

Restraint of God

I We have seen, in chapters 7-8, the judgment of God against the gods of Egypt. (God intended—and intends—to demonstrate that He, alone, was—and is—God almighty. Pharaoh wanted to arrogate unto himself the privilege of receiving worship, but God will not share the worship of men with Pharaoh or anyone else. Now please remember that idolatry need not involve statues; it is not limited to historical accounts and heathen cultures. Idolatry is as much an attitude as it is a practice, and anything that distracts our attention from God can become an idol. The most obvious form of idolatry in Korea is Buddhism; but there is idolatry in churches too, especially at Christmas time. In some churches there is idolatry every Sunday, when pastors demand honor that should be given to God only, and when forms of worship feed the egos of performers on the platform, instead of directing our attention to Jesus; but these are not our topics today. Instead, let us meditate momentarily on the amount of damage that the Sendai earthquake and tsunami *might have done*; and how little real damage the rest of the world has sustained; and how much worse things *could have been*. Let us think for a few moments about God's mercy in His restraint of disasters.)

A God made Egypt miserable; but so far nothing had died. (Now as unpleasant as it must have been to see all their water turned into blood, no one died by drinking it. No, rather, they dug into the ground around the sides of the river for drinking water, and the plague passed after seven days. And as unpleasant as it must have been to find frogs in everything from cooking pots to coat pockets, and as bad as their rotting bodies must have smelled, and as pesky as all the flies must have been, still the only deaths due to these plagues was that of the frogs. We would do well to recall here that the Egyptian magicians had the ability to imitate every plague that God sent, right up to the gnats and flies; at which they

confessed their helplessness before *the finger of God*. Now in Chapter 9 we see an escalation, if you will, in this contest between Pharaoh and God. The deaths of livestock and the destruction of crops in the fields is a stroke at the economic life of Egypt. The plague of boils made it impossible for Pharaoh's magicians to stand in the presence of Moses; no one else would have been able to function at their work places either. Yet we should note that even in all this misery, no one *died*, until hail storm. Even then, those who heeded Moses were safe from it.)

B God knew how to keep His people safe from harm. (The more obvious, more historical part of this story is recorded for us in chapters 8 and 9, where God did not allow the plagues to hurt anyone— or even any of the animals —in the Land of Goshen, where the Children of Israel lived. Now there is a more prophetic implication here, in Exodus 15:26— *If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the LORD that healeth thee*. Psalm 103:17-18 seems to extend God's protection of His children in perpetuity. But let us consider our responsibilities as we claim His promise: *the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children; to such as keep his covenant, and to those that remember his commandments to do them*. God is still capable of making miracles and of protecting His own children from disasters; and God still insists that His children keep His Covenant and remember His Commandments, too. This is a very practical promise from our Heavenly Father that all believers can claim, if we live right in front of God.)

II The first 3 plagues affected only the inanimate world. (Again, we note that a historical inquiry without relevant applicability is nothing more than an almost

academic exercise of vocabulary and listening skills. So let us ask whether the finger of God might have touched our contemporary world as well, without inflicting actual physical harm on people. Well scientists have been warning governmental policy-planners for years that increasing levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, decreasing masses of ice at the poles, and rising temperatures in ocean water were indications of dangerous changes in the environment. Now we will stop short of saying that these were wrought by God; it is obvious that environmental degradation is the natural result of exploitation. Yet we can say that there is a certain parallel to Pharaoh's Egypt here. Perhaps you have noticed that the frogs in Egypt could not live in the Nile River after it turned to blood any more than the fish could; the fish just didn't have anywhere to go. Did you notice that the gnats appeared after the deaths of the frogs, and before the appearance of the flies? This, too, is a natural sequence of events. The point is that God can and often does allow the natural consequences of our decisions to teach us to make better decisions the next time. Well for Pharaoh, there were several next times, and he made the same wrong decision each time. The time finally arrived, for him, when there was no more chance to repent and get it right; and that is the lesson for us too. In the contemporary parallel of this Egyptian analogy, the time when only the environment is affected is gone; the time when people themselves begin to suffer has arrived; and we should start making better decisions with respect to our worshipping God. We won't; Biblical prophecy is pretty clear about that. We won't, but we should.)

