

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 15, 2017**

## **THE PASSOVER OF GOD**

**Exodus 12:1-13, 29-38**

In the previous episode of our series on the life and legacy of Moses, we saw how things went from bad to worse for both Moses and the already-suffering people of Israel after Moses and Aaron were royally rebuffed by Pharaoh the first time they went to Pharaoh and insisted that he let the people of Israel go (Exodus 5). Not only did Pharaoh refuse, he tightened the screws on the people of Israel and made their bondage more unbearable. The Israelite foremen in charge of their fellow slaves blamed Moses and Aaron for making things worse. This was not what Moses expected. Nor was it what he had signed up for when he reluctantly agreed to leave Midian and go back to Egypt.

But you know what happened next, don't you? God reaffirmed His promise to Moses. He reassured Moses that He would rescue the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt. The Lord told Moses – again – that Pharaoh would resist, that his heart would become harder and harder (7:3-4, cf. 4:21-23), but in the end, God would prevail and bring His covenant people out of Egypt.

How? By bringing a series of ten plagues – literally, “strikes” or “blows” – upon Pharaoh and the Egyptian people. These plagues or disasters were public signs of God's power and authority over both nature and nations, and a visitation of God's righteous judgment on Pharaoh and the people of Egypt who had enslaved the people of God. They were a gripping reminder of who God is and what God can do (Peter Enns, *Exodus: The NIV Application Commentary*, 236).

The kinds of responses such demonstrations of power should inspire in us are humility (a sense of our smallness and weakness), repentance, awe (for the Creator who rules over all creation), praise and worship to God. Unfortunately, to his own demise and that of his nation, Pharaoh's response was exactly the opposite. He just became more and more stubborn in his opposition to God. Because of his heart condition, which proved to be terminal, he refused to listen to God or to God's spokesmen Moses and Aaron.

The Lord sent ten plagues:

- Blood in the Nile (turning the water into blood)
- Frogs
- Gnats (not “Nats” but gnats with a “g”): One translation says this plague was lice (NKJV). It could also have been fleas or mosquitoes. Whatever it was, one thing we know for sure is that it wasn't pleasant.
- Flies
- On livestock
- Boils

- Hail
- Locusts
- Darkness

The tenth plague, the one that finally broke Pharaoh's back, was the death of the firstborn male in every household, every family, of Egypt. With this succession of strikes or blows, things went from bad to worse, this time for the Egyptian people. By the end, the Egyptians couldn't wait for the Israelites to leave. Even Pharaoh wanted them gone.

Pharaoh found out the truth of what it says in Hebrews 10:31, that it is a fearful thing, a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. You can only scoff at God for so long before you suffer the consequences. You may not suffer the consequences in this life, but you will face the just and righteous judgment of God eventually. Unless you come to Him with a heart of true repentance for your sins, with a heart of trusting faith in Him and willing surrender to Him, and allow Him to transform you through the power of His love.

It is one thing for a proud, hard-hearted, rebellious, unrepentant sinner to fall into the hands of a just and holy God. That is something to fear. It is quite another thing, though, for sinners who know they need a Savior and look to Jesus to be the Savior they need. For they – *we*, all of us who trust in Him – need never worry about facing the wrath of God for our rebellion, our sin, our treason, against Him. Why? Because Jesus has borne in His own body, in His own person, in His own suffering and death on the cross, the wrath of God we deserve.

Because of Jesus' sacrifice for us; because He was pierced for our transgressions – yours and mine; because He was crushed for our iniquities – yours and mine; because He took upon Himself the punishment we deserve (Isaiah 53:5); because He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not even open His mouth to defend Himself, and He was led like a lamb to the slaughter (53:7); because He poured out His life all the way to death and was counted with the transgressors (53:12), even though He never did anything to deserve it; because of who Jesus was – *is* – and what He has done for us, the just and holy wrath of God has passed over us. Instead of being objects of God's wrath, we are treasures of God's mercy and grace who are loved by God and will be loved by God forever. Not because we are so great. Not because we are such spiritual hotshots. Not because we measure up to His standard of holiness. But because He is merciful and gracious and loving. Which is precisely why Jesus came to die for us. Because He did, because of His blood shed for us, for the forgiveness of our sins, the judgment of God has passed over us, just as it passed over the people of Israel on the night the angel of death passed through the land of Egypt and took the life of the firstborn son in every Egyptian family, in every household that did not have the sign of the lamb's blood on the doorposts of their house.

Since God is a forgiving God, did you ever wonder why He cannot, or does not, just automatically forgive our debt of sin? If He wanted to, couldn't He just move on without requiring payment for our sin? The problem, as Joshua Ryan Butler explains in his book *The Pursuing God*, is that someone always eats the cost of sin. For example, suppose your neighbor crashes his car through your fence and tears up your front yard. When you discover what has happened, you forgive him. You say: "Don't worry about the damage. All is

forgiven.” But forgiving your neighbor doesn’t undo the damage or pay the cost of the repairs. It means that you eat the cost.

Or consider a more complex example. During the U.S. housing crisis several years ago, shoddy banking practices and corporate corruption, Butler says, “threw a sledgehammer into the global economy.” Now, imagine a new CEO takes charge of one of the huge corporations responsible for the crisis. The old CEO is gone. There is a new boss in town. The new CEO is personally innocent. He was not behind the wheel when the ship got steered into the rocks. But there is still a massive debt. One bank alone owed people \$17 billion.

