

Together with Pharaoh, the Nile was regarded by the Egyptian people as a visible and tangible god in their own midst (at times in Egypt, the sun, or 'aten' was afforded the same status). Each had the power of life and death, the Nile through its watering of the land by annual flooding, and Pharaoh through his authority. A sign which used the water of the Nile was powerful because it claimed God's authority over the Nile and by implication, over the pantheon of gods including Pharaoh who were worshipped in Egypt. There is no mistake, the third sign was not reversible sign as the other two were, but a 'once only' sign to the people of Israel that their God was greater than the gods of the Egyptians. Unless they were prepared to believe this, then God's plan of salvation for His people would not prevail.

The sign itself took water and turned it into blood; from life to death. Although the Scriptures present blood as meaning life, this is because blood was thought of as essential to something that was living. However, blood that was 'poured out' (as in this sign) was a sign of death. The message was unmistakable; God had the power of life and death over Egypt, something that would become clear in a terrible way, later on in the story of Exodus (as we have seen above).

Application

This small and seemingly minor part of the story of Moses is deceptive; small at least in comparison to the great revelation of the name of God in yesterday's reading. It is really very important because Moses' request for God's help in the first few verses shows that he was developing a partnership with God which would prove to be crucial for future years. In this instance, Moses perceived that trust and faith was required from the people of God if they were to work with him, and if God was going to be able to do His work through them. The signs and wonders that were given by God were not for people who had great faith, but for people who were lacking in it, or those who needed to have their faith ignited. Perhaps we should remember this when asking the Lord for miracles today!

Many people today still find it hard to accept the miraculous, particularly as recorded in the Bible, and largely because they cannot equate this with their own experience. If we talk with a wide range of people today, however, we can easily find that many will describe events in their own lives which are totally inexplicable, and in our own context and culture, they can be called the 'miracles' of today. Sometimes, people get better after being anointed and having hands laid on for prayer, and people's lives are miraculously saved in incidents which have no rational explanation. Instead of dismissing 'miracles' out of hand, it is better to see how God is working through inexplicable events of our own day; things that would have readily been regarded as miracles in times past. When we are open to seeing the breadth of God's majesty and the command He has of His own creation, then we may find our own faith blessed and upheld by perceiving events for which we have no clear explanation. We may even find that they have an important part to play in what our Lord wants us to do for him in ministry to the rest of the world.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group whether you feel comfortable discussing miracles, and whether you have doubts about the literal truth of events such as this.
2. In what miraculous ways does God bless His people today?
3. Discuss what this passage says about faith and trust in God, and what this might say to people today.

Discipleship

Reflect on what the Lord has done in your life which is miraculous. Think back over events in the past and assess whether the Lord has worked in extraordinary ways to bring about blessing for you, for example. If you find it hard to think in terms of 'miracles', then consider 'works of power' or 'extraordinary events' through which God has worked. It is important for us to have a grasp of these things so that we can accept the powerful and sometimes strange ways that God works in our lives in the present. We do not understand everything God does, and we do not need to!

Final Prayer

Stir within me, Holy Lord, the fire which warms my soul; feed it with the breeze of Your Spirit and breathe it into life. Make me glow with all the radiance of the faith within me, so that I may give testimony to Your truth, Your majesty, Your life and Your transforming power; and may I burn with love, the eternal fuel of Your magnificent Creation! Thank You, Holy Lord: AMEN

Prayer

When my heart is full of praise, free my spirit to worship You, Lord God, with speech beyond words, with songs without end, with love which treasures Your every Word, and a with a life which never shirks the highest challenges of faith. Turn my love of You into a life lived for You in every possible way! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Church community

There are many today who feel that most Christian worship and community life is an inadequate expression of what is truly 'church', and they either promote 'fresh expressions' of church or try to plant new churches in order to make the Gospel accessible to others. Pray that such work is empowering of all God's people, and not just those who are led to work in this way.

Meditation

(a reflection on overcoming problems in daily life)

Grant to us, Lord Jesus Christ, that quality of love
Which forgives those who have hurt us,
Overcomes all manner of anger and bitterness,
Refocuses us on that which is good, not bad,
And seeks ways to build bridges over troubled waters.

Grant to us, Lord Jesus Christ, that quality of faith
Which believes that problems can be solved,
Displays love towards the most difficult of people
Trusts that God is in control of everything,
And seeks to defeat the works of the evil one.