A The next 3 plagues interrupted people's lives and livelihoods. (The deaths of cattle, sheep, and goats, and the destruction of growing crops, would have been a significant injury to the agricultural sector of the Egyptian economy. Following as it did the deaths of fish in the Nile River, it would have posed a significant

challenge to the food supply. Yet apparently not all animals died, there were some left to need protection from the coming hail storm (perhaps they bought replacement animals in the Land of Goshen?) and grain that had not yet headed was spared from the hail. Here we note again the restraint with which God acted. Now are there parallels in our contemporary world for these events? We need not exercise much imagination to draw an analogy between the agricultural sectors of the economy in Pharaoh's Egypt and the financial services sectors of the post-industrial economies in Europe, North America, and Asia. Not all insurers, banks, and governments went broke in 1997, although nearly everyone's livelihoods have been affected by inflation and unemployment since then. Now let us note again that (excepting suicides) the only world-class problems that have claimed lives are wars, famines, and diseases, as has always been the case. If we are correct in drawing these parallels between Egypt and the contemporary world, then we ought to be thanking God for His mercy and restraint as He passes judgment against selfishness and arrogance in our world. Furthermore, we ought not to be surprised when things get worse instead of better, and when more and more people are affected, and when catastrophes (either natural or man-made) start claiming even more lives. If social order breaks down entirely, as the Bible indicates that it will, then whom should we blame? No doubt people will spare secular humanists in academia and government from the harshest reproaches, but God will not exonerate them; they will be the most guilty.)

B The plagues in Chapter 9 affected people personally. (Let us continue in this line of examination a moment longer. At the beginning, God warned Pharaoh to let His people go, or some bad things would happen. In the beginning, the bad things affected only the inanimate world. Then beginning in Chapter 9, moms had to start explaining to kids why there was no milk for breakfast; millers and shop

keepers had to start explaining to customers why there was no grain to grind; and priests had to start explaining to people in temples why, after all their prayers and sacrifices, their gods were not helping them. Now, of course, bankers have to explain to businesses why there is so little capital for investing, government economists have to explain why inflation robs people of their purchasing power, and why social services have become fewer and more expensive, and civil servants have to explain the necessity for disaster preparedness. Yet in Egypt until Chapter 9, and in our world until very recently, God's judgment has not had a direct cost in terms of human life. That situation changed in another chapter or so for Egypt; and it may already have changed for us.)

C God is and was merciful, even to the Egyptians. (We note again that so far, the only people who died in Egypt were the ones who ignored Moses' warning about the coming hail storm. God told Pharaoh that things could have been much worse, but that they weren't, because God raised him (Pharaoh) up specifically to show His (God's) power. Part of that power was used for restraint; to give the Egyptians the opportunity to learn that their king was not God; to give Pharaoh a few more chances to repent; and to demonstrate both the goodness and severity of God. Now can we not see how God has been merciful in our world as well? –or do we think that the survival of Florida and New Orleans was due to hurricane preparedness, and that earthquake-proof construction methods and tsunami warning systems saved Japan? We are tempted to think as the news media would have us believe, that civil unrest in the middle-east started because of wiki-leaks and persisted due to social media; and that governance survives in North Africa due to the departure of dictators. Now let us note that famines and civil wars in Africa, and elsewhere, began with the rejection of western-style Christianity and democracy in favor of Islam and marxism, as far back as the 1950s, and yet

humanity survives. Many are miserable, but life goes on. God is giving our world a chance to repent and worship Him, but we continue to ignore Him. Several thousand people went into eternity from Japan without Jesus on March 11, and the only way for unbelievers to meet Jesus is for someone who knows Jesus to introduce them to Him. The fact that the earthquake was 8.9 instead of 9.9 shows the restraint of God; the fact that the tsunami was 3 meters and not 30 meters shows the restraint of God; and the fact that God has not reached down with His Big Thumb and squashed the multi-million dollar institutional church buildings, where they are too busy increasing attendance figures to challenge unbelievers to repent and believe the Gospel shows the restraint of God. Surprise! Here is another reason to thank God and worship Him; but will we?)

III God protected the Children of Israel in the Land of Goshen. (Beginning with the plague of flies, God protected the Land of Goshen, where the Israelites were, from plagues. He told Pharaoh that He made the distinction so that Pharaoh would know that God was in the land. Now we ought to be careful here, because teachers of a very dangerous heresy use this to validate their message. First let us note that God said, the distinction would show Pharaoh that God was in the land. God was indeed in the Land of Goshen, but the Spirit of God is absent from the liberals' churches. The spirit in the heresy is humanism, and the spirit in the liberal who preaches it is ambition and cowardice. If you don't know which heresy I mean, I will tell you plainly that there is no scriptural justification for the doctrine of a pre-tribulation rapture. That doctrine came from Scotland in the 1850s, and it was popularized by C.I. Schofield in the early 20th century. It is an effective deception: a lot of people run to altars to confess sin and receive Jesus as their Savior after they hear it preached. (We hold that the Truth of the *Word of God* is enough to make people repent.) Also, if one repents because of a false

