

Miracles or Magic?

Exodus 7:8-25

I want to begin this morning not in Exodus, with the writings of Moses, but with Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. For there, in Paul's theological description and explanation of the ultimate battle between good and evil, we see the fulfillment of what takes place back in Exodus 7. Paul writes about the second coming of our Lord Jesus at the end of this age.

2 Thes. 2:1 "Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, 2 not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. 3 Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, 4 who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God."

He continues.

2 Thes. 2:5 "Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? 6 And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. 7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. 9 The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, 10 and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. 11 And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, 12 that they all may be

condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness."

It is those last verses that give us such a helpful commentary on our text in Exodus. You see, the lawless one who works for Satan, shows himself "with all power, signs, and lying wonders." Supernatural power, used for evil. Wonders and miracles, expressing a lie. And Paul tells us what God is doing in all that, "And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness."

So that's what we have in Exodus.

I. THE DEMONSTRATION OF POWER.

Power exerted by good, by God. And power exerted for evil, on behalf of Pharaoh.

v.8-12

Amazing, isn't it, that Pharaoh's magicians could imitate the Lord's prophet! But what a contrast, between the forbidden power of magic and the almighty power of God.

A. The forbidden power of magic.

One of the things God had made abundantly clear to his people was the prohibition against magical powers, often called sorcery in the Bible. Mention is made of soothsayers. Spiritists, those who consult mediums. For example,

Deut. 18:9 "When you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. 10 There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer,

or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, 11 or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. 12 For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you. 13 You shall be blameless before the LORD your God. 14 For these nations which you will dispossess listened to soothsayers and diviners; but as for you, the LORD your God has not appointed such for you.”

That is as plain as it can possibly be! No witchcraft. No fortune telling. No omens, mediums, no spells or attempts to communicate with the dead. No magic. Nothing that we would label today as “the occult.”

And why? Because they are all false, they all proceed from a false god. The revelation of their power is a false revelation. And by contrast, those things all deny the reality of God’s own supernatural revelation in the prophet like Moses, who is Jesus! So all magical arts are opposed to Jesus! Then and now, in whatever form them might be expressed.

Now, I don’t mean those things that are more accurately called “illusions.” Modern magicians whose “magic” consists only in the skillful ability to make you see something other than what really happened is not the focus. Rather, those things that would be more in the realm of black magic. And you ought to include horoscopes in that, and astrology--the signs of the stars. Palm readings, fortune tellers. Ouija boards. All of it!

Because all those things are a rebellion against God’s self-revelation in his only begotten son Jesus. So don’t even begin to dabble in those things. Don’t for a moment think that they are innocent and untouched by evil. Any magical power, other than God’s own display of his own power, is forbidden.

And don’t be fooled. Don’t think for a single moment that though they might appear to be good that they are! Don’t believe the lie that they are actually nothing at all, nothing other than a subject for our own curiosity. Stay away! It isn’t innocent! Dabbling in spiritual powers other than those of the one true God, is evil. It is forbidden.

All of that clearly implies that magical powers are real. Evil powers are real. And the occult is real. Satan is real.

There is certainly some speculation that that miracles of Pharaoh's magicians are actually nothing other than illusion, intentional deceptions, but I tend to think not. I think that Pharaoh’s men threw down their rods and they became serpents, too. I think that Pharaoh’s men imitated the sign of turning the water into blood, too. Evil power is still real.

Mat. 24:24 “For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.”

Thus this warning ought to be sufficient,

2 Cor. 11:13 “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. 15 Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.”

But notice the wonderful contrast here in Exodus 7, the contrast between this forbidden power of magic and,

B. The almighty power of God.

Pharaoh’s magicians are, after all, imitators. You see nothing original in them. Nothing to demonstrate themselves to be

superior. And in fact, look at just how inferior they really are.

v.12

When you imagine that scene in your mind, you might even want to indulge in a very satisfying chuckle! How ridiculous this whole thing is. Pharaoh's magicians try to show off their power by turning their rods into serpents just like Aaron did, and the serpent from Aaron's rod just eats up the others! So great is the almighty power of God. Beloved, all of that really happened! And then another display of God's power.

II. THE POWER OF LIFE AND DEATH.

The first of the ten plagues. The plague of blood.

v.17

Why is that so significant? Because blood means death!

Lev. 17:10. "And whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. 11 For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.' 12 Therefore I said to the children of Israel, 'No one among you shall eat blood, nor shall any stranger who dwells among you eat blood.' 13 "Whatever man of the children of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who hunts and catches any animal or bird that may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with dust; 14 for it is the life of all flesh. Its blood sustains its life. Therefore I said to the children of Israel, 'You shall not eat the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off.'"

