

Parashah Forty-Nine

Exodus 6:2–7:18; Ezekiel 28:25–29:21; Acts 7:17–22

notes by Tim Hegg

The Character of the Redeemed Soul

If one looks at the Scriptures as a whole, nothing is more clear than this: the exodus from Egypt forms the paradigm or the pattern for the whole concept of “redemption.” After this momentous event, the exodus would remain in the traditions and beliefs of Israel as the undisputed action of God in redeeming His people. A simple definition of redemption is “regaining ownership through payment of a price.” This basic meaning of גָּאָל, ga’al, the Hebrew verb most often translated by our English word “redeem,” by extension can also mean “to right something that is wrong.” In either case, a consistent part of redemption is the paying of a price. A modern day illustration of the basic meaning of “redemption” may be found in a pawn shop. An item which has been left in the hands of the owner is redeemed when (1) proof of ownership is provided, and (2) the required price of redemption is remitted.

Now here is a very important aspect of redemption: the one doing the redeeming has prior ownership of that which is being redeemed. Israel belonged to God before she ever descended to Egypt. As the text states (Ex 4:22): “Israel is My son, My first born.” This being the case, we must ask a fundamental question: “Why did God allow Israel to be under the bondage of slavery in the first place?” If He already had ownership of Israel, if indeed Israel was His son, His first-born, why would He allow Israel to be subjected to such an ordeal? This is the basic question in the minds of the Sages who wrote the midrashim. They answer by quoting from the Wisdom literature of the Tanach: “Whom the father loves, he chastens” (Prov 13:24; note also Prov 3:12, cf. Heb 12:8, cp. Mid. Rab. *Exodus* 1.1).

‘But he that loveth him chasteneth him diligently’ (Prov. 13:24). This refers to the Holy One, blessed be He; because of His love for Israel, as it is written: I have loved you, saith the Lord (Mal. 1:2), doth He heap upon them chastisements. You will find that the three precious gifts which God gave unto Israel were all given after much suffering: The Torah, Eretz Israel, and the Life to Come.

The chastening hand of the Lord upon Israel was needed, for she had a natural tendency to believe in “self-redemption” (as indeed all mankind has such a tendency)—that she was self-sufficient and could pull herself up by the boot-straps. Indeed, it is when we are faced with trouble and calamity that we once again admit that we are unable and weak, and we cry out to God for help.

But the fact that God brings us under the rod of chastening by putting us into a difficult or troublesome situation does not negate the fact that we belong to Him, nor does it call into question His love for us. Indeed, the very place of trouble is where He intends to demonstrate His outstretched arm of redemption, not only to assure us of His unfailing faithfulness to His promises, but also to prove to us once again that apart from Him we can do nothing.

This is one clear characteristic of the redeemed soul, of the one who has true, saving faith: a willingness to (1) admit one’s inabilities, and (2) to entrust oneself into God’s care. Self-reliance is diametrically opposed to biblical faith.

Now God often has to bring us into situations of dire straits before we are willing to admit that we cannot make it on our own! Our hearts (minds, wills) are still affected by the natural thinking—

by the depraved self or “flesh” which, in the strength of the remaining tendency to rebellion, tends to believe that one can get along fine without God. Yet it is the indwelling Ruach, the Spirit, who enlivens the redeemed soul to face the truth and willingly admit it—without God I can do nothing. If the difficulties of life are that which bring us to this place of truth and confession, then certainly we have come to understand why we would give thanks to God for such trials and tribulations—they bring us to appreciate the redemption God has made for us. Thus James writes:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2–4)

But once the soul that belongs to God has reckoned with its innate inability, faith working within causes that soul to rest in the all-sovereign One and His promised care. The two parts go hand in hand: admitting my inability and relying upon God.

Not so with the unbeliever. The unbelieving heart may be forced to admit its inability, but there will still be an unwillingness to lay oneself upon God and trust Him for His care. Rather, the unbelieving heart hardens in rebellion against God for it reasons that God has arbitrarily brought the calamity, and this for selfish reasons. Like the sin entered into by Adam and Chavah (Eve), the heart of unbelief questions the very goodness and love of God. The lie of the evil one, “has God said?” was received by Adam and Chavah as a valid questioning of God’s goodness. Had God given the prohibition regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil for selfish reasons? Was God trying to hide the truth from Adam and Chavah, that they could be equal with Him if they but ate of that tree? The first sin, therefore, was that of unbelief. They questioned the goodness of God. The core element of the unbelieving heart, then, is a self-centered reliance based upon the suspicion that God is not always good. This being the case, how one interprets the struggles and troubles of life will depend ultimately upon whether one has faith or not. The heart of faith eventually confesses that even the tribulations in life are a mark of God’s love. The unbelieving heart thinks just the opposite.