doctrine and later learns that the doctrine was false, what will happen to the repentance? It will be like buying a car that will not run, and then swearing never to buy that kind of car again. So let us be careful with our expectations of Divine protection for God's people. Secondly, we ought also to note that God did not either protect the Children of Israel from all plagues, nor did He take them out of Egypt to protect them from the misery that followed the plagues. The purpose for which God sent the plagues was to demonstrate His Power to Pharaoh, and to provide the Israelites reason to proclaim the Name of the Lord throughout the world. The Children of Israel saw blood in the water and gasped at the sight (and smell) of the frogs too, and they felt the sting of the gnats as much as did the Egyptians, and there is no Bible verse to say that the Hebrews were spared from the plague of boils. We say again, there is absolutely nothing in the Bible to support the belief that God will take believers out of the world before the Great Tribulation begins, either. The Hebrews were delivered from Egypt in Exodus 12; and believers will be delivered from this world when Jesus returns to earth, and not one moment before. God took care of His people while they were in Egypt because He was in their Land; God will protect His people in our time too, *if* He is in our Land, *if* He is honored in our churches, and *if* He is Lord of our lives; but we should not expect His protection under any other conditions.)

A Some Egyptians began to understand the Power of God. (Ordinary humble Egyptians, who suffered most from the plagues, had no power to release the Hebrews from bondage. That decision was Pharaoh's to make. We see that once before he seemed to be willing to let them go, and then changed his mind when the crisis was passed; now, during the hail storm, we note his apparent repentance and subsequent backsliding. The Bible tells us that some of his officials began to fear God and started taking Moses' advice. Let us note once more that this is an

indication of the mercy of God, that He gave them warning and then gave them opportunity to benefit from heeding it. What a pity that the *pharaohs and their officials* in our world have not been so thoroughly impressed with God's Power! Like the Pharaoh of Exodus, they seem to be so obsessed with their own power that they have no interest in respecting God's. And, as in Egypt, it seems that the only people in our world who understand the demands of God and His Power to enforce them are not part of decision-making processes. For this and several other reasons, we are right to organize our own church; and similarly, it is no mutiny if we explain our reasons to others and encourage them to vote on unreasonable church policies with their feet.)

B Pharaoh appears to repent; then to backslide. (Pharaoh's repentance seems to be insincere, even across all the centuries. He seems to be like the child who goes to school without his homework and then tells his teacher how sorry he is. He isn't sorry for being irresponsible and careless, he is scared of what is about to happen to him. He may in fact be very sorry about being in trouble, but until he is sorry for his attitude and his behavior, nothing will change. This is why Proverbs advises the use of corporal punishment: unless the child is made to suffer in ways he will not want to repeat, then the punishment is not effective. Pharaoh's confession of sin in v. 27 is like that. He is sorry for the hail storm, not for the bondage of the Hebrews; he was sorry for the problems his country was enduring, not for his arrogance. And like that student who escapes punishment by his teacher, Pharaoh backslid quickly, once the immediate threat had passed. God and Moses saw the superficiality of his repentance; God was merciful anyway.)

C "God is not mocked"; men reap what they sow. (This is a reference to Galatians 6:7-8. We should read this together. There is another point to be raised here, from Romans 2:5— *after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up*

unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God. Pharaoh (and my irresponsible student) only thought they were avoiding retribution for what they had done or not done. Pharaoh sought to mock God, as teenagers will mock parents and teachers if they are not corrected for their insolence. But God was not mocked by Pharaoh. Worse things were yet to come upon him. God will not be mocked by liberals in contemporary churches either. Let us read together Revelation 3:17-19. *You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent* (Revelation 3:17-19). Repent *what*, exactly? Selfishness; deceptions (misrepresentations as well as self-deceptions); gossip and rumor mongering; idolatry; secularism and humanism, and the greed and ambitions these things engender, come to mind. The challenge of God's Word is clear; and the contemporary church is no more likely to repent sincerely than Pharaoh was.)

IV The Children of Israel never quite understood their "special-ness". (We shall return to our critique of contemporary religious experience momentarily. Now we must turn again to the symbolism of God's dealing with His Chosen people and what it means in our Christian experience. Moses told Pharaoh that God had raised him up for a two-fold purpose: first, to show the Power of God to Pharaoh, and second, so that His Name would be proclaimed in all the earth.)

A God's plan was for the Israelites to do the proclaiming of v. 16. (From our New Testament perspective, we should notice that that proclamation should have taken the form of the Birth of Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man. The contents of

the Proclamation should have been as the angels sang, *Glory to God in the Highest and on earth, Peace and good-will to men*. The good-will referred to by the angels was the dawning of the Age of Grace, the time when *Whosoever shall call upon the Name of the Lord shall be saved* (Romans 10:13). We say again, that we understand these things from our New Testament perspective; they could not have understood them except in the context of Messianic Prophecy. God would have used the Hebrews to do the proclaiming, in their role as the Kingdom of Priests (Exodus 19:6); but their hearts were not right with God; they did not share the faith that justified Abraham, or King David's zeal for praising God.)

