

6 Rescue – Sacrifice Exodus 12:1-13

My daughter came to me the other day with some maths homework she needed help with and I'm afraid to say that I am reaching that point where my memory of schoolboy mathematics is seriously starting to tail off. This time it was "Significant numbers".

To be honest the significant numbers in my life these days are those telling me what's left in my bank account when I check the balance at an ATM, or those which tell me what size trousers I realistically need to be considering when I'm in a clothes shop.

So what did I do with this "big question"? I did what thousands of other parents do everyday – I Googled it. Job done!

But in our reading from Exodus this morning (and in the chapters around it) there are some pretty significant numbers too; ten plagues, death of the first born, the sacrifice of one lamb per household and these significant numbers should throw up some pretty big questions too;

Why does God kill the first born Egyptians?

Why did the Hebrew people have to be protected too?

And what was the significance in the lamb?

Shall we Google it? Let's not this morning, let's turn back to God's Word and see what we discover there.

So, first of all, why does God kill the first born Egyptians?

It seems a bit extreme doesn't it? But we begin to see how it came about if we go back to Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush. It is there that God tells Moses upfront that "the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him."

Pharaoh is an unyielding ruler, so although we read later on that God hardens Pharaoh's heart against Moses' requests, in doing that God is merely speeding up the decision making process of a proud man who has no time for the God of the Hebrew people.

And that disregard of God by Pharaoh is critical to these events because fundamentally it is that refusal to acknowledge God which is the root of his problems – Pharaoh is in open rebellion against God. That's why in verse 12 of chapter 12 God explains who the mighty hand which will eventually compel the Egyptian King to release the Hebrews belongs to and why God is so committed to action; God says "I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD."

So here is the point; Pharaoh is not under any circumstances going to release the Hebrew people. Linked to that he has no respect for YHWH their God and instead he worships idols; false gods and actively fights against the one and only true God despite all the evidence which should, in fact, convince him of God's holiness.

These verses then record the battle royale between the God of righteousness and the false gods trusted by the king of rebellion and the good news is that YHWH – the LORD will not be defeated. We can fight all we like against God, we can refuse to acknowledge his authority all we want and we can insist on worshipping our own gods be they Ra or material wealth, but at the end of the day, if we do, God will judge us for our rebellion and his judgement will stand.

But let's get one thing straight here, YHWH is not "God with a short fuse", you can't accuse God of not giving Pharaoh fair warning – nine plagues; blood, frogs, gnats, flies, livestock, boils, hail, locusts and darkness. It should have woken the Egyptian king up from his self-delusion.

At the beginning of it all the Pharaoh's magicians seem to be able to keep up; false gods can do a good impression of being powerful. But very quickly the magicians get left behind and they don't hold back in telling their king that they are convinced that the plagues are the work of God, but Pharaoh will not listen, he will not let Moses and Hebrew people go, he has set himself and his nation on a collision course with God.

So what we have in Exodus is not a capricious or violent God, but actually God declaring righteous judgement on the false gods of the Egyptians. It is God who gives Pharaoh every opportunity to change his mind, but who ultimately will deal with sinful rebellion. And how does God deal with sin? Well, because God is just and righteous and holy he judges sin; "I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD."

But then, if that is the case, what do we make of our second question; Why did the Hebrew people have to be protected from God's judgement too? Well, in a nutshell, it was because they too were sinners. Let me give you a big example; Whilst Moses is serving God and working for the release from slavery of the Hebrew people they begin by grumbling against him.

Because Pharaoh's initial response to the request to leave is to increase the workload of his slaves the Israelite foremen seek out Moses and his brother and say, "May the LORD look upon you and judge you!"

They aren't actually interested in what God is doing but they will use pseudo-religious language to criticise God's servants. It is just an example of their sinfulness. So if God is going to judge the Egyptians for their rebellion against him (which is what sin is) then in all fairness (and God is always fair) he has to judge the Hebrew people too. If the final plague is to be the death of the firstborn then it will have to be the death of the firstborn sons of the Egyptians and the firstborn sons of the Hebrews.

