

Death and Deliverance Exodus 12:29-42

One of the fruits of walking slowly through a narrative book of the Bible is the natural build-ups which occur throughout. Present in the development of any good story are those parts that, though you're tempted to skim, you dare not do such a vile thing! A veteran reader understands that a story's cadence can often cause its power punches to land with more force. In the case of Exodus, the cadence has been growing and building to a crescendo-point. You might have reflections on reading this for the first time, or if you don't, just imagine an initial read-through by anyone up to this juncture in chapter 12. You're just waiting on something to break in this strained relationship between powers—earthly and cosmic. It's not hard to imagine one being locked-in, having one's attention entirely arrested, an edge-of-your-seat kind of response.

And the two very different peoples—the Egyptians and the Israelites—have two very similar experiences. Egypt—to say she had the worst few weeks in her existence as a nation is not hyperbole. Israel—to say she had an unfortunate few centuries is not a stretch either. The lots of both are about to drastically change. By an invisible Hand, both death and life will feature.

I. The Death Promised

The life-or-death instructions for the Passover, along with the establishment of the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the regulations related to it, now give way to the pinnacle point of the plagues. The terror promised by Yahweh had arrived. The warned and culpable Pharaoh would join the chorus of the weeping conquered, the fatigued king finally willing to do as God demanded through this strike of devastation.

A. Strike of Devastation

[29] At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. This is a just incursion by the LORD. He has worked for weeks reversing the good in creation as a form of His blameless displeasure: water corrupted, land infested, animals destroyed, light removed, and now life will be exacted. Within the bounds of His righteous judgment against evildoers, not as a tit for tat or returning evil for evil, does the LORD strike down **the firstborn in the land of Egypt**. This taking the life of Pharaoh's firstborn son to the prisoner's firstborn son is an expression of two extremes to show that what God was doing was a comprehensive work.¹ No earthly status accrued by any possible means could cause the destroyer to turn away. No escape for the prisoner and no acquittal for royalty was in play here. God was, and remains, the righteous Judge of all the earth.

The change, however, from the earlier promise that *the slave girl behind the mill*² would not be immune to the approaching destroyer to **the captive who was in the dungeon** here in 12:29 doesn't change the sense of what God said here. Unless the angel of destruction perceived a bloody door

¹ Douglas Stuart, *NAC: Exodus*, 292.

² Exodus 11:5

frame, no firstborn was safe from death, even those in the barn and the pasture.³ And the response proved out such horror.

B. Posture of Desperation

[30] And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians. And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead. This **great cry** here is the same term used of the cry that the Israelites expressed under bondage back in chapter three. Exodus 3:7, “*Then the LORD said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people...and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings...”*” Now, in a full and dramatic reversal of fortunes, it was the turn of the Egyptians.⁴ For, death blanketed the Egyptian populace. Every **house** could signify the death of a firstborn within a larger household, which typically had more than our Western living-arrangement customs. In antiquity it was common for extended family members to cluster under one roof or inside of one compound.⁵ The point is, every Egyptian family was deeply affected by death. Death took the firstborn, but sorrow overtook them all, from the least to the greatest, with Pharaoh himself not being spared.

All rose up in the middle of the night to a nightmare in real time. For the leader of Egypt, this was straw that broke his own back of resistance, temporarily at least.⁶ We see this in verse 31, ***Then he summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, “Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the LORD, as you have said. [32] Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone, and bless me also!”***

The exasperation reflected here is palpable. The middle-of-the-night summoning of Moses and Aaron reflects a kind of desperation by Pharaoh to rid himself of this divine curse. The prior conditions of their release, in light of the death of his own child, fall away.⁷ And the king is joined in his zeal to see the Israelites gone. Verse 33, ***The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste. For they said, “We shall all be dead.”*** The LORD, in His sovereign, relentless power, brought a world power to its knees. They are essentially begging the Israelites to leave and to not waste any time doing so. His string of wonders (disrupting creation and creaturely securities) rendered the gods of Egypt, supposedly in charge of those spaces, powerless. God likewise rendered those who would worship these gods, fools.

He brought death’s weightiness, and Egypt buckled underneath it. This king is in check. With his pawns, they are more than ready to see the board of Egypt wiped clean of any Israelite.⁸

II. The Deliverance Promised

Verse 34, ***So the people*** (what did they do?) ***took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls being bound up in their cloaks on their shoulders.*** The scene must have been

³ Psalm 78:49 refers to this event, and refers specifically to angels as the agents of God’s destruction here.

