

Exodus 7:8-13 and 15:8-13 (DHT)

YHWH spoke to Moses and Aaron saying, “When Pharaoh speaks to you saying, ‘Show yourselves by working a miracle,’ then you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and cast it before Pharaoh, and let it become a serpent.’” So, Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh and did so, just as YHWH commanded. And Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent. But Pharaoh called the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did so with their enchantments in like manner. For every man threw down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs. And Pharaoh’s heart grew toughened, and he did not listen to them, as YHWH had said.

//

*“At the blast of your nostrils the waters were gathered together;
The floods stood upright like a heap;
The depths congealed in the heart of the sea.*

*The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake,
I will divide the spoil; my desire shall be satisfied on them.
I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.’*

*You blew with your wind; the sea covered them;
They sank like lead in the mighty waters.*

*Who is like you YHWH among the gods?
Who is like you, glorious in holiness,
Fearful in praises, doing wonders?*

*You stretched out your right hand;
The earth swallowed them.*

*You have led forth in your covenant faithfulness the people whom you have redeemed;
You have guided them by your strength to your holy habitation.”*

Illustration and Introduction

I rarely listen to secular music; but if I do, it is usually John Mayer. One of my all-time favorite albums is his record, “Battle Studies.” Unlike his others, on this album in particular, John Mayer exegetes with precision our culture’s quest for independence while simultaneously longing for something beyond ourselves; for spiritual fulfillment. All he does seems to bring him happiness and fulfillment only in the moment. Nothing seems to stick. It is either the case that these worldly pursuits produce authentic happiness and fulfillment or there must be some spiritual force intervening to direct his attention to a better way. Yet, our songwriter struggles to give up these worldly pursuits despite their persistent failure out of fear that the unknown will leave him far emptier. This simultaneous quest for independence and longing for spiritual dependence run a crash course into one another in his song “War of My Life.” Our songwriter

hopelessly fears nothing he does can ever truly fulfill him because of the spiritual war taking place in him and around him. Consider these lyrics:

“Come out angels, come out ghosts, come out darkness; bring everyone you know
I’m not running, and I’m not scared; I am waiting and well prepared
I’m in the war of my life; at the door of my life; out of time and there’s nowhere to run
I’ve got a hammer, and a heart of glass; I got to know right now which walls to smash
I got a pocket, got no pills; if fear hasn’t killed me yet, then nothing will...
I’m in the war of my life; at the core of my life; got no choice but to fight ‘til it’s done”

As the spiritual war for his soul goes on, the song culminates with the line describing what our songwriter truly desires more than anything else: “No more suffering and no more pain ever again.” Our two passages this morning are the bookends to a scripturally seismic spiritual war; one of epic proportions between the God of Israel and the gods of Egypt.

Summary of Exodus Context

For those of you unfamiliar with the epic opening number of one of the greatest movies ever made, “The Prince of Egypt,” the Israelites had been enslaved by Egypt for 400 years working with brick and mortar, the same material the Babylonians used to make their infamous tower in Gen. 11. This is not the only significant echo from Genesis though, for Pharaoh is thematically introduced as a shrewd character, just as the serpent was in Gen. 3. Pharaoh thus plays the role of the serpent from the garden in the Book of Exodus.

It was severe labor and the Israelites cried out to their God. In Ex. 3, their God appeared to Moses from within the burning bush and told him he had *seen the affliction of [his] people who are in Egypt...[he] knew their sufferings and had come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up from that land to [the Promised Land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob].* (Ex. 3:7-8).

God promised before it took place that he would rescue his people from slavery in Egypt. He repeated this promise to Moses nearly a dozen times in the next few chapters (Ex. 3:10; 3:16-17; 3:19-20; 4:21-23; 6:1; 6:6-8; 6:10-12; 7:2-5). But there’s a catch. God told Moses, *I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So, I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders I will do in it; after that he will let you go* (Ex. 3:19-20). Even more than that, in Ex. 4:21-23, God told Moses, *You shall say to Pharaoh, ‘thus says YHWH, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.”*

If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn.’ So, before this seismic spiritual war between the God of Israel and gods of Egypt began, we already know what’s going to happen:

1. God will show his signs and wonders
2. Pharaoh will initially not let them go because of his hardened heart
3. The firstborn of Pharaoh will be killed
4. Pharaoh will then let the Israelites go

Now, Moses was initially reluctant to accept this burning-bush commission, objecting against God, asking, “What if they do not believe me when I say you appeared to me?” *God said to him [in Ex. 4:1-5], “what is that in your hand?” Moses said, “a staff.” And God said, “Throw it on the ground.” So, Moses threw it on the ground, and it became a snake, and Moses ran from it. But God said to Moses, “Put out your hand and catch it by the tail,” so Moses put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand, “Do this that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers has appeared to you* (Ex. 4:1-5, slightly condensed). God also provided his brother Aaron to be Moses’ mouthpiece to Pharaoh (7:1-2).