Grant to us, Lord Jesus Christ, that quality of hope
Which sees beyond the troubles of the day,
Longs for peace to be established between people
Is passionate about overcoming all odds, in Christ,
And seeks the ultimate glory of the Father.

Grant to us, Lord Jesus Christ, those special spiritual gifts
Which daily help us live our lives according to Your will.

Bible Study - Exodus 4:1-9

¹ Moses responded by saying, 'Look, they will not accept me or listen to my report, for they will say "The LORD has not appeared to you."' ² So LORD said to him, 'What is that in your hand?' He said, 'A staff.' ³ The LORD said, 'Throw it on the ground;' and when Moses threw it on the ground, it became a serpent, and he ran away from it! ⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Reach out your hand and catch hold of it by the tail.' So he reached out his hand and caught hold of it, and it turned back into a staff, there in his hand! ⁵ 'This will make the accept that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has indeed appeared to you.'

⁶ Then the Lord said to Moses again, 'Put your hand inside your cloak.' So he put his hand there, and when he took it out from inside his cloak, it was covered with a leprous disease, like snow! ⁷ The LORD said, 'Now place your hand back inside your cloak.' So Moses put his hand back inside His cloak, and when he took it out, it the flesh was restored! ⁸ 'If they do not accept you or take notice of the first sign,' said the LORD, 'then they may accept the second.' ⁹ And if they will not accept even these two signs, or listen to you, then take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground. The water you take from the river Nile will become blood on the dry ground.'

Review

This passage of Scripture is reasonably well known, but not often dwelt upon, and it is all about trust. God had revealed Himself to Moses with power and authority, and with a new name which was closely identified with this revelation (3:13-15). Although some interpreters of this passage think that Moses doubted God by raising questions about what he had been commanded to do, he was in truth being very perceptive. Moses was prepared to believe God and trust in the power of His revelation and message, but what good would this be unless the rest of the people of Israel were willing to trust him, Moses, the disgraced upstart prince who had fled Egypt in disgrace (2:11-15), years before?

This was no small matter. God's declared plan from the time of the forefathers was to establish a Covenant relationship with His people, so that they would be a means whereby God could 'bless' all the peoples of the world (Gen. 12:2,3). This was the way that God chose to work to break down the barriers which existed between Himself and the people of the world because of sin, and the means by which He planned to bring Salvation, eventually through Christ, to the world. However, this plan was impossible to move forward whilst the people of Israel, God's own people, had been reduced to slavery, severely compromising their ability to trust their God. Moses' concern may have been straightforwardly self-centred, an expression of worry about how he would be received; however, if God's people did not have the faith and trust to listen to him, then everything God planned would not happen. It was a critical time for the salvation history of the world.

Signs and wonders, including miracles (as we saw yesterday) are demonstrations of God's power and authority. They are things we cannot do, but which draw people's attention and may even induce faith, and they help us with the work God has given us to do for Him. This is nowhere clearer than in this passage. Moses needed God to do something that would ensure the people accepted the message he brought them, so immediately, the Lord graphically showed him two miraculous signs and told him a third.

The first two miracles God demonstrated were 'reversible' miracles, turning something normal into something fearful and back again; firstly a staff into a snake, and secondly a healthy hand into one that had the feared 'leprous disease' and back again. Each of them had special meaning for the people of the day, which we will examine later in this study. The last miracle was clearly different because it was an irreversible 'sign' which had sombre and threatening overtones. The Nile was regarded by all as a means of life, and was itself worshipped by the Egyptians as a god. Turning the water from the Nile into blood sounds like a threat to bring death instead of life, and although we know that this happened when the Egyptian first-born died on the night the people of Israel left Egypt, this passage is not prophetic and does not obviously point forward to that terrible night.

The primary purpose of the signs described in this passage was to persuade the people of Israel to accept and respect Moses (4:5,8), and receive the message he brought them about their God. If the people of Israel accepted the signs, together with Moses and his message from God, then their own future would be secured as God's people, and they would be able to renew their 'Covenant' relationship with God, with all its benefits and its obligations to bless the nations of the world.

Going Deeper

Each of the signs described in our passage was dramatic and fearsome. They each required faith and complete trust in God, as do the signs, wonders and miracles that God gives His people today. Moreover, unless the work of God has this kind of dramatic power, then people will not be able to see in them something of the divine. By looking at these signs more closely, and how God used them to target the fears and aspirations of His own people, we can learn something about how God works in signs and wonders amongst us today.