Someone has to pay the costs. So, what happened is this: In the aftermath of the crisis, the banks were deemed “too big to fail,” and the U.S. government forgave the debt, covering the most expensive bailout in history. Though massive damage had been caused by the banking industry, the debt was forgiven. But the debt didn’t simply go away. Someone else covered it – in this case, the American people. As Butler says, “someone always eats the cost.”

At the cross, God “ate” the cost of our sin. Why can’t God just forgive the debt of sin we owe? What happened at the cross is that God justly forgave our debt, by covering the cost personally. The Wall Street bailout that took place a decade ago was not really the most expensive in human history. The most expensive bailout was when God the Father sent His Son into the world as the CEO of a corrupt organization called “Humanity, Inc.” In concert with the Father and the Holy Spirit, Jesus took upon Himself the most massive debt-forgiveness plan the world has ever seen. Or will ever see. (Joshua Ryan Butler, *The Pursuing God*, 100)

What happened in the Passover, when the angel of death sent by God took the life of every firstborn male in Egypt, human and animal alike, but passed over the homes of the Israelites who had covered the doorframes of their houses with the blood of the Passover lamb, was a sign – a foretaste – of what Jesus would and did do for us on the cross.

The details of God’s instructions to the people of Israel and what He did in the Passover to deliver His people from their slavery are found in the passage we read in Exodus 12. Verses 1-13 contain the Lord’s instructions to Israel through Moses and Aaron, telling them what to do to get ready for what God was going to do in the Passover. Then, in verses 29 and following, we read of the final plague, in which the Lord struck down all the firstborn of Egypt, followed by the beginning of the exodus of Israel from Egypt. Free at last! In the same way that we celebrate American independence every year on July 4, the Jewish people commemorate and celebrate their emancipation, their liberation, from slavery in Egypt every year at the time of the Passover. So they will never forget what God did for them.

If we understand it rightly, however, it has even greater meaning for us who are followers of the Lord Jesus than for the historic people of Israel. For Jesus Himself is our Passover Lamb, and He has been sacrificed for us, as it says in 1 Corinthians 5:7. As John the Baptist testifies in John 1:29, Jesus is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (cf. John 1:36).

The blood of the lamb on the doorposts of the Israelites served as a sign. A sign of what? It was a sign of *protection* from the angel of death, so that he would pass over their houses. It was a sign of *God's mercy* that triumphs over judgment (James 2:13). It was a sign of *substitution*, as the blood of the lamb served as a substitute for the blood (for the lives) of the people themselves. It was a sign of *redemption*, of their lives and freedom being purchased through the death of another on their behalf.

All of which points us to Jesus, the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice for our sins, whose blood shed for us in His death on the cross is the ultimate fulfillment of all these things – protection from the judgment of God that we deserve, mercy, substitution (as Jesus took *our* place and gave *His* life in our stead), redemption (the purchase of *our* salvation at the cost of *His* life), and grace, which comes free of charge to people like us who don't deserve it and never will. It is free of charge to us, but it came at great personal cost to Jesus. And to God the Father, who willingly gave up His own Son so that we could become His sons and daughters.

This world is so full of terrorist acts that you may not recall the November 26, 2008 attack by a gang of terrorists who stormed the Taj Mahal Palace in Mumbai, India, leaving 200 people dead. A reporter later interviewed a man who had been a guest at the hotel for dinner that night. The guest described how he and some friends were eating dinner when they heard gunshots. Someone grabbed him and pulled him under the table. The assassins ran through the restaurant, shooting at will, until everyone (or so they thought) had been killed. Miraculously, this man survived. When the reporter asked the man how he lived when everyone else at the table had been killed, he replied: "I suppose it was because I was covered in someone else's blood, and they took me for dead."

This, says Ravi Zacharias, is the perfect metaphor of God's gift through Jesus Christ to each one of us. Because we are covered with His blood – with the blood of His sacrifice for us – we live. We have the gift of eternal life with Him (*Zacharias, Has Christianity Failed You?*, 42).

The Bible's historical accounts of the plagues, the Passover, and the exodus from Egypt are not first and foremost about Pharaoh, though obviously he played a part. Nor are they mainly about Moses, though he, too, had an important part. They are first and foremost about God, about who He is and what He has done and what He can do.

They are about us, too. Because what is recorded in Exodus is not just ancient history or a story with a moral. It is redemption history. It is a sign of the gospel that finds its full expression and fulfillment in the coming of Jesus Christ "in the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4) as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

The coming of Jesus *to* us and *for* us is the defining moment of all defining moments in the whole history of history. It is the decisive event in all of history, an event that requires a response from each of us, just as God's announcement of the Passover to the people of Israel required action on their part. It was a test of their faith, to see if they would really trust God and take Him at His word. And it was a test of their obedience. Obedience is not the path to salvation, because no one (except Jesus) can ever follow that path perfectly. But faith without

obedience is not true faith. True faith proves itself in right living. So our faith in Jesus, our faith in the sufficiency of His saving work to cause the judgment of God to “pass over” us, must be lived out. It must be given expression in the way we live our lives under the gracious and loving lordship of Jesus Christ.

Do you see that? Do you know that? Does your life bear witness to that?

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.