

## What Makes All the Difference

*Dr. Ian Macleod*

*And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there was none like it, neither shall be like it any more. But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast: that ye may know how that the LORD doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel.*

—EXODUS 11:6-7

Let me read to you [Heidelberg Catechism] Lord's Day 10.

Q. 27. What dost thou mean by the providence of God?

A. The almighty and everywhere present power of God; whereby, as it were by his hand, he upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, and all things come, not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.

Q. 28. What advantage is it to us to know that God has created, and by his providence does still uphold all things?

A: That we may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and that in all things, which may hereafter befall us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate us from his love; since all creatures are so in his hand, that without his will they cannot so much as move.

Dear congregation, this doctrine of God's providence makes it so clear to us that nothing happens by chance; rather, everything that happens on the stage of human history is the working out

of the purposes of the Lamb of God, the one who sits upon the throne in heaven. So as we hear and when we hear and see in the news the coronavirus spreading now as a pandemic; when we see what before seemed so far away in China now in our own streets and neighborhoods; when we see such a leveling of humanity, a virus that is no respecter of persons, whether young or old, rich or poor; when we see people in a panic; when we see the shutdown of schools and transport and all these other things—then dear friends, what we must also see is the hand of God. It's at times like these that we must stop and listen to the voice of God speaking. It's very clear; it's certainly true that God is speaking in these events, and whether you listen to the many different opinions in the news or on social media, whether you hear the deafening silence of the atheists and the secularists who have no words of hope or comfort or perspective, what we must hear in all of this is the word of God. God is speaking, and really His message is very clear: Be still and know that I am God.

It was very striking to me a couple days ago when we heard of the confirmed cases of this virus in our own state and hear more broadly of the widespread shutdowns in other nations and even coming into our own nations, whether in industry or business or sport or travel. It was very striking to read in my own readings from Exodus 10–12 about these last plagues that came upon Egypt. There are many similarities, and there's certainly the same message, even if the outward circumstances are different. There's the context of plague, there is the fear and confusion it brings, and yet there is this clear message that God is bringing, as He does at the end of verse 12 and chapter 12. This is really what the Lord is saying this whole time. This is His purpose: "I am the LORD," and in all this and amidst the plague and the fear and the confusion, in all this there is this glorious message of salvation and deliverance from a disease that is far more serious than any plague or virus.

So this morning, we want to look at this passage in its context, and we want to draw from it three things that the Lord is also saying to us today. We'll highlight, therefore, in its context, three

verses with these three things. The first thing is this: God is the great sovereign. End of verse 12 of chapter 12: "I am the LORD." God is the great sovereign. Secondly, God is the great separator. In the middle of verse 7 of chapter 11: "that ye may know that the LORD doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel." And then thirdly, God is the great Savior. That's the last verse we read in our reading, verse 13 of chapter 12: "When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you." Well, let's examine these three things, then, with God's help.

Firstly, God is the great sovereign. "I am the LORD." This has been what God has been making known throughout Exodus; indeed, it's throughout the whole Bible. This is the really great thing. These chapters in Exodus are not really so much about Pharaoh or even about the plagues; these are really things that are means to the end. The great thing is this: it's God making His name known. That's what God has been doing throughout this book of Exodus. He appeared first to Moses, and he said, "I am the LORD." You find that in chapter 6, verse 2. Then he tells Moses to go to the children of Israel, and that's His message to them: "I am the LORD. You will know that I am the LORD your God," chapter 6, verses 6-7. And He tells them there, too, in verse 8, "I will fulfill all My covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and you will know that I am the LORD." That's the refrain and that's also, then, what Moses comes to Pharaoh with; that's the message to Pharaoh: "Thus saith the LORD. Israel is My son, My firstborn, and I say unto thee, Let My son go that he may serve Me."