⁴ Stuart, 292.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Exodus 14:5-9

⁷ T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, 237.

⁸ And indeed, that takes place. Salvation coming on the heels of judgment is a biblical pattern we needn’t miss. It happens in the temporal sense—think the flood, Daniel, Jonah, Israel here on the heels of the death angel and at the Red Sea. And it happens, to the praise of His glorious grace, in the eternal sense through the gospel!

one of joyful frenzy. Usually, when I'm in a hurry and pressing others to be, there's little joy involved. Some in here could corroborate such a claim. God has already told His people that they would be commemorating these very moments in verses 14-20, and the moments are upon them. They left with haste.⁹ There will be no early-morning raisin cakes or pomegranate muffins.

But food, important as it was and would be for these desert wanderers, was only a portion of the picture. While these people were leaving all they ever knew, with memories going back generations, they were finally being brought into a glorious freedom, a freedom for which many of them had earnestly longed and cried out for. Yes, they were headed into a harsh landscape, into the unknown, but this deliverance would define and dominate every aspect of their faith for all time. In fact, this deliverance would be a central framework for understanding a more comprehensive, spiritual deliverance offered centuries later through another Passover Lamb. And Psalm 105:43 tells us *how* they went out of the place of their bondage, "*So he brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing.*"¹⁰ The most natural response to God's supernatural work of salvation is making melody in our hearts, making joyful noises with our lips, and making beauty rise from the various instruments you hear each Sunday.

We don't have to dig too deep to think about this in much less significant ways. A long day's work, and the clock strikes 5. Some of you leave with haste and go out singing. (I see you nurses and teachers!) The long-imprisoned is set free, and met at the gates with tears of joy and shouts of redemption and release. This scene, though it has a touch of chaos and the added pressure from Egypt to get *up* and *go*, is one of joy unspeakable! The Deliverer's strong, outstretched arm had accomplished what His people could not. The God of their fathers had lifted the clouds of slavery and saved them in the power of His might!¹¹ They went out in a hurry, but they went out happy in God.

A. *The people of God reframed*

We saw *how* Israel went out of Egypt. Psalm 106:8 tells us once again *why* He delivered them, "*Yet he saved them for his name's sake, that he might make known his mighty power.*" In His dealings with Israel, God revealed His unstoppable strength. The midwives, the man Moses, the might displayed in the plagues—all were showing us God's Person and power. But one way God was working among His people was the granting of a new sense of who they were under His rule and provision. God does not change, but He changes others.

Look at verse 35, *The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing.* Back in chapter 11, God gave Moses instructions for the people at their fresh release. They were to request supplies for their exit from Egyptian citizens and neighbors. The Bible says that they simply asked the Egyptians for *silver*, *gold*, and *clothing*, and verse 36, *the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked.* This wasn't a goodwill gesture by the Egyptians towards those they had long-enslaved. And, it wasn't a bullying move, or manipulative, or a leveraging of the moment on Israel's part either. It's recorded by Moses as an indication of

⁹ Taking dough to-go. (I'm hopeless)

¹⁰ Perhaps this is more with reference to the Red Sea event, but I think it can be safely taken more as a summary statement entailing the whole series of events, which would include the events of this passage.

¹¹ Exodus 6:6, Psalm 136:10-12

God granting His people *favor in the sight* of His (and Israel's) enemies. And this is something that God would continue to show His people as the years and centuries unfolded. Canaan's grapes, figs, milk, and honey were Israel's inheritance.¹² The gold of Babylon was used in the restoration of Jerusalem and the temple.¹³ And here, Proverbs 13:22 plays out, "*A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous.*" God will care for His people, and the resources of those in rebellion to Him aren't ever off limits. The people of God were being well-supplied for the journey out of the land.

However, beyond having what they needed in their wilderness wanderings, they are being prepared for another important task. Look at the end of verse 36 and verse 37, ***Thus, they plundered the Egyptians. [37] And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. Plundering*** is something that typically happens in the context of war.¹⁴ With the images of *men on foot*, or literally "*foot-soldiers*," and with the usage of the *hosts of the LORD* in verse 40, each indicates a renewed identity of these formerly oppressed. They will eventually conquer kings and lands for His name's sake. They had been serving Pharaoh's whims year after year, decade after decade. Now, they are marching away from their shackles as a jubilant, unburdened army under the LORD's power and blessing.

