

judgment. As such, the plagues have much to teach us about God's nature and how He works, and when we read them, we will have to bear this in mind. The truth is that when God acts within the world, what He does will make evident what is right and what is wrong, showing the difference between good and evil. That is judgment. In Exodus, God separated out His own people because He had chosen them and had a task for them. His judgment came upon Egypt because their enslavement of the Israelites prevented them from doing God's will, and the story of Exodus is partly about the liberation of Israel and partly about the judgment of Egypt and the way the God demonstrated His glory by defeating the Egyptians.

There is no doubt, however, that God was going to extract His people from Egypt, and promised that He would do so in dramatic form. Israel was formed into a nation from the tribal clan of Jacob which went to Egypt to avoid the perils of drought (Gen 50), but they would leave the country standing tall and on full alert (7:5). In addition, God Himself would be at their head, leading them on according to His will (7:5). This great prophecy anticipated the time when the Lord would lead Israel 'in a pillar of cloud by day ... and in a pillar of fire by night' (Exodus 13:21).

Application

If we are God's people, then His will cannot be avoided. God works with each of us patiently until we are ready to do what He wants. The path of Christian discipleship is often one by which we slowly realise more and more about what God requires of us, and we gradually gain the confidence to be obedient to His call. Just as the Lord repeatedly called Moses to confront Pharaoh, so He will repeatedly call us, especially when we feel uncertain about the nature of what we are called to do. The Lord will often give us reassurance through others. For Moses, this came through the support of his brother Aaron, but it is also true that the Lord's continued support of us is evidence of His faith and trust in us. It is my firm belief that God is calling people today to do all manner of things for Him, but in our rational world, people quickly turn away if they do not understand what they think God may be calling them to do, or they believe that others should be doing things, not themselves.

The miracle of God's grace is that He stays with us and does not give up on us, just as He did not give up on Moses. The Bible teaches us that God has confidence in all of us who are His people, and He will always seek to work through us. He never ceases to offer us assurance and help us by explaining things to us in new ways, often repeating things to us and offering us new insights to help us along the way. But in the end, we have to be willing to listen and obey!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In your opinion, what does this passage say which offers re-assurance to Moses. If you were Moses, what reassurance would you need?
2. Discuss the importance of receiving reassurance from the Lord today. How does this happen?
3. Why is it necessary for God to judge Egypt?

Discipleship

None of us knows what lies ahead, and although we presume that things will continue as they are, sometimes the Lord does something or uses us in quite unexpected ways. It is wise for us to seek the Lord's guidance about our regular lifestyle and work, and be content with it. However, we should also be prepared for the Lord to do something new at any time, and maybe even require us to change direction in our work or our lifestyle. In this way, we can be secure in what we normally do, but always be ready for anything the Lord might call us to do.

Final Prayer

You are the One who has brought me to this place, Lord Jesus. Guide me therefore to where You would have me go from here. Show me a sign, a light, a map; any guidance by which Your Word may lead me on, so that I may give glory to You in all I do, from this time on: AMEN

Prayer

I place to one side all the cares of my soul and place myself in Your hands, O Lord, my Saviour and my God. I rest in You, I take my peace from You, I learn from You, I look forward by Your guidance, and I rejoice in Your presence. Jesus Christ, my Lord, may I always value every moment I place aside from worldly cares to be with You! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Strengths and Weaknesses

It is our human nature to have both strengths and weaknesses. Pray today for any people you know who have to maintain 'strength' in difficult circumstances, perhaps unable to show their own weakness for fear that their jobs or their families might suffer if they did; politicians, single parents, industrial leaders for example. Pray for the world to value true humanity.

Meditation

Lord, when there is nothing left and I feel poured out like water;
I come to You to renew my soul.

Lord, when my bones ache with weariness, stress and toil;
I come to You to heal my body.

Lord, when I have lost my way and fail to find my directions;
I come to You for guidance.

Lord, when the repeating nature of my earthly life oppresses me;
I come to you for restoration.

Lord, when I am troubled by the things I see around me every day;
I come to You for peace.

Lord, when the people around me fail to see me for who I am;
I come to You for affirmation.

Lord, when the world has lost its way and I do not know where to go;
I come to You for salvation.

