

The God Who Delivers (Part 4 of 6)

The Promised Judgment: The Death of the Firstborn
Exodus 11:1-10

Mark Vroegop

¹ The LORD said to Moses, "Yet one plague more I will bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt. Afterward he will let you go from here. When he lets you go, he will drive you away completely. ² Speak now in the hearing of the people, that they ask, every man of his neighbor and every woman of her neighbor, for silver and gold jewelry." ³ And the LORD gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover, the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's servants and in the sight of the people. ⁴ So Moses said, "Thus says the LORD: 'About midnight I will go out in the midst of Egypt, ⁵ and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the cattle. ⁶ There shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there has never been, nor ever will be again. ⁷ But not a dog shall growl against any of the people of Israel, either man or beast, that you may know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.' ⁸ And all these your servants shall come down to me and bow down to me, saying, 'Get out, you and all the people who follow you.' And after that I will go out." And he went out from Pharaoh in hot anger. ⁹ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh will not listen to you, that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt." ¹⁰ Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh, and the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land (Exodus 11:1-10).

This week there was big news out of Leister, England. In August last year, archeologists discovered what they believed to be the remains of King Richard III underneath a parking lot. King Richard was killed in the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, and DNA evidence confirmed the remains to be his.¹ While King Richard only reigned two years, he was regarded as the last King of England during the Middle Ages, and you may remember some lines from the play written about him by William Shakespeare:

*Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York;
And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.²*

The remains confirmed that King Richard suffered from scoliosis, a curvature of the spine that led Shakespeare to depict him as an ugly and deformed hunchback, died of mortal wound to the skull,

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2013/02/03/world/europe/richard-iii-search-announcement/index.html>

² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_III_\(play\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_III_(play))

and was hastily buried.³ The archeology is bringing clarity to what historians know about this brief but important King of England.

The study of the book of Exodus is a bit like an archeological dig. Lying under the surface are interesting discoveries and helpful nuggets of truth that help you understand the Bible with greater clarity and depth. Learning what lies underneath can shed new light on things which we might otherwise take for granted.

When we began this series, I told you that Exodus was filled with foundational concepts that inform the New Testament. There are many ideas or themes that have their roots in Exodus. Here are a few: "I AM," Passover, Sacrificial Lamb, the Law, the Ark of the Covenant, and the concept of redemption – that God "brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Ex 20:2). And there are others.

Today we are going to learn about another term which has great significance in the Old Testament, the book of Exodus, and the New Testament. It is the term **firstborn**. And it is connected to the last of the Ten Plagues, the death of the firstborn.

The Sovereign God Who Delivers and Saves

Our series title has been "The God Who Delivers," and we have seen the various plagues which have become leverage points for God to send the message "Let my people go that they may serve me." The Nile, frogs, gnats, flies, livestock, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness have all put enormous pressure on Pharaoh, and they have directly challenged multiple Egyptian gods. But the death of the firstborn will be the defining and final plague. And it is directly connected to two biblical ideas: sovereignty and salvation. The final plague shows us a sovereign God who saves.

The death of the firstborn will become a monumental moment for Pharaoh, for Egypt, for Israel, and for God. It will be a point of reference for future generations and a statement to those who would hear about this moment. Everything in chapters 7-12 was leading up to this moment. In fact, this was a part of God's plan from the very beginning. Before Moses' first encounter with Pharaoh, God told him what would happen:

²¹ And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. ²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, ²³ 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 son' " (Exodus 4:21–23).

So there is more here than just a final plague. There is more here than just a proud ruler of Egypt. And there is more to this story than just people being freed from slavery. Embedded in this narrative and in the history of the word "firstborn" is the convergence of God's ability to be God and His unstoppable plan to deliver His people. The death of the firstborn is a portrait upon which we see God's sovereignty and His salvation, not only in the Old Testament but also in the New.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_III_of_England

The Significance of the Firstborn Plague in the Exodus

Chapter eleven records both a flashback to what God had told Moses before and a promise of what was going to come in this final plague. The phrase “the Lord said” can also be translated (per NIV) as “the Lord had said.” The flashbacks are found in verses 1-3 and verse nine:

The LORD said to Moses, “Yet one plague more I will bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt. Afterward he will let you go from here. When he lets you go, he will drive you away completely.”² Speak now in the hearing of the people, that they ask, every man of his neighbor and every woman of her neighbor, for silver and gold jewelry.”³ And the LORD gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover, the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh’s servants and in the sight of the people (Exodus 11:1–3).

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Pharaoh will not listen to you, that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 11:9).

We’ve heard this before. When Moses was at the burning bush, God told him about Pharaoh’s eventual defeat and their plundering of the Egyptians (see 3:19-22), and before he went to Pharaoh the first time, God told Moses that Pharaoh’s heart would be hardened (see 7:3-5).

Verses 4-8 seem be words that Moses spoke directly to Pharaoh in the context of the plague of darkness. So this narrative is not always sequential, and this is because the purpose of this book is theological, not just historical. In other words, it is communicating a message, not just recording a story. So what is the message or the significance of this final warning? What are the messages being communicated in this text?

