

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 7. Saved by a Sheep.

In full obedience to the God he was beginning to know, Moses went back to Reuel (or Jethro) and asked leave to return to his people in Egypt to see if any of them were still alive. Jethro agreed and gave him good wishes. He seemed to be sensitive to the concept of God. So Moses packed up his wife and his 2 sons and, taking the precious staff with him, set off for Egypt. Verse 19 of chapter 4 tells us God gave Moses an assurance that all those who had sought his life in Egypt, had now died and it was safe to return.

God's perfect timing shows in verse 27 where He says to Aaron, "Go into the desert to meet Moses." It sounds strange, but Aaron obeyed and went to the "mountain of God" where he met Moses and kissed him. It is strange too that such a common greeting as a kiss should be mentioned here, as if it was a special reunion. If there had been some estrangement between the two brothers it was gone now; they would be a strength and encouragement for each other. They had a lot of catching up to do.

In verse 29 Moses and Aaron brought together all the elders of the Israelites and related all that God had said to Moses, adding proof to his words by performing miraculous signs with the staff. Their hearers then took a big step forward; (verse 31) – they believed ... they heard that the Lord was concerned about them ... they bowed down and worshipped. It must have been a great encouragement to Moses. Surely a new day was dawning.

In Chapter 5 Moses and Aaron went confidently off to Pharaoh and asked that they might all go off into the desert to hold a festival to their God. Pharaoh told them there was nothing doing. "Who is this God that I should obey him?" he taunted. "The God of the Hebrews" they earnestly argued, "has met with us. Now let us obey him and go or He may bring punishment on us all." Pharaoh was not impressed, and that very day he instructed the foremen to make the slaves gather their own straw instead of supplying it for making the bricks, yet to demand the same quantity to be made in the same time. When the Israelites appealed to Pharaoh at this injustice he told them they were lazy and demanded they fill their quota of bricks.

Of course their natural reaction was to take it out on Moses and Aaron, calling on God to judge them for the mess they had created. No more worship now. Instead, "You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us." Moses in turn put the blame on God - verse 22. "O Lord, why have You brought trouble on this people? ... You have not rescued your people at all." But God was patient, and in chapter 6 assured Moses that with His mighty hand His people would indeed be released from Egypt. He gave a lovely promise in verse 7, "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God." With them He would fulfil the covenant He had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Verse 9 is sad; the Israelites did not listen to Moses' report because of their discouragement and cruel bondage. Have you ever prayed for something particular and had an answer which has only made things worse? It would be easy to stop listening to God then, wouldn't it? Never give up your faith. Sometimes, as in surgery, things have to be made worse before they can be made better. God knows what He is doing and just what you need: He will never taunt you, and the rough path where He leads you will end in the best possible answer for you.

In chapter 7:1-13 God encouraged Moses and Aaron to go back to Pharaoh and use the miracle of the snake and the staff to convince him. But in spite of Moses' snake gobbling up the snakes produced by the magicians, Pharaoh hardened his heart. God had given him every chance; there was nothing else for it now but to resort to drastic measures.

From chapter 7:14 to chapter 11 we find the story of the Ten Plagues, the blight on Egypt which at long last persuaded Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. It is significant that each of the plagues was against some object of Egyptian worship; God was showing Pharaoh that all the might of a pagan Egypt could not withstand the judgement of the one true God. The plagues involved many natural phenomena that were common to Egypt, and they followed in a natural progression, yet they did not just happen by chance, but were presented as mighty acts of God. They gradually got worse, from annoyance to loss of livestock, then to fear and terror with darkness, and at last, to personal devastation for all Egyptians. God gave Pharaoh increasingly dire warnings, waiting patiently for him to respond, before descending upon him in judgement. The plagues covered a period of several months.