And that's the context, then, into which Pharaoh replies and defies this Lord and says, "Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice and let Israel go?" This daring defiance of Pharaoh is to defy the one living God. "Who is the Lord?" And yet that is Pharaoh representing a godless world. "Who is the Lord that we should obey His voice?" Pharaoh believed he was a god. He had many gods of his own in Egypt. There were river gods of the Nile. There were field gods for the harvest. There were gods for health, for

industry. There were gods in the sun and the moon and for light, and the Egyptian god Amon-Ra was considered to be one of the greatest of the gods, the god of the sun. But what we see here so clearly in these plagues is with what ease the Lord shows that He is God as He defeats these Egyptian gods. They are all polemics against the Egyptian gods. "I am the LORD," God is saying, "and not them." So, you have a plague of blood that defeats the river gods, locusts destroy the field gods of the harvest, the thick darkness that God simply speaks into being defeats Amon-Ra. Then, in this tenth plague, the Lord shows that He, and not the Egyptian gods, is the God who gives life and the God who takes life. God is the one who gives and takes life. The Egyptians were preoccupied with death and the afterlife. That's why you have all these tombs, these mummified pharaohs in Egypt. But here Jehovah is saying that He is the God who simply spoke the world into being, He is the God who with His word turned the chaos into order at the beginning, and He is the one who with the same word can turn order back into chaos if He so chooses. He is displaying His almighty power. "I am God and no one else." And this all then happens by His almighty and everywhere-present power.

So, we look at this virus today and what is God, therefore, saying to us but this: "I am the one who is in control of the industry of business, of health, of life. I have given all these things and I can take them away in a moment. I can shut them all down. I can bring everything to a halt in an instant. I am the LORD." And dear friends, this virus ultimately is a good thing, if it brings us all to the place where we begin to listen to God. Just like, as you remember with Manasseh, it brought him to affliction so that he would listen to God.

You know the deadliest thing in the world today, the deadliest thing in the world today, is to not listen to God. It's to ignore God. And so if God forces us, if God brings us to the place where we listen to Him before the final judgment comes, then this is mercy, because with the coronavirus, God is not just saying to us, "I am able to shut everything down in a moment," but He also is

reminding us, like He was doing here in Egypt, that “this is what I will do one day completely and finally. I will shut everything down, as it were, never to be reopened again.”

Indeed, if you would go into Revelation (and you can maybe read this on your own time), in Revelation 16 you see many of the same plagues being brought upon the nations again. Then in chapter 18 of Revelation, we have not this time Egypt but now Babylon, but representing the same thing really, the world power, the wicked world, the godless world. And what we read there in Revelation 18 is that in one hour—in one hour, really just the idea of something very quickly—everything has gone. Everything goes. In one moment, it was there, and now in the next moment, it’s not there anymore. And you hear all this weeping and confusion and mourning, and everything is shut down, and everything has gone, and in Revelation 18 there’s this refrain that all these things are no more. And this time, finally, there’s no Moses to be entreated to take these things away. This is final, and these plagues, and even this coronavirus plague, and any affliction we see like this, are God telling us that one day all these things will come to an end.

You have this refrain in Revelation 18, “no more.” The city of Babylon—the wicked, godless, powerful empire that it’s tried to create—is no more. In verse 22, it speaks about all the arts and all the music—the voice of harpers and musicians and of pipers and trumpeters shall be heard no more. And it speaks of the collapse of industry, the collapse of civilization as we know it. No craftsman, whatever craft he be, shall be found any more in you. The sound of the millstone shall be heard no more. All the industry gone.

Domestic life, life as we know it domestically; the light of a candle—no more. The voice of the bridegroom, that idea of joy and the things of this life—no more. Commercial life, the merchants who were the great men of this world—that’s what it says there; they were the great men of this world—no more.

And you see, what God is giving us in these, as it were, small foretastes and pictures of that final ultimate irreversible “no more”

is God saying, “I am the LORD. I am the LORD. I am sovereign over all these things.”

But let’s notice here, second, that God is also the great separator. God is the great separator. There’s a great difference that God makes.

You know, right now people are speaking a lot about what makes a difference, and rightly so. How quickly a government acts, how quickly you can find a vaccine, how good or bad a person’s health and immune system is—that’s going to make a difference. How careful people are with hygiene—that’s going to make a difference. And again, that’s all right and proper, but here we’re speaking about another difference. Now of course, just to be clear, with a virus like the one we have, a Christian can contract this virus just as much as anybody else. That’s not the difference that we’re speaking about here. But you see, what the Lord wants you to see and to hear now is another difference that He alone can and does make.

