Let My People Go and Worship Me (3)

Exodus 9:1-10:29

Key Verse: 10:3 “So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said to him, “This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: ‘How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, so that they may worship me.”

Last week through Missionary James Lee’s message we learned that in times of difficulties we must focus on God and worship Him. When we are troubled because of things of the world, such as financial difficulties, poor academic performance, and anxieties about future, we become slaves to fear. God promised to be with us and to take care of his people. God wants us to live by faith, trusting in him and serving him. We also learned that God wants us to live a sacrificial life like Moses, not live a selfish life like Pharaoh. Moses sacrificed his princely position to obey the will of God, while Pharaoh did not obey God in order to live a selfish life. God blessed Moses’ life as a deliverer and he cursed Pharaoh’s life as a loser.

Today’s passage continues with the rest of the plagues on the Egyptians and Pharaoh, from the plague on livestock to the plague of darkness. Through these series of the plagues, God wanted to teach Pharaoh something important: The LORD is God.

First, let my people go so that they may worship me. Look at verses 1-4. ***“Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: “Let my people go, so that they may worship me.” If you refuse to let them go and continue to hold them back, the hand of the LORD will bring a terrible plague on your livestock in the land---on your horses, donkeys and camels and on your cattle, sheep and goats. But the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and that of Egypt, so that no animal belonging to the Israelites will die.”*** Thus far, God had been asking Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery so that they might go and worship Him. When Pharaoh didn’t listen to Him, God sent four plagues on him and the Egyptians: the plague of blood, the plague of frogs, the plague of gnats, and the plague of flies. Through these plagues Pharaoh’s heart began to open for God’s message, but not completely. Yet Pharaoh was still stubborn and rebellious. He didn’t believe in the God of the Hebrews (Israelites). He didn’t trust Moses, but instead he trusted his magicians. He thought that he could overcome such plagues. He was wrong! Like Pharaoh, people often will not repent their sins, but become stubborn, thinking that they can endure God’s punishment by their willpower. How foolish they are! Paul said in Romans 2:5, “*But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed*.” People do not know that stubbornness and an unrepentant heart are evils which invite God’s wrath and bring one disaster after another to their lives. Jonah did not like God’s idea for saving the Ninevites. So he ran away from God when he was called to go to Nineveh. He ran away in the opposite direction from Nineveh. But he was thrown into the mouth of a big fish and stayed in its belly for three days. After this hard lesson in the belly of the fish, he repented and went to Nineveh with God’s message. Repentance of sin and obedience to God’s will are the ways of salvation and the keys for blessing.

What was God’s will which Pharaoh had to obey? It was to let the Israelites go so that they might worship the LORD. It was very difficult for Pharaoh to obey God’s will because the Hebrew slaves had been so important and necessary for Pharaoh and the Egyptians for the last 430 years. The Egyptians used the Hebrews as slaves for building their cities, palaces, pyramids, roads, and houses, and for transporting, carrying, cooking, cleaning, and all aspects of their lives. So it was impossible for Pharaoh to give up the Hebrew slaves at once. It was the same difficulty for Americans in the South in the 1860’s to give up African Americans until they fought against the North to keep them as their laborers. It is the same one for children to give up their video games overnight so that they may focus on school study. Once we are obsessed or addicted, it is very hard for us to get out of it. We need a deliverer who is stronger than our will and sinful desire. It is difficult for sinners like Pharaoh to give up their sinful behaviors and desires.

The liberation of the Hebrew slaves was not God’s instant favor for the Israelites or a random decision for the sake of Moses. It was God’s long-term plan for the Israelites and the fulfillment of his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 430 years ago God had already foretold the liberation of the Israelites and promised Abraham with this plan. In Genesis 15:13-14, “*Then the LORD said to him, “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nations they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions*.” What was God’s long term plan for the Israelites? It was to make them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Ex 19:5,6) Later God established a covenant with the Israelites at Mount Sinai. “*Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites*.” In a word, God wanted to make them a shepherd for all nations so that through them the knowledge of God might be spread throughout the whole world. God wanted to save the whole world through the Israelites. At that time, the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. But in the future God will set them free and use them as a special nation for the whole world. In order to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, the Israelites had to learn how to worship God and obey him. They were full of slave mentality. They were not ready to carry out God’s holy mission as slaves. They needed to be changed for them to be a godly people.

Pharaoh did not know God’s plan and vision behind the story. He thought about only himself and his people. He rejected God’s message, which was delivered by Moses. We also reject God’s will because of our ignorance. We do not acknowledge God’s great plan for our lives. God chose us and works in us and wants to use us for his good purpose. Without knowing this, we will not listen to God, but become selfish and rebellious. We often want to live as slaves to sin, not as people of God. In a sense we are like Pharaoh.

In verse 4 God treated the Israelites differently from the Egyptians. Look at verse 4. “***But the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and that of Egypt, so that no animal belonging to the Israelites will die***.” Why did God distinguish the land of Goshen from the land of Egypt? This was because God wanted Pharaoh and the Egyptians to know that all these disasters came from God, not by accident or by nature so that they might know that the LORD is God. God wanted them to know that all these plagues were purposed for them to repent and to let the Israelites go. God does not show favoritism. Jesus said in Matthew 5:45, “*that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous*.” God loves us equally; still, he distinguishes the good from the evil. God protects his chosen people for his good purpose. This is the reason why we are not afraid of death while we carry out God’s mission on this earth. God will take care of us and protect us, and we believe that our souls are in His hand.