"The life of the flesh is in the blood." And the pouring out of blood is a description of death. So we read,

v.18-21

God's message is so very clear. It is,

A. A warning of death.

God is revealing his power with a clear demonstration of his right to inflict death. Remember he pronounced that right at the very beginning, in the garden of Eden,

Gen. 2:16 "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 17but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

A warning of death. At creation. In Egypt. And in the future, too. Consider,

Rev. 16:1 "Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, "Go and pour out the bowls of the wrath of God on the earth." 2 So the first went and poured out his bowl upon the earth, and a foul and loathsome sore came upon the men who had the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. 3 Then the second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it became blood as of a dead man; and every living creature in the sea died. 4 Then the third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood. 5 And I heard the angel of the waters saying: "You are righteous, O Lord, The One who is and who was and who is to be, Because You have judged these things. 6 For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, And You have given them blood to drink. For it is their just due." 7 And I heard another from the altar saying, "Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments."

That is what this is all about. "Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments." Such is,

B. The revelation of glory.

The revelation of God's glory. Through his judgments!

That's what the world today misses, with the popular perceptions of God and the popularized preaching of his word. God's glory is revealed through this power over life and death, through the power to inflict the punishment of death upon the wicked.

How could a loving God send anyone to hell? That's how the supposed dilemma is often phrased. But the answer is self-evident. God's own glory is his power unto judgment. He says so to Pharaoh.

v.17

And don't forget that NT commentary I have read already a couple times previously in our study of Pharaoh,

Rom. 9:22 "What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, 23 and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory."

Such glory revealed!

v.14-17a

Beloved, by this we still know that he is the LORD! Just as we read in Revelation, the judgement of God is a revelation of his glory. The power of God over life and death is a revelation of his glory.

Rev. 19:11 "Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. 12 His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a

name written that no one knew except Himself. 13 He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. 15 Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. 16 And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS."

That's power! And how should we respond?

Rev. 19:1 "After these things I heard a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, "Alleluia! Salvation and glory and honor and power belong to the Lord our God! 2 For true and righteous are His judgments, because He has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication; and He has avenged on her the blood of His servants shed by her." 3 Again they said, "Alleluia! Her smoke rises up forever and ever!" 4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who sat on the throne, saying, "Amen! Alleluia!" 5 Then a voice came from the throne, saying, "Praise our God, all you His servants and those who fear Him, both small and great!" 6 And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, "Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns!"

Yet how does Pharaoh respond? How do the people of Egypt respond? Clearly not with that sort of worship! Indeed, their rebellions show to us the natural condition of,

III. THE HEART OF MAN.

The natural condition of the heart is hard, deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. With Pharaoh we see,

A. Hardened pride.

v.13-14

We see that repeated in,
v.22-23

He saw the power of God, and he despised God. The more he saw of that power, the more he hated him. Just the opposite of what you might expect, if indeed man was by nature good or even innocent. Yet man is not by nature good, but rather described as dead in his trespasses and sins. And he suppresses the truth that God has revealed, according to Rom 1.

So that is what you encounter in the presence of every unbeliever. Hardness of heart. They suppress the truth of God's power which he has revealed. In creation. It is evident and obvious. God has made it so, "His invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse."

And we see this hardening not just in Pharaoh, but in all the people.
v.24-25

Don't miss that reference to seven days. This went on for seven days. God turned their water supply into blood. They had nothing to drink. So what did they do? "So all the Egyptians dug all around the river for water to drink, because they could not drink the water of the river." Rather than submit to the miraculous demonstration of God's power, and repent of their sin, instead they dig ditches to try to get their own water. Such,

B. Stubborn self-reliance.

They can do it themselves. Clearly, that is what we see in unbelievers. Ultimately, in the worst case, that has reference to their pursuit of salvation. They seek to work their own works into to earn and achieve their own salvation.

Stubbornly, they cling to their own efforts, foolishly believing against all hope that they can do enough of those good works. If God turns their life-sustaining supply of water into blood, they just dig more ditches to supply themselves with water. And they will always fail. Stubborn self-reliance will always fail.

And as much as that is true of the unbeliever seeking to be saved, it is as well true for the believer seeking to live his life for God. And this is part of the old man that we perhaps don't fight off often enough. If your efforts to do good and to obey God result from your own self-reliance, they, too, are doomed to failure. If your exercise of Christian discipline is really simply a deep rooted stubbornness, then you, too, are doomed to failure.

Stubborn fulfillment of traditional duties or obligations is not the same thing as loving the Lord your God with all your heart. Self-reliance as a strategy for doing battle with ongoing sin and with the struggles of life is not the same thing as "present[ing] your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service."

Stubborn self-reliance is not godliness, but rather pride. And that old man attacks so many of us so very, very often. Beware, for it can begin to harden your heart, too. And cause you to think, or act, as if you are really quite strong and self-sufficient.

It is humbling to confront the power of God as a great contrast to your own weakness. And it is Paul who perhaps expresses it best.

2 Cor. 12:7 “And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

So that ought to be your response to this revelation of God’s power to Pharaoh. A boasting in your own weakness, that you might trust in God alone for all your strength. It is one thing to say that your heart is not hard like Pharaoh’s. But it is quite another to say that it is as soft as Paul’s!

Symbolically, God may yet turn the water to blood in your life. And if he does, rather than dig ditches for yourself to find your own water, prepare yourselves to declare your faith. “most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me....For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Those are strong words. And deeply personal. May they would penetrate your hearts this afternoon, we are all afflicted with such pride all too easily. Put to death your own self-reliance for God says to you, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”