You never let me down!

Bible Study - Exodus 6:28-7:7

²⁸ Now, the LORD spoke to Moses in Egypt ²⁹ and said to him, 'I am the LORD; tell Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I say to you.' ³⁰ But Moses protested before the LORD, 'In truth, I am a poor speaker, why would Pharaoh listen to me?' ^{7:1} The LORD said to Moses, 'Look, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. ² You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron will tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave his land. ³ But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and I will do more and more signs and wonders in Egypt. ⁴ Because Pharaoh will not listen to you, I will place my hand on Egypt, and with great acts of judgment, I will bring my people the Israelites out of the land of Egypt like an army prepared for war. ⁵ The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and lead the Israelites out from among them.'

⁶ This is what Moses and Aaron did, just as the LORD commanded them. ⁷ Moses was 80 years old and Aaron was 83 years old when they spoke to Pharaoh.

Review

This reading straddles the end of chapter 6 and the beginning of chapter 7, and marks the point at which the preliminary stories of Moses and the Israelites in Egypt come to an end. From

tomorrow, we will begin to read about the confrontation with Pharaoh and the great plagues of Egypt. Much of this passage today summarises what we already know in the form of a speech by God, but although it may seem straightforward, it contains some subtle emphases and additions which are useful for our understanding of what was happening, especially between Moses and God. When stories were recited from memory in ancient times, rather than read aloud, brief summaries such as this were helpful ways of keeping the story line of a long saga well focussed, and the changing emphases of what was said helped show how the story was progressively moving on.

In our passage, this is particularly noticeable in the description of the Lord's relationship with Moses. It appears more relaxed than earlier, despite Moses' on-going concern about his ability to speak (6:30). To begin with, God spoke to Moses with His revealed name; 'I am the Lord ...' (6:28) and He then repeated the instruction to go to Pharaoh (see also 6:1-9 and 26,27). Moses was told not to spend any more time trying to help the Israelites, despite their distress, but to go directly to the king of Egypt and say what he had been told to say (6:29). When Moses complained again about his poor speech (6:30, see also 5:22 and 4:10), the Lord was not angry as he had been before (4:14), He gave Moses power and authority so that he would be 'like God to Pharaoh' and confirmed the support of his brother Aaron as his 'prophet', the one who would speak his words (7:1).

The theme of reassurance continues in the rest of the Lord's speech in chapter 7. No more specific instructions were given, but the Lord emphasised that the only requirement placed on Moses and Aaron was that they should be faithful (6:28, 7:2). The Lord did not tell them what lay ahead; they would surely have been even more fearful if they knew something of the bewildering events just about to happen! Then, the Lord gave a prophetic word that Pharaoh's heart would be 'hardened' (7:3), thereby reassuring Moses and Aaron in advance that any negativity towards them on the part of Pharaoh would not be their fault. In His speech to Moses, God took full responsibility for everything that would happen; what could be more comforting? To emphasise this, the words 'I will' keep repeating throughout, indicating the power of God to control everything. Indeed, in verse 3, God told Moses that He would do 'more and more' wonders and signs, but Moses and Aaron were not to know what they were before they happened! All they had to do was be faithful, and God would do what He promised by bringing the Israelites out of Egypt (7:4,5).

The result of all this encouragement becomes clear at the end of this brief summary. In verse 6 we are told that Moses and Aaron were indeed able to do what they had been commanded, despite the odds against them. They were old, their own people had followed them at first and then rejected them (5:15-23), Moses was ill at ease as a speaker, let alone before Pharaoh, and apart from the promises of God, they had nothing with which to confront the most powerful man on earth; Pharaoh, the king of Egypt.

Almost all the words of this passage can be found in previous discussions and speeches, but the way it is set out gives this text a quite different feel. All of us know that the manner in which we are spoken to and the way in which things are said count for a great deal; and in this case, God's encouragement gave Moses and Aaron much needed encouragement and approval.

Going Deeper

This passage contains an extraordinary promise to Moses that he would be made 'like God' to Pharaoh, and this needs further exploration. We will also find that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and the mentioning of signs and wonders all bring out further matters of interest. God's plan to release His people was detailed and required complete obedience from Moses and Aaron. With reassurance, they were now ready to do exactly what they were told.

