

The Passover Blood

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EXODUS 12:1-3, 7, 11-14, 29-30

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, "This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household....Then 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....This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's Passover.

"On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn – both men and animals – and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. 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. This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD – a lasting ordinance."

At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well. Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead.

Here we have the biblical record of the institution of the Passover. Before we deal with the Passover itself, let us first place it in the proper context by considering the events that led up to it.

About four hundred years before, God told Abraham that his descendents would be enslaved and mistreated for a time in a country not their own, but after that God would punish the nation where they serve as slaves, and would bring them out and lead them to their own land (Genesis 15:13-14). In accordance with God's plan and decree, the sons of Jacob, who were jealous of their father's special favor toward Joseph, sold their younger brother to Egypt. But God watched over Joseph, and he was elevated to the highest position in Egypt under Pharaoh to oversee the preparations for the famine to come.

When the famine came and the nations were without food, they came to Egypt to buy from them. Jacob also sent his sons to buy food, and they were reunited with Joseph. As the famine would continue for still some time, Jacob and his whole family moved to Egypt and were given a piece of land as their residence.

The Book of Exodus begins when a new Pharaoh felt threatened by Israel's growing number and prosperity. Thus he enslaved them and then even issued orders to kill their newborn males. But then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, who was faithful to

his promise to Abraham, and sent Moses to confront Pharaoh and to lead his people out of Egypt.

Even as God called Moses to this special work, he told him that Pharaoh was not going to let the people go so easily. Or, from another perspective, we can say that God was not going to let Pharaoh go so easily. He said, "But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you" (Exodus 7:3-4). He would directly control Pharaoh's heart to defy the divine command, even in the face of the miraculous disasters that God would send against the nation.

In other words, God would deliberately prolong the struggle between Pharaoh and Moses so that there would be additional opportunities to display his power at the expense of Egypt. This is so that he could glorify himself, punish the nation of Egypt, and induce confidence in the people of Israel toward God and his servant Moses.

Chapters 7 through 10 exhibit a consistent pattern. Moses would confront Pharaoh and ask him to let the people of Israel depart from Egypt to worship the Lord. Pharaoh would refuse, and so God would send a plague against the nation. Then, even when Pharaoh would appear to yield, God would control his heart and harden him again.

The Exodus account *repeatedly* states that it is God who hardened Pharaoh's heart (4:21, 7:3, 9:12, 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8). This is evidently something that the Spirit wishes to emphasize, so that no one would miss it or come to some other conclusion. There are only several instances when the language appears to suggest that Pharaoh hardened himself (8:15, 32; 9:34), but this is nothing more than relative language, since it is clear that, even in these instances, it is God who directly hardened Pharaoh.

For example, 9:34 says, "He and his officials hardened their hearts." And of course they did. But when God refers to the same instance just two verses later, he says, "I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these miraculous signs of mine among them" (10:1). Later in chapter 14, it is said that "Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds" (v. 5). Of course they did, but what changed their minds? Verse 8 explains that they changed their minds because "The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh." It is the action of the creator that explains the action of the created, the ultimate that explains the relative, and not the other way around.¹

¹ If I move object X so that it strikes and moves Y, then it is rightly said that I am the one who moves Y. It is also correct to say that it is X that moves Y if we mean this in a relative sense. But if X somehow moves itself to strike and move Y, then in no sense can it be said that I am the one who moves Y. The concept of secondary causation can only explain a relationship between two non-ultimate objects, but it cannot explain away God's direct control over all things, including evil. That is, it only explains the relationship between X and Y, and not God's relationship with X and Y. Then, the analogy would not be complete unless we also point out that there is no inherent and necessary relationship between X and Y, but God is the one who determines and regulates their interaction. When X strikes Y, the latter moves not because there is an inherent and necessary power or principle functioning apart from God, but it is because God moves X, and then he also moves Y at the time that X strikes Y. Thus God in fact exercises direct and constant control over both X and Y. See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Ultimate Questions, Commentary on Ephesians*, and *Captive to Reason*.