Second, they may know that I am the LORD. Let us think about each plague from the plague on livestock to the plague of darkness. As Moses told Pharaoh, all the livestock of the Egyptians died, but not one animal belonging to the Israelites died. Pharaoh investigated and found that not even one of the animals of the Israelites had died. Yet his heart was unyielding and he would not let the people go. (9:6-7) Next God sent the plague of boils. When Moses took some soot from a furnace and tossed it into the air, it became fine dust and brought out boils on all the Egyptians and animals. They suffered physically. Still, Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go. So Moses stretched his staff toward the sky, God sent hail on the whole land of Egypt. Those who listened to Moses’ warning and brought their animals inside and hid themselves were saved. But those who ignored God’s warning were all struck by the hail and died, both people and animals in the field. (13-25). The only place it did not hail was the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were. (26) Here we learn that God gave the chance of salvation to the Egyptians. Those who listened to God’s word and obeyed were saved, but those who didn’t listen to Him and ignored were all killed.

Through this plague of hail God wants to teach something important to not only the Egyptians but also to the Israelites. Look at verses 14-16, 29. “***Or this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth. For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. But I have raised up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth***.”(14-16)***… “Moses replied, “When I have gone out of the city, I will spread out my hands in prayer to the Lord. The thunder will stop and there will be no more hail, so you may know that the earth is the LORD’s***.” (29) Through these plagues God wanted them to know that the LORD is God. God reveals himself in many ways. He reveals himself through the creation of the world, signs and wonders, revelations, his words, his chosen people, and so on. In many ways we come to know God: through Bible study, miracles, revelations, and so on. We are blessed when we come to know God through his words. God revealed himself fully through the Scripture. When we read the Bible prayerfully, we meet God and experience his love and power. When we obey his word, we experience a deep spiritual world and have intimate fellowship with Him. But there are some who know God in hard ways, such as plagues or diseases or other sufferings, like Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

Look at verse 27-28. “***Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron. “This time I have sinned,” he said to them. “The LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Pray to the LORD, for we have had enough thunder and hail. I will let you go; you don’t have to stay any longer.***” Finally Pharaoh realized that he was wrong and God was right. He admitted his sin, but not from his heart. When he saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned again. He and his officials hardened their hearts, and he would not let the Israelites go. (34-35) In this world there are many Pharaohs who are foolish and stubborn. They beg for God’s mercy when they suffer because of their sins. But as soon as their sufferings are gone, they come back to their sinful life. Who are wise and blessed people? They are those who fear God as God and repent to live a new life.

God’s punishment on the unrepentant Pharaoh continued with the plague of locusts and the plague of darkness. The great swarm of locusts invaded all Egypt and settled down in every area of the country in great numbers. They covered all the ground until it was black. They devoured all that was left after the hail---everything growing in the fields and the fruit on the trees. Nothing green remained on the tree or plant in all the land of Egypt. (10:13-15) God’s punishment started with environmental inconveniences such as the plague of blood, the plague of frogs, the plague of gnats, the plague of flies. When Pharaoh didn’t repent, God’s punishment damaged their economic and physical life with the plague on livestock, the plague of boils, the plague of hail, and the plague of locusts. The magnitude of God’s discipline became stronger and fatal. Still, Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go. So God put all the land of Egypt into complete darkness for three days. Verses 22-23 says, “***So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and total darkness covered all Egypt for three days. No one could see anything else or move about for three days. Yet all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived***.” (10:22,23) What was the significance of the plague of darkness to the Egyptians? Pharaoh was revered as a sun god. The word ‘Pharaoh’ means ‘great house.’ But the sun god couldn’t do anything in the total darkness for three days. Darkness is also an omen for the coming deadly plague of firstborn.

Moses was reluctant and hesitant when he was called by God to deliver God’s message to Pharaoh. He made many excuses to avoid God’s calling. But he repented and obeyed God and went to Pharaoh with God’s message. Pharaoh knew that all the plagues came from the LORD God. He knew what God’s will was. But he did not repent. He stubbornly rejected God’s message. In this way he invited God’s wrath to him and his people.

God’s message, “Let my people go so that they may worship me” contains God’s divine plan for world salvation. God wants not only the Egyptians but also the people of the whole world to know that the earth is the LORD’s. God wants all people of all nations to believe in Jesus Christ so that they may not perish but have eternal life. (Jn 3:16) God wants his chosen people the Israelites to spread the knowledge of God to the whole world. In order to do so they had to learn how to worship the Lord and to live as a people of God. God gives us the same message today. “Let my people go so that they may worship me, so that they may know that I am the LORD.” There are many suffering people under the slavery of sin like slaves under Pharaoh. We have to deliver God’s message, “Let my people go so that they may worship God.” We have to challenge Pharaoh as Moses did so that they may know that the LORD is God and that salvation comes from the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us pray for God’s salvation for those who are suffering under the power of sin around us. Amen.