Final instructions before battle

For the second time in Exodus, the Lord spoke to Moses and told him that he was to be 'like God' to someone. Earlier (4:16), we read what God said to Moses about how he would use his brother Aaron as a prophet, adding 'you will be like God for him'. This is the most extraordinary thing for God to say, and Moses is the only person in the whole Bible to whom it is said. It

sounds very dramatic, but what it means is that as far as Aaron was concerned, what Moses told him would be the same as receiving instructions straight from the Lord Himself, and Aaron's task was to pass this on directly to the people, as prophecy. Now, here in this passage, Moses is told 'I have made you like God to Pharaoh!' Again, this appears extraordinary, but there is a straightforward explanation. Pharaoh regarded himself to be a god, governing Egypt and doing what he wished with it, so the Lord decided to give Moses the qualities, power and signs that would make Pharaoh treat him like a god. As we have mentioned in earlier studies, Pharaoh would normally only speak with those who could demonstrate or claim divine status, so God's words to Moses were powerfully reassuring. God had prepared the way for everything that was about to happen.

As well as showing Moses that He was in control of events in this way, God also promised that He, the Lord, would also be in control when Pharaoh 'hardened' his heart. The Lord had already said this once before to Moses in their earlier discussion on the 'Mountain of God' (4:21), however, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart becomes a feature of the unfolding story of the plagues, creating a great deal of tension within the story (8:15,19,32; 9:7,12,34,35 etc.). What is not clear in English is that three different words are used in Hebrew for this 'hardening'. Mostly, the Hebrew word used is 'hazak' which has a core meaning of 'to be strong'; in other words, having appeared to give way to the Moses' demands after a plague hit the land, Pharaoh would become strong again, changing his mind and dashing the hopes of Israel that they would be freed.

A second word is also used to describe Pharaoh's 'hard' heart, and this is 'kabath' which means 'to be thick, or heavy', and numerous puns are made at Pharaoh's expense about the tardiness of his mind and reactions; jokes which are not obvious to us who read the passages in English! Christians who attend a Passover festival today will quickly learn that Jewish people find a great deal of humour and fun within some parts of the story of the plagues and the Exodus.

In this passage we have read today, however, a third and different word is used which is only used here. It is the Hebrew word 'qashah' which means 'to become hard', and it describes how a mud brick, for example, becomes hard in the glare of the sun's rays. The word is used with considerable sarcasm, for the Pharaoh who forced the Israelites to 'harden' bricks of mud under conditions of slavery became so hardened himself that he could not recognise God's final warning about releasing the Israelites, leaving himself and all Egypt open to the most awful of plagues, the death of the first-born (Ex 12).

The plan of God revealed?

The second half of God's speech to Moses contains more about His plans than we might quickly realise. We are told that God will 'do more and more signs and wonders', with a clear emphasis on 'more and more' (7:3)! This is the first we hear about further miracles, for Moses had earlier been given three signs and wonders to perform (4:1-9) which were supposed to be used to convince the people of Israel (4:30,31) of the Lord's authority and power, and they were also told to use them when confronting Pharaoh (4:21). Up to this point in the story, nothing has been said about further miracles, so clearly, God intended to move matters on with much more dramatic force!

The Lord then spelt out in more detail the general pattern of what lay ahead for Moses and Aaron. When Pharaoh refused to listen to their plea to release the Israelites, God would act in 'judgment' (7:4). We are so used to the word 'judgment' that we read it without noticing whether it has any special significance; but in this instance it does. This is only the third mention of the word 'judgment' so far in the Bible, and all three references speak about God's judgment on Egypt for their enslavement of God's people. God clearly acted in some form of 'judgment' in a number of stories in Genesis (for example, at the time of the Flood, or Sodom and Gomorrah), but the word 'judgment' only begins to appear in stories which refer to the Exodus.

The first mention of judgement comes in God's prophecy about the enslavement of His people in Genesis 15:14, and the second is in Exodus (6:6). Piece by piece, the Bible introduces this major theme of God's power and work in the world, and most Christians do not spot the fact that the great plagues in Exodus are the first occasion the Bible specifically talks about