

WINNERS AND LOSERS

Exodus 11, 12

At the end of a week when the England cricket team won the Ashes I don't need to tell you the difference between winning and losing. Winning is everything. Second place is nothing. Everyone loves a winner. If you want to know what they think of a loser just ask Sven Goren Eriksson.

The first twelve chapters of Exodus are all about winners and losers. They are full of contrast. There's the contrast between Pharaoh and Moses: Pharaoh so confident, Moses so diffident. We saw last time how reluctant Moses was to believe that he could be used by God. He made five excuses before finally God became angry with him and he felt it wisest to shut up. But as we move on from chapter 4 to chapter 6 we find Moses putting himself down again.

Chapter 6 verse 12: 'But Moses said to the LORD, "If the Israelites will not listen to me, why would Pharaoh listen to me, since I speak with faltering lips?"' Admittedly Moses had not had a lot of success convincing the Israelites. His intervention had resulted in even greater hardship for them.

Moving on to chapter 6 verse 30: 'But Moses said to the LORD, "Since I speak with faltering lips, why would Pharaoh listen to me?"' Moses was anything but confident.

By contrast Pharaoh was supremely confident. From the very start at his first meeting with Moses, chapter 5 verse 2, 'Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go."'

Winners and losers. Pharaoh and Moses. It's obvious, isn't it. Pharaoh was born to everything the world had to offer: wealth, fame and power. And he took it. Moses was presented with everything the world had to offer but he gave it all up, for poverty, obscurity and helplessness.

If you had been a betting man in Egypt who would you have put your money on to come out on top, Moses or Pharaoh? I don't think there's any doubt. Pharaoh would have been a dead cert.

But of course things didn't turn out according to the book, not the bookie's book anyway. In the New Testament, in God's book, we read, 'God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that don't exist—to bring to nothing the things that do exist, so that no one may boast before him' (1 Corinthians 1:27–29).

Jesus said, 'What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet loses his soul?' (Matthew 16:26.)

Alongside this contrast between Pharaoh and Moses there is the contrast between their people, the Egyptians and the Israelites. It's the same situation but on a much larger scale. The Egyptians were the masters. The Israelites were their slaves. The Egyptians were the oppressors. The Israelites were their victims. Winners and losers. It's crystal clear, isn't it.

But there's a further contrast: the final plague and the first passover. If we look at this scene from ancient history from a purely human point of view the outcome seems certain: victory for the Egyptians, misery for the Israelites. But there is another perspective, another factor in the equation: the presence and the purpose and the power of God.

God had chosen Moses. God had chosen the Israelites. God was on their side and the battle Pharaoh chose to fight was not against Moses but against God. 'Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go.' Pharaoh was to find out just who the LORD was in a close encounter of the unmistakable kind.

It would be shortsighted to see these events just in terms of winning and losing. They are more about judgment and salvation. God's action in punishing Egypt was a judgment on sin, principally the sin of rejecting the living God, but also the sin of cruelty and injustice to innocent people – his people. God sent Moses in his name to say, 'Let my people go,' and Pharaoh stolidly refused.

God sent plagues on the Egyptians as a warning. They are catalogued in Exodus chapters 7 to 11: water turned to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, the death of livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and finally the death of all firstborn: people and animals alike. This build-up of judgments was meant to warn Pharaoh and his people and it had a limited effect on them but whenever the crisis passed Pharaoh's heart was hardened.

Some people have been troubled by this. Exodus chapter 4 verse 21: 'The LORD said to Moses, "When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.'" It's repeated in chapter 7 verse 3. 'I will harden Pharaoh's heart.' In no less than nine other verses we are told that the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart. Was that fair?

If we go back to chapter 7 verse 13 we read there that 'Pharaoh's heart became hard.' In the next verse, 'Pharaoh's heart is unyielding; he refuses to let the people go.' Then in chapter 8 verse 15 there is a significant change of expression. There we read for the first time, Pharaoh 'hardened his heart'. It's repeated in verse 32. In chapter 9 verse 7: 'his heart was unyielding'.

This is how it worked. Again and again Pharaoh hardened his heart until finally God hardened his heart. In other words, God locked him in to the decision he himself had so emphatically made. God is patient. The Bible tells us that he does not want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9). But there comes a time when it's too late, when the decisions we have made become irreversible. The die is cast. That's how it was for Pharaoh. Decision determines destiny.

God's judgment on Pharaoh and on Egypt is a warning about a far greater judgment that affects us all. In Romans chapter 14 we are told 'we will all stand before God's judgment seat' and 'each of us will give an account of himself to God' (verses 10, 12). In Acts chapter 17 verse 31 we read, '[God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.'

If the events recorded in Exodus tell us about the final plague they tell us also about the first passover. They are about salvation as well as judgment. God's judgment fell on everyone, Egyptians and Israelites alike. The destroyer brought God's judgment to the doors of every home without exception, a reminder to us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But when the LORD brought destruction to certain doors he didn't go in. He passed over. Hence the name 'passover'. Why were those households saved while others were not?

Quite simply it was because they accepted salvation on God's terms. They did what he told them. And what was that? To take a lamb, a year-old male without defect, to roast it in a particular way and eat it in haste, dressed ready for their journey – the exodus from Egypt. But not only that: they were to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses. And God said, 'When I see the blood, I will pass over you.'

In the New Testament we read 'Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed' (1 Corinthians 5:7). He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Peter says, 'it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect' (1 Peter 1:18, 19).

Peter draws attention to three things here. First of all, there was a price that had to be

paid. That's what redemption means. Secondly, as the sacrificial lamb Christ had to be without blemish or defect, the sacrifice of a perfect, sinless life. Thirdly, it was the shedding of his blood that secured our pardon.

God's word tells us that 'Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.'

There's one more lesson from Exodus chapter 12 I want to point out. If you look carefully at verses 1 to 11 you'll see that it's all telling the Israelites what they must do. The key word is 'you'. Look at verses 4 and 5. '**You** are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. The animals **you** choose must be year-old males without defect, and **you** may take them from the sheep or the goats.'

Now contrast that with verses 12 and 13. It's still God speaking. 'On that same night **I** will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn —both men and animals —and **I** will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. **I** am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when **I** see the blood, **I** will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when **I** strike Egypt.'

God was saying, 'There's something that only you can do and there's something that only I can do.' God calls us to believe in the Lord Jesus, to trust him for salvation, to turn from our sins and humbly ask him to take over our lives. God can't do that for us.

But forgiveness of sins, the sacrifice that makes it possible, the punishment that takes away sin, the victory that overcomes death and hell – that's something we cannot do; the miracle that takes sinners and makes them into saints, so far reaching that it can only be described as being born again – only God can do that.

Not the labour of my hands can fulfil Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone: Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress; helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly: wash me, Saviour, or I die.

Winners and losers. The scenes in London last Tuesday were truly remarkable. But the Bible gives us a picture even more incredible than that.

It's in the final book, Revelation chapter 7 verses 9 to 17.