Exodus 7

This help soon proved worthwhile, for in our first passage we see Aaron performing this very miracle before Pharaoh and his magicians to prove that they truly spoke for the God of Israel. But other than Aaron performing this miracle instead of Moses, there has been one other significant change that I’d like to focus on for a moment, because our English translations do not adequately capture the richness of the terminology. There are two primary Hebrew words for “serpent.” The first is *nachash*. *Nachash* refers to the physical creatures we would call a snake. The second is *tannin*. *Tannin* also refers to snake-like creature; however, it is almost always used in connection to some form of eschatological reality, or in other words a creature depicted within the realm of future, end-times related activities, often translated as sea dragon or sea monster.

In Ex. 4 when God initially gave Moses this miracle of transforming his staff, the word for a creaturely snake is used. However, Moses switches it up in our passage in Ex. 7:8-13 by referring to the eschatological serpentine dragon. Moses does this to draw our attention; this is not merely a miracle in the moment, but rather a miracle that anticipates the end of the story.

Our passage depicts the final scene before the ten plagues begin, in which the God of Israel battles and defeats the gods of Egypt. Commentators frequently note that each of the plagues combat the prominent gods of Ancient Egypt. Pharaoh, himself, was deified, so when the plagues culminated in the death of Pharaoh's firstborn son, as had already been foretold, the God of Israel directly attacked this deified Egyptian by mummifying his heir. This scene does not just anticipate the outpouring of YHWH's mighty hand in the plagues, but also what follows. We already know that Pharaoh would eventually let them go, but our passage anticipates something else that takes place even after the defeated, heirless Pharaoh conceded.

The anticipation comes from the activity of these eschatological serpentine dragons who battle it out before Pharaoh, his magicians, and all else in Pharaoh's court. “The Prince of Egypt” depicted just two magicians, in large part because of apocryphal writings and rabbinic tradition that specifically name two magicians, from which Paul cites in 2 Timothy 3; however, Exodus does not actually specify how many there were. What Exodus does say, though, is that however many magicians there were, they *were* able to replicate this miracle performed by Aaron through their dark arts, and their staffs also became opposing, eschatological serpentine dragons. Yet, however many there were, the one eschatological serpentine dragon representing the God of Israel swallowed all the dragons representing the gods of Egypt.

Exodus 15

YHWH demonstrated his supremacy over all other gods not just by anticipating the end-result for his people, but also by anticipating the end-result against their enemy. Over the course of the next seven chapters, Israel and Egypt witnessed the outpouring of the mighty hand of YHWH against Egypt in ten plagues, culminating in the death of the next god of Egypt. Israel was rescued from Egypt and brought through the chaos waters on dry ground. Now, “The Prince of Egypt” merely implies Pharaoh's death by showing him washed up all alone on a rock in the middle of the sea calling out for his adopted brother Moses to hopefully save him too, but Ex. 14 paints a more graphic picture. Pharaoh has no final dialogue or change of heart. Pharaoh's demise is characterized by the walls of water covering him and his army (14:28). *Israel saw all the Egyptians dead on the seashore...and* [despite his initial reluctance, the people] *believed in YHWH and in his servant Moses* (14:30-31).

Following this great act of redemption Israel breaks out in song praising the Lord. In this song is where we find our second passage.

I will sing to YHWH, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. YHWH is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation...

At the blast of your nostrils the waters were gathered together;

The floods stood upright like a heap; the depths congealed in the heart of the sea.

The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake,

I will divide the spoil; my desire shall be satisfied on them.

I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.’

You blew with your wind; the sea covered them;

They sank like lead in the mighty waters.

Who is like you YHWH among the gods?

Who is like you, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?

You stretched out your right hand;

The earth swallowed them.

You have led forth in your covenant faithfulness the people whom you have redeemed;

You have guided them by your strength to your holy habitation.

This word “swallowed” occurs only twice in the entire book of Exodus. Moses again draws our attention, this time to the bookends of the plagues in which the former anticipates the latter. Much like the eschatological serpentine dragon representing the God of Israel swallowed the dragons representing the gods of Egypt, so also did YHWH cause his creation to swallow Pharaoh and his army, leaving Egypt with no gods in the aftermath of the treachery their former “supposed-god” brought upon them by arrogantly and persistently hardening his heart. Aaron’s staff swallowing the staffs of the sorcerers anticipated the death of Pharaoh that would soon follow. Yet, these two swallowings together anticipate yet another swallowing connected another redemption; one that demonstrates YHWH’s supremacy over all other gods far more than the exodus from Egypt.