So Pharaoh hardened his heart in a sense, but God made it happen by directly controlling him. Likewise, when a person believes the gospel, he believes the gospel – God is not the one who believes, but he is the one who makes the person believe. And when a person prays, it is not God who prays but the person who prays, but it is God who causes the person to pray and who controls his every thought and utterance as he prays.

The Bible teaches that it is God who directly hardens someone's heart against his word so that this person would not receive mercy but would rather incur greater and greater divine wrath against himself. To illustrate, consider Joshua 11:19-20: "Except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites, who took them all in battle. For it was the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the LORD had commanded Moses." God controlled the thinking of these nations. He made them attack Israel, so that they would in turn incur the wrath of God and be destroyed by his people, "exterminating them without mercy."

Then, Isaiah 63:17 says, "Why, O LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance." God makes them wander and hardens their hearts. How will the people stop wandering and how will their hearts stop being hardened? It will happen when *the Lord* returns to the people, and not when the people return to him. Of course the people must return. Of course they must stop wandering, and of course their hearts must soften. But why would they do it? They would – they *could* – do it only when God returns to them and favors them again.

The New Testament is just as clear about this. John 12:40 says, "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn – and I would heal them." Throughout this process, God remains righteous because it is his prerogative to control his creatures in any way and for any purpose that he pleases. To even protest against this teaching betrays a sinful defiance against the Lord (Romans 9:14-24).

God was working against them. He would send them a plague, and then he would harden their hearts so that he could send them another one. Egypt was ruined in the process (Exodus 10:7). It was a giant among the nations, unrivaled in economic and military strength. The people also worshiped many gods. But nothing could save them when the true God was working against them. They could not even repent and cry out for mercy because God made them stubborn.

We can make a similar observation regarding God's relationship with nature. God actively controlled nature to produce the plagues, which devastated the land and killed multitudes of people. He did not just "allow" the water of the Nile to turn into blood. It is not as if the natural state of the liquid was blood, and that he had been sustaining it as water until the time of the plague. And it is not as if the water could turned itself into

blood by its own initiative and power. We can say the same thing with the frogs, the gnats, the flies, the boils, the hail, the locusts, and so on.

It is futile to assert that perhaps God "allowed" the devil to do it. If the devil had any choice at all, it was not in his best interest to send plagues upon Egypt, so just allowing him to do it did not guarantee that he would have done it. Also, the point of the plagues was to demonstrate God's power, not the devil's. But we need not speculate about this. The magicians, or those who represented the power of the devil, could reproduce miniature versions of the first several plagues, but after that they could not keep up, and admitted that the finger of God must have been at work. In any case, if one would only read through the several chapters and notice the language employed, it would be clear to him that the text describes each plague as planned, produced, sustained, and then removed by the active power of God.

Our passage deals with the final plague that God brought against Egypt, although he would come against them again later at the Red Sea. He declares that he would "pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn – both men and animals" (12:12). Again, we observe the active and deliberate nature of God's harsh and bloody judgment against his enemies. He does not say that he would leave Egypt in judgment and save the Israelites from the self-destruction that the Egyptians would bring upon themselves. He does not say that he would leave Egypt, and somehow their firstborns would fall dead by themselves. He does not even say that he would leave the Egyptians in the hands of Satan.²

No, he declares that he would pass through Egypt and kill every firstborn. This is his nature, his method, and his glory. What often happens is that people would construct their own standards and rules about how a righteous God ought to operate, and then they would invent all sorts of complicated arguments and distinctions to explain how God has never violated their standards and rules. It is as if they are embarrassed by the God of the Bible because he is too different from how sinful man functions and because he disregards the standards imposed upon him by spiritual rebels.

