The pharaoh dismisses them with insults and threats.

These foremen, expelled from pharaoh's presence, immediately happen across Moses and Aaron. In an act of horizontal violence they blame Moses and Aaron for souring their relations with pharaoh.

Note some of the classic reactions of the oppressor (Have we witnessed such in our own lifetimes?):

Ignorance is professed by the powerful but no enlightenment is sought.

Reliance is made on the presumed authority of the oppressor.

There is stiff resistance to reason and no interest in negotiation.

Harsher measures are undertaken in an attempt to stifle dissent and protest.

Liberation leaders are characterized as outside agitators.

Attempts are undertaken to divide the oppressed people by driving a wedge between people and leaders.

I Am Yahweh

Now, Exodus turns to the reactions of the oppressed and the reaction of Yahweh. Three elements stand out – the Israelites, Moses, and Yahweh.

The once hopeful Israelites, many of whom had just recently bowed down and worshipped Yahweh, now refuse to listen to Moses and Aaron. They are

bitterly disappointed. Their very spirit is broken. The Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman describes their situation as one of ‘saturated hopelessness.’ Enmeshed in bondage, burdened by unrealistic work demands, worn down by the continual struggle just to survive, and with no place to call home; they see no peaceful alternative to slavery. And that my friends leads to violence – first horizontal as in the case of the foremen attacking their own race, and perhaps later in the form of violent revolution or civil war. Yahweh wants to build relationships, bring emancipation, and establish covenants. But the Israelites are now deaf to God’s call. Some are angry. More are in despair. And despair is always a formidable enemy of God. But it does not stop Moses.

Moses does the right thing. He does not appeal to the pharaoh for mercy. He takes his troubles to Yahweh. He complains to Yahweh. He goes to Yahweh in prayer. He seeks God’s advice, not that of some perceived powerful ruler. And Yahweh responds with His reaction to oppression. Yahweh does this in two ways

First, with the reminder, I am in control. I am sovereign. I am the Lord. Four times he reminds Moses of this reality in just this single passage. I AM Lord.

Second, with the promise. Yahweh proclaims the seven ‘wills’ of liberation. These seven wills we all need to hear and to remember and to believe. There are the stuff of faith and hope and love.

I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians (the oppressor).

I will free you from slavery (the oppression)

I will redeem you (Yahweh will take action)

I will take you as my people (Yahweh will adopt us)

I will be your God (Yahweh will be forever there for us)

I will bring you to the land (improvement not just emancipation is promised)

I will give it to you as a possession (happiness and joy lasting forever)

The Plagues: the Signs and Wonders.

And now we begin to see Yahweh stretch out His arm with mighty acts of judgment to vouchsafe his promise. The plagues begin to unfold and often the reoccurring drama seems almost formulaic:

Moses and Aaron relay Yahweh's command to send out Yahweh's people. They will accompany this command by the threat of some calamity so that pharaoh and the Egyptians will know that Yahweh is Lord. Pharaoh refuses the request or sometimes bargains in bad faith. Moses and Aaron depart and the plague ensues. The pharaoh pleads for cessation. Moses prays. Yahweh lifts the plague, but then the pharaoh's heart hardens and the cycle begins again with increasingly destructive consequences.

We see a prologue of all of this in the encounter during which Aaron's staff turns into a snake, which then swallows up pharaoh's snakes. Although this encounter is somewhat less dramatic, it is important not to miss it.

The struggle for power, control and sovereignty is now fatally joined. Staffs are symbols of authority for both Egyptians and Israelites. When Aaron cast his staff to the ground we do not know for sure that it turned into a snake. The Hebrew word is 'tannin' which could mean a large sea monster, a dragon, a water reptile like a crocodile, or a snake. We do know that tannins and snakes are associated with chaos in Genesis. We also know that the female Cobra snake is the national symbol of ancient Egyptian power.

The act of swallowing up denotes many things: 1) the chaos which Yahweh will bring will overcome pharaoh's power, 2) the swallower acquires the power of what is swallowed up, and 3) just as pharaoh's snakes are swallowed up by Aaron's snake, so will pharaoh's armies be swallowed up by the Red Sea

### Harding of the Heart

Over the course of the several plagues, we repeatedly hear a phrase about the hardening of pharaoh's heart. Much of the time this is self-inflicted by the pharaoh himself, but sometimes Yahweh is credited with doing the hardening. For many folks this is very worrisome to say the least. The concern is this: Did Yahweh make the pharaoh do evil or be inclined to do evil, and then hold pharaoh accountable for the evil deeds?

Although Yahweh may of course do whatever he will, some different thoughts and alternatives about heart hardening:

Yahweh was so angry with pharaoh, that Yahweh did indeed; punish pharaoh by taking away his free will, his ability to do right, and his capacity to repent.

Pharaoh's heart had to be hardened because, otherwise, the pharaoh might have, with a softened heart, let the Israelites go too early. The story then would have not worked out as well.

Pharaoh was already well down the behavioral road to hardening his own heart, so Yahweh just enhanced the pharaoh's willpower to carry out the character the pharaoh was already determined to form.