The Eschatological Day of the LORD

Isaiah 24-27 are pivotal chapters describing the eschatological Day of YHWH. In Isa. 25:6-8, we read that on Mount Zion *the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich*

food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well-refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the LORD of Lords will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth.

Isaiah’s prophecy about Mount Zion involves the swallowing of death, and his prophecy about the Day of YHWH culminates in Isa. 27:1 when YHWH will slay the eschatological serpentine dragon once and for all. While Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus plays the role of the serpent from the garden, the Edenic-serpent remained at-large; he was wounded but not destroyed, and it is at Mount Zion when the final defeat will take place and when death will be destroyed. Whereas our passages in Exodus anticipated a swallowing described by death, they together anticipate a swallowing that leads to life. Life can only go on when death is finally put to death.

The author of Hebrews connects this story to our story, writing, *Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, Christ himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery* (Heb. 2:14-15). Like the Israelites in Egypt, we were slaves to sin until Christ rescued us from the dominion of darkness (Col. 1:13), transferring us into the kingdom of his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9), an act of redemption Isaiah describes as a second Exodus.

Paul too writes of this coming day, quoting from Isa. 25:

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory, O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:50-57).

Gospel Presentation and Conclusion

COVID-19 has made us all hyper-aware of death. Every day, the news tells us how many people have now died from this plague. “Death doesn’t discriminate between the sinners and the saints; it just takes, and it takes, and it takes.”¹ Physical death and the news of it is all around us. All of us will taste physical death once unless our Lord returns first. Paul wrote these words after Christ’s death and resurrection, and so even Paul anticipated what Christ accomplished that first Easter weekend to be finished at the end of days. Just as the death of Pharaoh brought temporary life to the Israelites, so will Jesus Christ’s final head-crushing blow to the serpent on the eschatological Day of YHWH bring eternal life to all who follow him back to the very good garden. On that day, the spiritual war taking place in us and around us will at last be over.

I invite you to follow him, by asking you just two questions. Do you believe in the virgin birth, the virtuous life, the vicarious death, the victorious resurrection, the visible ascension, and the vindicating exaltation of Jesus Christ? And do you therefore submit entirely to Jesus as the Master of your life? If the answer to these two questions is yes, then you are born again.

If you are born again, then you must be prepared to die. Not just to die physically at the end of your days on this earth, but to die daily. It is a paradox for the New Testament writers to insist that we must die in order to live. But just as the way Pharaoh died anticipated the life given to the Israelites, and just as the way Christ died anticipated the life given to those who believe in his resurrection, so also the way we die daily anticipates the life we will live in the coming age. Dying daily to sin does not just involve the taking off of sin, but also an intentional putting on of the character of Christ. In our eschatological Promised Land, we will worship our savior unceasingly, and live in continuous communion with YHWH who will be there with us.

Are you practicing these things? Are you worshipping throughout the week? Are you praying throughout the week? Are you receiving God’s Word regularly throughout the week? If these are things you don’t enjoy doing regularly, then heaven is not going to be fun for you. Dying daily is to purge our sin and the perishable and mortal things that will fade away, and to replace them with imperishable and immortal things that will not fade away, such as the worship of God, the Word of God, and fellowship with God and his people. Is how you are dying today anticipating and preparing you for how you will live in the coming age?

¹ These lyrics are from “Wait for It” written by Lin-Manuel Miranda for the Broadway musical, “Hamilton.”

These are things we practice. They are not things we immediately desire to do. If they were, then we wouldn't need to practice them. But with practice comes enjoyment of these things. Nevertheless, all these things have their genesis in believing the Gospel. And so, I ask you these two questions again: Do you believe in the person and work of Jesus Christ? And do you therefore submit *all* of your life to Jesus as your Lord? If the answer to those two questions is yes, then you are born again, which means:

1. You are completely forgiven of all your sins past, present, and future, so let this assurance of your forgiveness direct how to approach temptation and direct how you put your sin to death.
2. You are given a new heart, or in other words you are given a new worldview. You now view yourself as God views you, you view your sins as God views them, you view others as God views them, you view God as he truly is, and you desire and delight in the things God desires and delights in.
3. You are given the Holy Spirit who lives within you and empowers you right now to turn from sin and turn toward YHWH; so humbly rely on this divine helper given to you for this time of preparation for the age to come.
4. And you are given the promise that, like Christ, you too will be physically raised from the dead to live with him for all eternity in the age to come.

To this final promise we still hope. Yet, our hope is with great anticipation as we expand upon our opening songwriter's ultimate desire, longing for the eschatological age to come when all that is perishable, all that is mortal, and all that is empty will once and for all be swallowed up; the Day when there will be no more suffering, no more pain, and no more death ever again.

Let's pray.