1. God keeps His promises

The structure of this text, by sandwiching Moses’ words to Pharaoh in between previously made promises, is intended to communicate a very important message. It is a lesson that Israel will not learn easily: God is worthy of trust. Doug Stuart summarizes this well:

“Moses was writing this story not merely to help his fellow Israelites trust Yahweh as things happened but to help them learn to trust that Yahweh is the one who makes things happen in the first place, as part of a great redemptive plan for the benefit of his people.”⁴

As we began our journey in this book, we read Exodus 2:24-25 which highlighted the same idea:

²⁴ . . . and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵ God saw the people of Israel — and God knew (Exodus 2:24–25).

The death of the firstborn is not only a warning to Pharaoh about the consequences of his hardened heart; it also is an encouragement and a warning to Israel that God can and should be trusted. God keeps His promises.

⁴ Doug Stuart, *Exodus – The New American Commentary*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006), 262.

2. God is the one, true God

Like the other plagues, the death of the firstborn directly challenged the Egyptian worldview. In fact, this plague, more than any other, shattered it. First, the plague was to happen at midnight, and the Egyptians believed that their sun-god departed to the underworld during the night, leaving them unprotected.⁵ They greatly feared the night because of this. Second, the plague affected every level of their culture, including their animals. Since their mythology was directly connected to the natural world, this would have had a devastating effect.

But it is the last aspect that is probably the most important. The Pharaohs of Egypt were worshipped as the sons of a god, and they were often obsessed with immortality and the after-life. Therefore, for every household to be simultaneously struck with death would have been incredibly frightening. Neither their gods nor Pharaoh could protect them.

3. God owns everything

There is a reason why God specifically targets the firstborn. In the Ancient Near East, the firstborn, typically the firstborn son, was believed to share more closely his father's qualities, and he was destined to succeed his father as the head of the family.⁶ The firstborn represented the continuation of a family from one generation to the next. Therefore, the firstborn was given greater authority and respect, and he was typically given a larger inheritance.⁷ The firstborn was a cherished child, not only because of birth order but also because of what it meant for the family's future.

But it is not just the importance of the firstborn child that is relevant here; it is God's claim of ownership over the firstborn. Exodus 13:2 identifies this idea very clearly:

² "Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine (Exodus 13:2).

God exerts His rightful claim as the Creator and owner of all creation through this statement that the firstborn belong to Him. God is making a statement here that should not be missed. He is saying that the most important and the first evidence of life's creative abilities do not belong to humans. The divine ownership of the firstborn is a statement that "I am God and you are not."

This is what Pharaoh needed to learn. Before Moses ever spoke to Pharaoh, God identified the people of Israel as His "firstborn son" and warned Moses what He would do to Pharaoh:

22 Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, 23 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 son' " (Exodus 4:22–23).

⁵ J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus – The Bible Speaks Today*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2005), 127.

⁶ A.C. Myers, *Firstborn – The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 383.

⁷ Ibid.

The death of the firstborn son is a clear and final statement regarding God's ownership of everything. Yahweh is God, and Pharaoh is not. This will be the ultimate lesson regarding Pharaoh's opposition of God, and it will also be the basis of Israel's relationship with their God.

As we will see next week, the death of the firstborn brought death to every home. Either the firstborn was killed, or a lamb was killed. The firstborn was either judged severely or spared mercifully by the faith-applied blood of a lamb. This moment marked Egypt and Israel for the rest of their lives. No one would ever be the same with this ultimate statement of God's complete ownership. This moment would forever serve as a warning to Israel about God's rightful place in their lives.

¹³ ...Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. ¹⁴ And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. ¹⁵ For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.' ¹⁶ It shall be as a mark on your hand or forelocks between your eyes, for by a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt" (Exodus 13:13–16).

The death of the firstborn and the Passover become a defining statement about God's sovereign power. He owns everything because He is God.

4. God will personally bring judgment and justice

The other plagues were mediated through Moses and Aaron. God gave the command and the power, but the plague happened as the water was struck (Ex. 7:20) or as soot was thrown in the air (Ex. 9:8). But this plague was going to be different. The warning was as ominous as it was personal:

⁴ So Moses said, "Thus says the LORD: 'About midnight I will go out in the midst of Egypt, ⁵ and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the cattle (Exodus 11:4–5).

This judgment will involve the personal activity of God Himself. Pharaoh and Egypt will no longer contend with God through a mediator; they will experience the tragedy of being on the wrong side of their creator.

And with this judgment, God will execute justice. It is not by accident that verse six says, "there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt . . ." It is the same word used in Exodus 3:7-9 for the cry that God heard from His own people, the cry that led Him to act on their behalf. God will personally bring absolute justice.

5. God's redemption brings blessing

The final significance of this plague relates to what victory looks like. You cannot read the Exodus narrative and think only of God's deliverance of his people *from* slavery. He redeemed them *to* something. God's deliverance brings freedom, but it also brings amazing blessings.