1. Water turned to blood, undrinkable and the fish died. Hapi was the god of the Nile, and water from the Nile affected the rest of Egypt. (7:14-24)
2. Frogs (one week later) couldn't live in the water so they invaded the land. Frogs were associated with the god Hapi and goddess Heqt, related to fertility. (8:1-15)
3. Gnats (possibly mosquitoes) breed in large numbers when the Nile is flooded. The magicians were too busy scratching to try and copy this one with their tricks; in fact by this time they were coming to realise the Greater Power than their own as they said to Pharaoh "This is the finger of God." (8:16-19)
4. Flies – perhaps the “dog-fly” which has a painful bite, attracted by the decaying frogs. But now God protected Israel from them: the plagues were not haphazard! Pharaoh tries to compromise by saying they could “worship God here in the land”, and then, “go to the desert, but not very far away.” Moses was having none of that. (8:20-32)
5. Plague on livestock: this may have been anthrax, spread by the flies. Another blow to Egypt's gods – bull gods Apis and Mnevis, cow god Hathor, ram god Khnum. Israel was again spared from this plague; as a pastoral people they depended on their livestock. (9:1-7)
6. Boils – humour in this glimpse of the poor magicians! Knees and legs affected. (9:8-12) Three times Pharaoh had hardened his heart: now in verse 12 we see that *God hardened Pharaoh's heart* - a reminder of His grim warning in Genesis 6:3, "My Spirit will not contend with man forever."
7. Hail – now the Egyptians who feared the word of Israel's God were given the chance to act and escape the judgement. Pharaoh admits his sin but is unrepentant when the hail stops. Flax and barley were destroyed but the wheat and spelt had not ripened and so were saved. (9:13-35)
8. Locusts – with livestock and grain destroyed, Egypt's economy was in ruins. Pharaoh's third compromise – only the men to go. Nothing doing. (10:1-20) Note verse 14 - "Never before had there been such a plague of locusts, nor will there ever be again." The Bible differs from all other historical records, in that it often recorded history before it happened!
9. Darkness – A spring wind called “hamsin” often brought sandstorms from the desert, with visibility almost nil and the air thick with sand. A blow to Egypt's sun-god Ra. But the Israelites had light, and a time of respite from their labours, in which to gather strength for the journey ahead of them. Pharaoh's fourth compromise – leave your flocks and herds behind. (10:21-29)

It is interesting to compare these compromises with those that tempt Christians today.

1. Stay in the land of servitude and bondage to sin.

2. Don't go far away – remain borderline Christians.

3. Neglect the spiritual care and nurture of our families.

4. Compromise in the area of the stewardship of our possessions.

We need the deliverance as of the last plague – the death of the Son to give us life and freedom.

10. Death of the firstborn son. (11:1-10) This is the climax of the struggle between God and Pharaoh; it was final, drastic, the ultimate display of God's power. Note verses 2 and 3; the Israelites took no more than what was their right after the years of slavery with no wages, no freedom, no respect granted them. Moses - who 40 years before had left Egypt in disgrace - was held in high esteem by the Egyptians, and the Lord saw to it that they were favourably disposed towards all the Israelites and

were glad to give them whatever they wanted, just to see them go! A lot of this bounty was later contributed towards the completion of the Tabernacle and so used in the worship of God.

Chapter 12 is a passage of great significance in the history of Israel – the institution of the Passover. It marked the birth of the nation as a free people, but it also looked forward to Christ, our Passover Lamb, as Paul describes Jesus in 1 Corinthians 5:7. Instructions for the Passover came straight to Moses from God; it was above and beyond all man-made traditions. In verse 2 God commanded that that present month, the month of Abib, was to be the first month of the year for Israel: their new life, as this new year, was to begin with the Passover, when a lamb was to be killed and the blood spread over the sides and tops of their doorframes so that the angel of death would pass over their houses and their sons would be saved from the death that would devastate the rest of Egypt. The symbolism is relevant today, as we take shelter in the death of the perfect Lamb, Jesus, who died to save us from eternal death and give us a new life. John the Baptist sums this up in John 1:29 – “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

Verses 3,4, “Take a lamb ... one for each household ... determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat.” One lamb could feed 14 people. As the supply was to be sufficient for each person, so Jesus is sufficient for us all, whatever our needs. “He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him,” says Hebrews 7:25.

Verse 5, “The animals must be year-old males without defect,” just as 1 Peter 1:19 says, “The precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”

Verse 6, “Take care of them (from the 10th day, verse 3) until the 14th day of the month,” time to prove there was no defect. “Can any of you prove Me guilty of sin?” Jesus challenges in John 8:46. And 1 Peter 2:22 adds, “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth.”