The Bible affirms active reprobation, active hardening, and active judgment. Since I have argued for this in other places,³ exhaustively and time after time, I will not repeat myself

² The "destroyer" in Exodus 12:23 is not the devil, but the Angel of the Lord that appeared to Moses (3:2). As C. F. Keil writes, "Jehovah effected the destruction of the first-born through the destroyer, or destroying angel (Heb. 11:28), i.e., not a fallen angel, but the angel of Jehovah, in whom Jehovah revealed Himself to the patriarchs and Moses" (Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. 1*; Hendrickson Publishers, p. 334). Since it is certain that the Angel of the Lord is a manifestation of the pre-incarnate Son of God (Keil & Delitzsch, Vol. 1, p. 118-122), the second person of the Trinity, the assertion is sustained that it was God himself who actively slaughtered the firstborns of Egypt. In fact, the verse reinforces our point and deepens its significance, showing that the Godhead is united in directly and actively slaying the wicked and causing disasters for them. See also 2 Kings 19:35. As for Psalm 78:49, there the reference is not to angels that were evil, but angels that caused evil. They were, at least in that context, "misfortune-bringing angels" (Keil & Delitzsch, Vol. 5, p. 528). See also *Barnes' Notes* on Exodus 12:29 and Psalm 78:49.

³ See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Commentary on Ephesians, The Author of Sin*, and also Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*.

now. But I am stressing this point here because it will help us to fully appreciate the Passover and what it represents in Scripture.

That night, "the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well. Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead" (Exodus 12:29-30). God is nowhere said to be passive in any of this. He did not pass over Egypt to save his people, but he passed over his people to kill the most prized members of Egypt's community, so that even the animals were not spared. He was on a mission to kill, and he did a thorough job of it, so that "there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead."

We have witnessed some great disasters in our lifetime in which many perished, and there was "loud wailing." Without considering the details of these events, the nature of the victims, and the applicable biblical principles, many people rule out the very possibility that God had anything to do with these tragedies other than that he "permitted" them. Rubbish! It is true that not every tragedy or violent death is a case of God's punishment against a person, but it is unbiblical to rule it out in every case. Are we ashamed of God? Those who worship him for who he is will boldly confess – nay, even boast – that he is one who seeks out and slaughters his enemies, and those he wishes to punish. Do you hate him for this? Or do you praise him for this? Your answer reveals whether your allegiance belongs to the God of your imagination or whether it belongs to the God of the Bible.

So the Passover was not a case where God abandoned the sinners and left them in judgment while he snatched his own people away from harm. No, he passes over his own people and gave the sinners all his attention, slaughtering all of their firstborns. But through Moses, he instructed the Israelites to smear some of the blood of the Passover lamb on the doorframes of their houses. He said, "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" (12:13).

All of this is a picture of what Christ has done for his people. When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). And Paul writes, "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7). The Passover is only a type and shadow of salvation. The reality is found in the atoning death of Christ. Accordingly, the blood of the Passover lamb is a type and shadow of the blood of Jesus Christ. The effect of the former is a picture of the effect of the latter.

The Passover also gives us a picture of the wrath of God against unbelievers. To differing degrees, and whether they are referring to reprobation, hardening, or judgment, some people often portray this aspect of the work of God as passive. But this is contrary to the picture that Scripture paints for us. If we believe the Bible as God's revelation, then we must affirm that he does not merely leave the unbelievers in their sins, as if they would

then self-destruct, or as if they could create a hell, set it on fire, and cast themselves in there. No, God himself pursues them and throws them into the lake of fire.

Among other things, the value of Christ's atoning blood is at stake. A weak view of God's wrath betrays a weak view of the atonement, since it is the blood of Jesus that saves us from divine wrath. Corresponding to the blood of the Passover lamb, the blood of Jesus does not only remove us from judgment, but the picture given to us is that it hides us from the most terrible and destructive power in all of existence – the wrath of God manifested in all of its fierceness and violence.