Back at the burning bush, God told Moses that the people were going to plunder the Egyptians (Ex. 3:22). This war-time metaphor is meant to capture the real battle in which God and Pharaoh are engaged. The death of the firstborn will not only result in Israel's freedom from slavery; they will also receive the spoils of war. God's victory on their behalf will result in great blessings.

Material goods were among the spoils, but there also was something personal for Moses. God's victory would result in Moses' own exaltation – *“the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's servants and in the sight of the people”* (Ex. 11:3). In other words, Moses would be proven right. The death of the firstborn would make right the injustice that he had endured.

I hope that you can see more clearly now the importance and significance of this plague. It is more than just the final act of deliverance; it is definitive statement to Egypt and Pharaoh and Israel and to us about the sovereign power of God. This plague targets the firstborn in order to clearly communicate that *“there is no one like the Lord our God”* (Ex. 8:10).

This plague will mark the people of Israel for generations. But there is more here because this plague is foundational to what we find in the New Testament about another firstborn child, another death, and another deliverance.

The Death of the Firstborn in the New Testament

Remember that I told you that the book of Exodus is a bit like an archeological dig? Well, as I went through the different aspects about the plague of the firstborn, I'm sure that many of you were thinking of some amazing parallels in the New Testament. If you were not even aware of this connection, then this will be a thrilling journey, as I try to show you the connection between what we just learned and what happens in the work of Jesus. Consider the following parallels:

1. Jesus is called the firstborn

Through the gospels and the epistles in the New Testament, Jesus is connected to this idea of being the firstborn Son of God. Here are few examples:

- Mark 1:1 – Jesus is called the “Son of God”
- Matthew 1:25 – clearly Jesus is the first son which Mary has born
- Luke 2:7 – “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger.”

Matthew goes even further to describe the flight of Jesus and his family to Egypt after his birth in order to fulfill a prophesy in Hosea 11:1 which says, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” So Matthew sees Jesus as following in the pattern of the original firstborn son – the people of Israel.

The apostle Paul even takes this a step further. The book of Colossians directly connects the power and honor of Christ to this title:

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or

authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15–17).

It is so clear that Jesus was *a* firstborn physically, and He was *the* firstborn in terms of honor. And none of this is by accident.

2. Redemption from sin is accomplished by the death of the firstborn son of God

God redeemed Israel through the death of the firstborn, and in the New Testament He redeems people from the slavery of sin by the death of the firstborn Son of God. We will look at this further next week, but it is not by accident that Jesus is called the Lamb of God (John 1:29). The symbols and imagery of the Exodus are meant to point beyond themselves.

²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The death of Jesus is the divine combination of the death of the firstborn and the death of the Lamb of God in one moment, which leads to the deliverance of His people from another kind of slavery – a bondage to sin.

3. Jesus bears the penalty and satisfies the divine demand for justice

Divine justice must be served for the consequences of rebellion through sin. God cannot and will not forgive sin without some kind of payment. Death, either the death of a child or the death of a lamb, came to every household in Egypt. And in the same way, atonement has to be made for forgiveness to be granted. Here is how the apostle Paul stated it:

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith... so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:23–26).

God is able to be just and the justifier because the firstborn son bears the penalty for rebellion. The death of the firstborn makes it possible for those who by faith receive Him to be set free from the slavery of sin.

4. The followers of Jesus share in his victory

Jesus' resurrection from the death is also described in firstborn terminology, and those who belong to Him share in His victory. Consider the following:

¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent (Colossians 1:18).

²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers (Romans 8:29).

The writer of Hebrews even uses the firstborn concept to describe all those who have been redeemed through Christ.

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect . . . ” (Hebrews 12:22–23).

In other words, those who receive the death of this firstborn become part of the assembly of the firstborn. The followers of Jesus share in His victory. His victory becomes the victory of those who put their faith in Him. Jesus is the firstborn son, the Lamb of God, the deliverer of His people, and the one from whom all blessings flow.

Is it any wonder that John’s vision of the end times records a Lamb who had been slain and worship all around Him that sounds like this:

*“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth” (Revelation 5:9–10).*

This is the song of an exodus, but not the kind that we have in the book of Exodus. This is the song of a people who were delivered from their own sin, redeemed by the death of another, and who owe everything to this Lamb of God who is also the firstborn son.

Do you see how much is under the surface when it comes to the book of Exodus? Do you see the amazing meaning embedded in this text? However, there is a difference between finding the bones of King Richard and reading the story of Exodus. The discovery of King Richard’s bones is fascinating and instructive. But the story of the death of the Firstborn is meant to warn you and invite you.

It is meant to warn you that there is a sovereign God who still rules the universe and who still owns everything. There is still a holy God who defines right from wrong and who cannot allow sin to go unpunished. Exodus tells us that God always wins. Always. He is God.

But this text also invites you. It invites you to see Jesus as the Firstborn Son and as the Lamb of God who can cause the judgment of God to pass over you. The invitation is to run inside the blood-covered house, which is Christ for forgiveness. The invitation is to receive the Firstborn Son who died so that you could be delivered.

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