It is important to remember that these signs were not given to Moses as indicators of the plagues that were to come later on the Egyptians, but signs which Aaron (acting for Moses) performed for the people of Israel. The critical passage of Scripture which links with this is found in Exodus 4:29-32:

²⁹ Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites. ³⁰ Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses, and performed the signs in the sight of the people. ³¹ The people believed ...

It was after this that the famous confrontations between Moses and Pharaoh took place, and the very first plague bears a resemblance to the 'staff into snake into staff' sign found here in

our passage (see Exodus 7:8-13). This may itself be symbolic, but we shall examine this later when looking at this text. We have already noted the potential connection between the last sign of 'water into blood', and the last and most terrible plague of death (Exodus 12:29-32).

Another general point worth bearing in mind is that what we read in this passage is a typical form of dramatic story telling, in which a command is given, and it is then done; however, the writer repeats the same words for both the command and its performance, creating a sense of drama. We see this several times in this passage, for example:

³ The LORD said, 'Throw it on the ground;' and when Moses threw it on the ground ...

⁴ ... the Lord said to Moses, 'Reach out your hand and catch hold of it by the tail.' So he reached out his hand and caught hold of it ...

⁶ the Lord said to Moses again, 'Put your hand inside your cloak.' So he put his hand there, and when he took it out from inside his cloak ...

This method of storytelling is often found in Scripture (see how the story of Peter's dream and his visit to Cornelius is repeated in Acts 10, for example), and to us, it may seem rather repetitious, but it is an important part of the way that emphasis is placed by Scripture on the commands of God. They have to be obeyed exactly!

The staff and the snake

The staff Moses held in his hand was an important tool for a shepherd, a multipurpose implement for guiding and taking hold of very strong sheep, and also a walking staff for a shepherd who had to spend a large part of their day on their feet. The sign God demonstrated was dramatic because this inanimate object was turned into a snake. Although we are not told whether this snake was venomous or not, it was sufficiently scary for Moses to run away from it (4:3)! The impressive thing about the whole incident was that Moses acted immediately on the commands of the Lord, even returning to pick up the snake by the tail. As most people who have dealt with snakes will know, such an approach to a snake places the snake at an advantage, leaving its head clear to attack anyone who comes near it! No small amount of courage would be required to do what God commanded, at least the first time!

This sign, however, was designed to be repeated, and we know that it was used at least twice (4:29 and 7:8f.). It demonstrated the power of God over His creation, and His ability to do with it what He pleased. Moses' staff later became a symbol of power as well, possibly an indication that the people of Israel saw Moses use the sign more than once. Moses lifted his staff over the sea to divide it (14:16), and at the later incident at Rephidim (17:5f.) in the wilderness, Moses famously struck a rock with his staff to bring out water for the people to drink. Nevertheless, the sign was given initially so that people might believe that Moses was sent by God (4:5). It was a test of faith.

The leprous hand

The sign of the leprous hand was probably far scarier for the people of ancient times than for us today. We are used to medicine dealing with all manner of health problems, including skin diseases, and have little fear of them. However, ancient peoples would have recoiled in fear at the sight of a leprous hand. The word which we translate as 'leprosy' from the Hebrew, covered a variety of skin conditions, many of which, including leprosy itself, were highly infections. This is the reason why many ancient communities had strict laws about keeping people with skin diseases outside of their communities (see Lev 13-14, Num 5:2, Deut 24:8-9, 2 Kings 15:5 etc.).

Few of us can understand the horror that came over people at the sight of leprosy, and we can only compare it with our reaction today to HIV or MRSA, and other infections which are like a sentence of death. However, once Moses had the courage to follow God's commands, then the sign became another repeatable sign he could use when necessary, and one that would have had an immediate impact! Ancient peoples associated leprosy with the gods, precisely because of its association with death. This sign was therefore an indication to the people of Israel and anyone else who saw it that God was Lord of life and death, and healing was a powerful sign that all life was in God's hands.

It is also worth noting that Moses did not show disbelief in any of these signs, or even indicate that he might need more than one. His initial request to God for some help in making the people believe him was met by the Lord's provision, which was more than might be expected. He did not ask for a second or third sign, God gave them knowing that they would be needed.

The Nile; water and blood