Israel no longer existed as the suffering enslaved, but as a people who will, in time, fight for Yahweh. God was granting them an identity secured by dominion over their enemies and the Passover event. Were they well trained warriors? Hardly. We can confidently doubt that they were training militarily under the noses of Egyptians. But, as one commentator wrote, "When God is at the head of an army, how powerful does it need to be?"¹⁵

The drastic shift that these images convey would only incite praise for generations to come, reaching all the way into this sanctuary! We're not an actual militia, fighting the wars of this world for plots of land or resources we need to live. But the children's song is right—I may never march in the infantry/Ride in the cavalry/Shoot the artillery/I may never fly o'er the enemy/But I'm in the Lord's army! To the whole church at Ephesus, Paul writes that God's people are to *put on the full armor of God*. He tells Timothy to *share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus*. If we live under Christ's rule, we are never unengaged from spiritual combat. God was redefining a people long-enslaved through the Passover deliverance. There, He was shaping a people to literally fight for His glory. Now, in the gospel dispensation, He is shaping a people to live, not aggressively towards others, but as those who primarily fight sin and corruption within to bring Him glory.

And notice verse 38, ***A mixed multitude also went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds.*** This is nothing less than people not from ethnic Israel getting under the umbrella of the mercy of God! We've noticed back in chapter 9 that some among the servants of Pharaoh hurried their slaves and animals to seek shelter. They believed the destructive hail was coming. Perhaps some of these Egyptians exited their homeland looking for a better one, and they found it under the reign of the true God.¹⁶ All peoples from pole to pole can have a home by faith in the

¹² Deuteronomy 8:7-8

¹³ Ezra 8:25-30

¹⁴ Alexander, 94.

¹⁵ Stuart, 306.

¹⁶ Hebrews 11:10

LORD and His Christ. In fact, God's grace will ensure a throng of people who are given a new identity with abounding spiritual riches.

B. The work of God remembered

If you're a parent, I don't have to relay the difficulties of living through long nights. Before they can tell you what's wrong, little ones get sick and that helplessness settles in. Even when they can relay the pain or symptoms, the helplessness still sticks. You give them medicine. You place them in front of experts. You change routines that are intended to aid progress. Yet sometimes the situation drags on. Many of you have lived through nights (or weeks, years) like this. In those situations, you pray, you long, you look feverishly for signs of improvement. You do what you can, but in the end, you understand that it must be the LORD in His exercised kindness if the situation is to change for the better.

The Israelites, packing up their unleavened bread, knew they were headed out. The Egyptians, and perhaps the proud snake-king and his hatchlings believed they were driving the Israelites out. But the baseline reality of the situation is found in verse 42, ***It was a night of watching by the LORD, to bring them out of the land of Egypt.***¹⁷ God was conducting the whole operation. The long, dreadful night was finally over. And they were to keep this occasion of their deliverance in very specific ways. That's what the end of verse 42 meant. It was to be ***a night of watching kept to the LORD by all the people of Israel throughout their generations.***

This shadow of sojourning and suffering lasted almost four and a half centuries. They lived under their own plague of darkness for 430 years at the hand of a handful of Egyptian Pharaohs. Generations were born and buried under the shadow of their oppressor. But God would bury this past for His people and exalt those who had been cast down for centuries. God brought death, then God brought life; two acts of God worthy of every effort to remember and celebrate into eternity.

Conclusion

This death and deliverance wouldn't curb the need for subsequent generations to understand their place in the wilderness of this world. All arrive in this desert-world "*dead in the trespasses and sins...following the prince of the power of the air...living in the passions of [sinful] flesh.*" And as such, we are "*by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*"¹⁸ But God is still rich in mercy. He works through the good news that He does indeed make people alive in His Son, delivering them from enslavement to sin and death when they simply place childlike faith in Jesus Christ. Have you anchored your life and trust in Jesus? Before death and judgment visit you, take God at His word, that, He who believes in His Son "*has passed from death to life.*"¹⁹

¹⁷ Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 139.

¹⁸ Ephesians 2:1-3

¹⁹ John 5:24