Again in verse 6, “All the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight” – i.e. between 3 and 6 p.m. Luke 23:44-46 tells us darkness came over the land from about the 6th hour to the 9th hour – i.e. noon till 3 p.m. – .. Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit,” and when He had said this, He breathed His last.

Down to verse 46, “Do not break any of the bones,” is echoed by John 19:33 – “When they came to Jesus and found that He was already dead, they did not break his legs.”

Back to verse 7, “They are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs.” “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,” says Hebrews 9:14.

Verses 9,10, “Roast (the lamb) over the fire ...head, legs and inner parts. Do not leave any of it till morning.” Hebrews 9:14, above, “unblemished” signifies “in the entirety of Christ’s being, not just superficially.” Christ offered Himself completely to God.

And finally, verse 11, “Eat it with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand.” The Israelites had to show their faith in God by being ready for the escape He had promised would come that night. In fact the whole ritual was simply a test of faith and obedience – faith that the blood of the lamb sprinkled on the doorposts would save them from death and obedience to carry out God’s orders. We think of that simple hymn which rings as true today – *“Trust and obey, for there’s no other way!”*

Verses 12 and 13 sum up the judgement of God – “I will bring judgement on all the gods of Egypt” – and on that night of the Passover He would strike down every firstborn of Egypt, both men and animals,

while the blood spread on the doorposts of the Israeli houses would preserve them from this last destructive plague. Verse 14 continues with God's commands for the whole nation to eat bread made without yeast for the whole of the celebration week; not a crumb was to be left in their houses, and anyone who failed to comply was to be cut off from Israel. This is highly significant when we consider that later yeast was often used as a symbol of sin; the sacrifice of the lamb told of Christ's sacrifice for our sins on Calvary, and with our past sins forgiven it is our obligation to live with our hearts motivated by the love of God and not our own sinful natures.

Moses gave all these instructions to the Israelites, who had now come to a new relationship with the God they hardly knew: they bowed down and worshipped Him, and then they obeyed to the letter. Can you imagine the excitement, the fear, the wonderment, as each family ate their roast lamb standing up, clothed and ready to leave. Midnight struck and throughout the land of Egypt the firstborn of every family died, from Pharaoh on the throne to the prisoner in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock that was left after the plagues. Bitter wailing echoed throughout Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. But among Israel not one person died.

Chapter 12:29-42 describes the great escape. Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron in complete recapitulation – “Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord as you have requested. Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. And also bless me.”

“What a hide!” you might say, asking for a blessing after all he had done to despise Israel and her God; almost as bad as us, seeking God’s blessing on something we know at heart to be wrong.

The Egyptians joined in the plea, urging the Israelites to go before any more of them died, and expediting their departure by bestowing on them articles of silver and gold, and clothing. In haste the Israelites took their dough before the yeast was added, carrying it in kneading troughs wrapped up in clothing as one and all, men and women, young and old, packed up what they could carry and stepped out into the night.

Surely this is one of the most dramatic scenes in the whole Bible! Judgement had fallen at last on the unrepentant Pharaoh, but the people of God went forth like a victorious army; (Chapter 13:18, “The Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle.”) In God’s perfect timing, their journey was made possible by the light of the full moon of the spring equinox: that moon cycle has governed the date of the Jewish Passover for over 3,000 years, and since the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. it has marked our Easter as well. Passover is the oldest continuously observed religious festival known to man.

And so this downtrodden rabble of slaves took its next giant step towards becoming a holy nation. At last they were free! They were on the threshold of a great and mighty history, the nation that was to keep alive the worship of the one true God, and to hand down to us the wonderful Scriptures that even today tell us about Him. Why did God do it? Moses reminds them later, in Deuteronomy 4:37, “Because He loved your forefathers and chose their descendants after them, He brought you out of Egypt by His Presence and His great strength.”

Verse 38 says significantly, “Many other people went up with them.” Among the mumbling, grumbling, stumbling Israelites, some had shown enough of the grace of their God to impress the Egyptians - impress them enough to leave their homeland and face an uncertain life with a foreign race! Don’t despair if you can’t preach a sermon; you can show the grace of Jesus Christ by the way you live and the way you love – enough to convince the sceptic.