The word 'hardened' may also mean to strengthen – in sense to take away fear (stout-hearted men). Yahweh endowed, blessed the pharaoh with the fortitude to make decisions out of the pharaoh's own free will and not because the pharaoh was frightened or scared by plagues. Pharaoh was given multiple chances to make a decision, a decision not dictated by fear, to do right, to repent, to do the will of Yahweh, and to release the Israelites. The pharaoh, not Yahweh, determined the pharaoh's final decisions.

### The Necessity of the Plagues

Also, sometimes worrisome, is the number and severity of the plagues. Some thoughts about their necessity and strength: Yahweh demonstrates his unlimited power in seriously opposing oppression. The universality of Yahweh's glory necessitates several plagues as testimony to His opposition to oppression (one plague might have been easily forgotten).

[Northridge earthquakes, volcanoes in Wa, Hurricanes in FL)  
Yahweh shows his authority to use all creation in opposing oppression. Yahweh provides a lesson about what our lives and the world we live in would resemble in His absence – in other words, a vision of chaos over creation. The plagues are an object lesson.  
Knowing Yahweh is Lord

The plagues are not just devices to help spring the Israelites from slavery. The plagues are intended to teach the Egyptians and the Israelites and us to know that Yahweh is the Lord.

*Over and over we hear know that I am the Lord, by this you shall know that I am the Lord, know that there is no one like the Lord, know that I am the Lord in this land, so you may know that there is no one like me, and you may know I am God.*

The Ancient Egyptians recognized over 1500 deities. And in the course of the plagues, Yahweh discredits most of the major ones – Hopi’s Nile is turned to blood, Nut’s sky is filled with thunder and hail, Shu’s air is filled with gnats and flies, Amanuet’s protection saves no one from boils, Geb’s earth brings forth frogs and locusts, Ra’s sun is blotted out, neither warrior Anta-arat nor savior Anher are able to guard people, places, or things, Osiris can not reverse death, and at the top of the chart, Horus, the God of the Rulers, is revealed as impotent as his pharaoh.

But breathe not too easily my sisters and brothers. The Egyptians had their quota of false Gods. Do we not have some of our own? Idols with which we have subtly replaced Yahweh – wealth, power, position, career, busyness, and so on. How many of those idols are oppressing our lives? Interfering with the relationship Yahweh wants with us? How does Yahweh strive to liberate us from our own false Gods?

### The Sequence of the Plagues

The Plagues are not a series of randomly selected individual calamities. There is an order to them, a progression, and a deepening sense of disarray, discord, and dysfunction. What Yahweh demonstrates to us is nothing short of the unraveling of Creation. Remember the first seven days of Creation – “Let there be light,” “let there be dry land.” Connect the dots! Exodus is now the antithesis of Genesis. We see chaos move first out of water, then onto to land, then down from to the skies and finally, into the being of life itself.

The fist three plagues (the Nile turns to blood, the invasion of frogs, and the infestation of gnats or mosquitoes) are all water source-orientated. The life support system of Egypt, the Nile, is an instrument of death. Frogs, which should stay near the river, come onto land – the boundaries between sea and land are blurred. Wild animals are inexplicitly mixed up with domesticated ones. Even the smallest of river pests – mosquitoes – come inland to raise pain. Creation’s second and third day collapse into chaos.

The second three plagues (swarms of flies, diseased livestock, and an epidemic of boils) are all land source-orientated. But, the land of Goshen is spared. Flies spread the chaos of contamination. Livestock – horses, cattle, chickens, sheep, goats, oxen, and camels are stricken and die. Production of milk and meat food ceases; labor, clothing, transportation and military industries all seriously impaired. Boils and other skin diseases strike humans and undomesticated animals. Pharaoh's advisors even cannot stand. Moses refuses to worship in Egypt. Creation's fifth and sixth day collapse into chaos.

The third three plagues (thundering hailstorm, locust onslaught, and the fall of pitch darkness) are all sky-source orientated. The hailstorm is the worst ever recorded and spares no vegetation other than some unripe wheat. The wind borne locust descend, 50 million or more to each square mile and consume 100000 tons of vegetation every 12 hours. Creation's third day falls into further chaos. Moses refuses to use children (and women) as bargaining chips for liberation. Darkness falls – the complete terror of blindness. A darkness so heavy it can be tasted. A darkness, perhaps, mixed with sand. Moses refuses to leave flocks and herds behind. The sun and stars are gone. Light is gone. Creation's fourth and fifth day collapse into chaos.

### A Final Warning

Now the parties are going for broke. There is no turning back. The final plague will be the ultimate reversal, Yahweh tells Moses. Pharaoh sealed this fate when he ordered the murdering of the first born of Israel not once but twice. It is the most intense and extreme of all the plagues. Yahweh is going to stop this drama. To do so, Yahweh will walk the land, not to kill, but to quietly and simply withdraw the gift of life.

Next week we seek to understand this God of Liberation – Exodus 12:1 – 15:21

Please listen to what Yahweh has told us this morning:

Know that I AM in charge: bring your problems to me, first.

Know me – I will stop at nothing to fight the injustices you are suffering. I will stop at nothing to liberate you from them. I will stop at nothing to bring you joy. Have the courage, the passion, and the confidence to know me.

Always trust me in times of injustice, resignation, capitulation, oppression, and especially, outright despair, for I am with you. Never forget my promise to liberate you in seven ways.

Know that the behaviors you engage in, may not only define you, they may consume you.

Know that I want you to search for me and see me and understand me in the creation I am making for you. Amen.