B How do we, the beneficiaries of Grace, understand our role? (This is the burning question for us. God's Chosen People were chosen specifically to be the human family for the Messiah; because of the hardness of their hearts, they could not be anything more. Let us recall that God was not surprised, He was prepared for an infinite variety of alternative outcomes with an infinite variety of methods for filling Heaven and Earth with His Glory. In the Age of Grace (which is the theologically correct way to describe the New Testament era from the time of Pentecost until the present), God has invested the Church (and we stipulate, the real, spiritual, capital C-Church) with the riches of His Grace. There are three specific ways that we are to proclaim His Name by communicating, or sharing, the Grace of God with the world. All three ways are signs of the Reality, they are not the reality of the Grace of God in or by themselves, or even in combinations. The Grace of God is a free gift. So is the faith with which we receive the Gift of the Grace of God. We who possess that Grace by our faith are obliged to preach the Gospel of Salvation by Grace through faith, in all the world. God makes no allowances for our geographical or cultural preferences and no exceptions in proportion to our excuses. There is only the demand of God that we preach the

Gospel to the world, and our obedience or disobedience to the Word of God. So we ask again, how do we, the beneficiaries of Grace, understand our role in the work and in the Will of God? Let us find our answers in scripture: *I must do the work of Him who sent me while it is day, for night cometh when no man can work* (John 9:4). The work God sends you or me to do will become obvious as we seek Him in prayer and Bible study. Let us find and define our roles thus.)

C Christians must learn to be instruments of God's Power; or else they will join the objects of His Wrath (Romans 9:15-24). (This is another passage which we should read together. How can we know which vessel we are? We will know by our utility to the Kingdom of God. No paper envelope makes a good dinner plate, and no dinner plate makes a good napkin. Similarly, no one who gossips and shares rumors is an evangelist, and no Saint of God is a hypocrite. The Power of God changes unbelievers into believers, and it changes believers into children of God. (The theological term for this process is Sanctification; and once it starts it is irreversible, in the born-again child of God.) We must become either tools in the Hands of God, for the revelation of His Glory to the world, or we will be useless to Him and become tender for the fires of hell. The Bible describes only saints and sinners, no one else; because there are but two destinies for all of us: Heaven or Hell. Everyone has a soul that will spend eternity *somewhere*; and we, believers, have the only Gospel that changes the eternal destiny of anyone's soul.)

V God will demonstrate His Almighty Power and His Name will be proclaimed in all the earth. (We return then, to the critique of our contemporary religious experiences. The Power of God is in the preaching of the Cross (1 Corinthians 1:18); and God uses that power to redeem mankind from sin. He shares that power with us, in that *to as many as received Him, even to them who believed on His name, He gave the power to become the sons of God* (John 1:14). Now the

Son of God came from Heaven to earth to do the redeeming, and to finish the work of Salvation. He leaves His (adopted) children here on earth now to do what He has always wanted done: to reveal His Glory, to proclaim His Name, to be lights to the world and the salt of the earth. God showed His Power to Pharaoh in spite of Pharaoh's refusal to submit to it; and God accomplished His Will in the Children of Israel too, although they neither understood it nor accepted it. Now is the Age of Grace. Now it is the role of the Church (with the capital C) to show the Power of God and proclaim His Name. These things will be done; they are the Will of God. As we have mentioned many times, God will accomplish His Will, with our co-operation or without it. The time has arrived when God will start showing His Power even though men neither recognize the demonstration of it nor repent after it. We should expect, from the example of Pharaoh's Egypt, and from Biblical prophecy, that conditions on earth will steadily worsen, until Jesus returns to earth again.)

A God's restraint gave Pharaoh an opportunity to repent. (God's restraint in dealing with impenitent men in our times is giving the contemporary world a few more chances to repent too. Pharaoh and his hard heart are prophetic symbols for us, who understand it, that God's restraint is unappreciated; that men will persist in indulging their propensity for sin; that the increasing frequency and severity of manifestations of the wrath of God will only harden the hearts of men as they rebel more and more against God's moral authority. God was, and is, watching. God was, and is, intervening. God was, and is, keeping His Children safe, while the plagues of judgment fell on Egypt and cataclysmic prophecies are fulfilled. God was preparing circumstances for the deliverance of the Children of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. What about the newsworthiness of Matthew 24?)

B Signs of the Times indicate that God is doing so again. (Let us read from Luke

13:1-9; Revelation 9:20-21; and 16:9-11. Jesus gave us some advice for coping with adverse conditions, and we would do well to meditate on that advice: *And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh* (Luke 21:28). We conclude this message as the Apostle concluded the Revelation (22:20)— *He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.*