Even now, we hear the "loud wailing" of the non-Christians coming from the distance. No, God has not left them alone, and that is precisely why they suffer so! We shudder when we think about what God is doing to them. But we are relieved, and tears of joy and gratitude are streaming down our faces because God has graciously given us the Passover. We find refuge from the Destroyer behind the blood of the lamb, and as we partake of the Passover Feast through faith in Jesus Christ, we receive life and strength for our journey.

Suppose these other people are right. Suppose God merely passes over the unbelievers and leave them in the place of judgment. But where is this place of judgment? Hebrews 10:31 says, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Is there a sense in which God passes over the reprobates and leaves them in the place of judgment? Yes, but only in the sense that he does not need to remove them from a place of non-judgment (as if there is a neutral place) to place them in a place of judgment, because the place of judgment is where they start out in the first place, and this place is God's own hands.

Thus there is nothing passive about reprobation, hardening, or judgment. If ever it seems as though God's is less active toward the reprobates as he is toward the elect, this is only because his relationship toward the reprobates already cannot be any more active. They begin in his fists of wrath, they remain in his fists of wrath, and they will be crushed by his fists of wrath. There is no room left for him to be more active than this. Does he leave them to be tormented by the devil? But even the devil is in his hands.

Once my wife saw a small spider on the carpet at home and tried to kill it. She took a piece of tissue paper and pressed down firmly on the spider. When she lifted her hand, the spider was flattened, and appeared to be dead. But I knew a little about spiders, and so I said, "It is faking! You have to really crush it. Hurry!" Even as I was speaking, the spider straightened up itself as if it had suffered no damage and started to run for its life. My wife was quick enough and caught it under the tissue again. I said to her, "You need to press really hard on it, crush it between your fingers with the tissue, and then flush it down the toilet."

And if you are a non-Christian, this is what God is going to do to you. At a time of his choosing, he will crush you with his hands and flush you down to hell, to the cosmic sewage system, as if you are nothing more than spiritual excrement. This is by no means overly dramatic or imaginative, nor is it an exaggeration. The New Testament word for

"hell" is "Gehenna," and refers to the Valley of Hinnom, located at the south of Jerusalem. By the first century, the Jews were still using it as a garbage dump, where they would keep the fire burning to destroy the waste. Jesus uses it to represent the place where God would dispose of the reprobates. The implication is that the non-Christian is spiritual garbage. If you reject Jesus Christ, you are nothing but a piece of trash.

My point is that *this* is what the blood of Christ saves us from. To diminish the wrath of God is to diminish the blood of Christ. We insult Christ's atoning work when we say that reprobation and hardening are merely passive, or when we portray divine judgment as not as terrible than it is. That is, to underestimate the wrath of God is to underestimate the blood of Christ that saves us from it. On this basis of a correct understanding of the magnitude and terror of divine wrath, the extreme extent of human depravity, and then the corresponding saving power of the blood of Christ, we press the point: "How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" (Hebrews 2:3).

The plagues of Egypt were terrifying, but something infinitely worse is coming. When it comes, there will be no repentance, and there will be no escape. What is your refuge? Where lies your salvation? What is your substitute for the blood of the lamb? Are you going to put iced tea on the doorframes instead of blood? The Destroyer will come in and slaughter you. Are you going to put a Buddha in front of your door? He will send both you and your Buddha to hell. Are you going to put a picture of Muhammad on your door? But he is already in hell waiting for you. Are you going to hide behind your science? Are you going to rely on your philosophy? But God has made foolish the wisdom of the world (1 Corinthians 1:20).

If you are a non-Christian, then you are in great danger. At any moment now, the Destroyer will come and throw you into the lake of fire to be tortured forever. Even the blood of animals cannot save you this time. The type and shadow of the atonement can only save you from the type and shadow of judgment. But the ultimate judgment is coming, and the final reckoning is near. This time it is coming for more than your firstborn. Hurry! Take refuge behind the blood of Christ, and the Destroyer will pass over you. Come! Join those who are already feasting on the Lamb of God, those who have already found life in Christ, and be saved from the wrath to come.