And that is bad news for us as well, because we too are all sinners, we too deserve God's judgement. We only need to look around us to see that we live in a world which takes for granted that human beings are sinful. In his book "Basic Christianity" John Stott puts it like this;

"Much that we take for granted in a 'civilized' society is based upon the assumption of human sin. Nearly all legislation has grown up because human beings cannot be trusted to settle their own disputes with justice and without self-interest. A promise is not enough; we need a contract. Doors are not enough; we have to lock and bolt them. The payment of fares is not enough; tickets have to be issued, inspected and collected. Law and order are not enough; we need the police to enforce them. All this is due to man's sin. We cannot trust each other. We need protection against one another. It is a terrible indictment of human nature."

And that is bad news for us because as we have seen God will not let sin go un-noticed, un-judged or unpaid for. Romans 2:5-6 spells it out, "...because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God will give to each person according to what he has done."

This is the real danger that we all face because in our hearts we have all at some time spoken just like Pharaoh did when he sneered at Moses, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him".

So, because God really is just and he has no favourites then when he judges the Egyptians he is going to judge the Hebrew slaves too, but because they are his people God graciously gives them a way of escape and that brings us to our final question; What was the significance in the lamb?

In order to escape God's judgement, each family is to take a lamb, a lamb which is not to be weak or old or diseased, in other words there is to be no casual attitude towards God in this and the lamb is to be sacrificed to God. Why?

Well, how does the Bible tell us death enter the world? Because of sin, so, what are the wages of sin? Again the Bible tells us; death. The just penalty for sin is death. If sin separates us from God because of his holy wrath then the only way to satisfy his just judgement is to die, but God allowed animal sacrifice to pay for human guilt and later in the Old Testament God's priests offered an animal sacrifices to God every morning. Every single day God's people were to be publicly reminded of their sinfulness.

The Old Testament sacrificial system was there so that sinful people could be spared the consequences of their sin by animals paying the price. God absolutely takes no pleasure in the death of anything, but because the just judgement on sin is death then it has to be paid.

So if the Hebrew people are to be spared God's judgement in Egypt then they must make a sacrifice, but the significance of the lamb works on two levels.

First; the here and now. The Hebrew people need to kill a lamb and put its blood on the doorframe of the house, why? Well, God gives Moses this message to pass on, "The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt." It is a sign for God's people that they are God's people, safe from his righteous wrath against sin because the lamb has died as their substitute and it is a sign to God that no penalty for sin is outstanding in that family; the price has been paid.

But the second level this story works on is that it is an enormous arrow pointing us to the New Testament and to Jesus. John the Baptist described Jesus as “the lamb of God” – what a strange thing to call him, except that Jesus is precisely that.

Because of our sin, which we have seen is endemic in our world, you and I are in just as much danger as the Hebrews were, we are sinners one and all and rightly deserving of God’s righteous judgement and condemnation, but God has taught us an amazing lesson in Exodus – because he loves his people he graciously saves by substitution. John the Baptist said, “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”. In the same way that the lamb in Egypt temporarily took away the sin of the family until God’s immediate judgement had passed Jesus is the one who dies in our place as our substitute.

But because Jesus is not an animal, because he is the very son of God his substitutionary sacrifice is so much greater. On the cross Jesus dies to pay for our sins once and for all.

But like the Hebrews we need to respond with faith. They needed to paint the blood of the lamb on their doorposts, if they didn’t act in faith, they were in terrible danger; God’s judgement on sin would fall on them. Likewise we actively need to respond like Paul who told the Corinthians “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.” We need to have real faith that his death has paid our penalty and freed us from God’s just judgement on us.

So, what difference does this make to us? Perhaps we need to take our sin seriously, I wonder if we always do? We need to recognise that God takes our sin very seriously and that if we ignore it we are storing up his judgement against us. God is loving, but he is just and righteous and holy too.

The good news – the amazing news in these verses is that no need to be afraid, because God has provided a means of escape for us; if we will trust in Jesus; the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world as our saviour then we can know life in all its fullness.

Perhaps we have already asked God to forgive our sins, put our trust in Jesus and accepted him as our Lord and saviour, but have we become blasé? It didn't take long for the Hebrew people to start grumbling against God after he had graciously saved them. So, for example, when we share communion do we really remember with gratitude and joy the amazing price Jesus paid on our behalf.

Today as we gather around the Lord's Table we would do well to remember Jesus' own words in John 6:53-56, "Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him."

Sharing the bread and the wine is a special sign to us that Jesus died in our place and if our hearts and minds are truly and wholeheartedly handed over to him then his blood marks us out before God as innocent through his sacrifice. Such a wonderful truth should inspire us afresh to worship God and to serve him with joy. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!" Let it be so in our lives. Amen.