This does not mean that one who has genuine faith fails to experience the woes and despair of tribulations. The Psalmist demonstrates often that at first, when trouble came upon him, he cried out in pain and confusion about why God would allow such a thing. But inevitably, after contemplating what he knew to be true, his heart of faith was able to accept the tribulations of life, and even to be strengthened and encouraged through them.

This picture of redemption of the soul is graphically laid out before us in the exodus story. Israel, the possession of God, is brought by His hand into slavery and bondage. This trial brought Israel to realize that she was powerless to overcome the hardship in which she found herself, and thus she cried out to God. Would she have called out to Him had the trouble not arisen? Or would she have willingly remained in the pagan culture of her rulers, foregoing the full, outward worship of HaShem? All indications are that she would have remained content to abide in pagan Egypt. But the love of HaShem for His people could not allow such spiritual apathy. His love for her is demonstrated in His willingness to bring Israel under the rod of His chastening, that she might cry out to Him and experience the power of His redemption.

The picture given to us in the exodus is not only of God’s redemptive hand, but also of the depraved heart of unbelief. Pharaoh, in contrast to Moses, Aaron, and the people of Israel, displays the characteristics of the natural heart, given to unbelief.

In our *parashah* the first three signs and wonders (cf. 7:3) that God sent are listed: (1) the Nile and the water in Egypt turns to blood, (2) an infestation of frogs followed, (3) and then an infestation of insects. Previously, the transformation of Moses' rod into a snake and its return to the form of a stick (cf. 4:5) had apparently been received by the people of Israel as a mark of authenticity of Moses' authority and power from God. The same sign, however, in the presence of Pharaoh and His court, only produced further hardness of heart in them.

The same may be true of the signs and wonders that Moses and Aaron displayed. The Nile turning to blood was a devastating plague, for it hit at the very center of the Egyptian social and religious foundation. Like a woman with a flow of blood is unclean for seven days (cf. Lev 15:19), so the Nile became “unclean”—unfit to drink and thus the “life” flow of Egypt was defiled. Rather than a life-giving source, it was turned into the stench of death. But even though every Egyptian had nothing but blood in watering buckets and bowls, the Israelites apparently were unaffected by the plague and had fresh water to drink. Only newly dug wells or even troughs beside the Nile afforded drinkable water to the Egyptians. But there was no humility in Pharaoh and his court—they considered the whole thing to be some sort of magic that Moses and Aaron had performed. They duplicated the phenomenon through their magical arts. But like the last plague, the first one had the portend of death.

The second wonder was frogs—frogs, frogs, and more frogs! And the third was like it: flying insects. The frog, living in the Nile, was viewed by the Egyptians as connected to the divine power of the River. They were, as it were, the god's offspring. As such, they too were sacred. But instead of affording the Egyptians life and health, they brought disease and trouble. The text says that they would come “into you and your people and in all your servants” וּבָכָה וּבַעֲמֹךָ וּבְכָל-עַבְדֶּיךָ (Heb 7:29; Eng. 8:4). Now while this may be understood as “upon” rather than “into,” the preposition could surely be taken either way. It stands to reason that such an infestation of frogs must surely have led to disease, for the people must have ingested parts of the frogs! Yet in their rebellion, the magicians of Egypt add to the calamity by adding to the frogs! The best they could do was make the situation worse.

Even Moses (who carefully constructs the divine removal of the frogs so as to leave no question by Whose power it was done), when he removes the frogs through prayer to HaShem, the piles of dead frogs cause a great stench throughout the land. Such unsanitary conditions are just what insects enjoy. The dead frogs were the perfect carrion to support maggots, producing the flying insects that overtook the land as Pharaoh refused to believe, and broke his pledge to send the people of Israel forth from his land.

Now in this third wonder, the magicians and Pharaoh are confronted with the obvious: this wonder could not be duplicated by the workers of magic—it was indeed, the work of HaShem. If we could excuse Pharaoh for his unbelief of the first two wonders, there is no excuse for denying this third one. He and his court knew beyond doubt that what was taking place was the direct action of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yet he willfully turns his back and walks in blatant unbelief.

Here then we have, in stark contrast, the distinct characteristics of faith versus unbelief. And as such we are given a litmus test of our own faith. True faith in God admits one's utter inability and thus turns to rely entirely upon God for one's eternal salvation, a salvation that not only has the *olam haba* (the world to come) in view, but also the life of salvation in the *olam haze* (this world). Unbelief tries to find one's own way, and to secure one's own redemption. The life of faith is just

the opposite: it is one of humility, while unbelief is marked by self-reliance. Faith says “there dwells in me, that is in my flesh, not one good thing” (Rom 7:18), while unbelief proudly affirms “Who is Adonai, that I should obey His voice?” (Ex. 5:2). Only faith saves; everything else will perish.