Chapter 11, verse 7, in the middle of it: “Ye may know how that the LORD doth put a difference.” Now here is God’s difference, God’s separation “between the Egyptians and Israel.” Now if you would go back to the beginning of this narrative in Egypt, the difference between Israel and Egypt was certainly obvious. It was obvious in this way, though: the Egyptians had the advantage and Israel had the affliction. The Egyptians had the whips and Israel had the lashes. The Egyptians had the homes and Israel had the hard labor. But oh, how different things are now when the Lord comes and says, “Now I will put my difference between these two.” And so, with these plagues you see it: now while there are lice and flies and frogs in Egypt, the Israelites sleep sound and safely. While the Egyptian cattle die with the hail, the Israelite cattle remain alive. While there is thick darkness that can be felt in Egypt, there is light in Goshen. The Egyptians are now plagued, and Israel is spared. But most strikingly of all is this last plague and this difference between life and death as every firstborn son,

every firstborn animal, in Egypt dies Not one firstborn son or animal in Israel dies.

These are very striking, and they're very interesting words at the beginning of verse 7 as well: "Against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast." Well, we all know how quickly a dog can move its tongue against man and beast, but God is saying here, "Against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue; that you may know that the LORD doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel." And this is in the context of this last plague.

Now there may well be a reference here to one of the Egyptian so-called gods, Anubis. This god Anubis supposedly was the god of the underworld and often came in a dog-like form. That's the way the Egyptians portrayed it, in a canine form. And the purpose of this god was to bring people from this world into the next, to bring them from life into death, to bring them from this world into the afterlife. This was the god Anubis, and he often supposedly appeared in the form of a dog. And here is the Lord saying, "Against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue." But one thing that is abundantly clear here is this: God's people don't die one heartbeat sooner than God intends. The language of faith says, "My times are in Thy hands. Thou art my God even unto death." No plague, no virus, no Anubis, can touch the people of God, can move their tongue upon the people of God, without God's permission. The difference between living and dying is always and only a difference that God ultimately makes. So we may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and in all things which maybe hereafter befall us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father that nothing shall separate us from His love, since all creatures are so in His hand that without His will, they cannot so much as move.

Now if that's true, if that ultimate difference is true, then that difference ought to manifest itself in the way we conduct ourselves, ought to be seen in the lives of God's people. Yes, in a time like this, we take precautions but we don't panic. We buy but we

don't hoard. We do consider our own needs, but we also show love and compassion to others. We are not indifferent to this situation, but we tell people about a far greater difference which they need to seriously consider. We consider this ourselves and we point others to this difference that no government can make—no health care, no vaccine—a difference that only God can and does make. We point people and we reflect ourselves, we ought to reflect ourselves, on this final difference when the Son of Man shall come in His glory and all the holy angels with Him. Then shall He sit on the throne of His glory, and here the great sovereign is the great separator, and before Him shall be gathered all nations, and He shall separate them one from the other. Oh, what a difference. As the shepherd divides his sheep from his goats, and he shall set the sheep on his right hand but the goats on his left, these shall go away into everlasting punishment but the righteous into life eternal. Then it will be seen so clearly, on that day—the Lord has put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel.

The question now is, what are we really speaking about when we speak about this difference that only God can make?

And that brings us here to our third point, that God is the great Savior. Verse 13 of chapter 12: “When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague”—the plague of death—“shall not be upon you to destroy you.” I'm not generally in favor of clichés, partly because they can often be misunderstood or said in an unthinking way, but there is one phrase that is much like a cliché (because of its frequent use) that is very good, and it's this: God makes a difference where there is no difference.

God makes a difference where there is no difference. You see, when we look at this, the difference God makes with His people, it is so important to understand, is not based upon an assessment of who is good and who is bad. God is not saying the Israelites are good and the Egyptians are bad. The striking thing about the tenth plague is this: that the angel of death, the destroying angel, as it is called, comes to the Israelite door just as much as he comes



to the Egyptian door. The angel of death visits the Israelite home. The angel of death visits every home.

And there are many ways you could see why this would be so terrifying. In the other plagues, the Israelites can, as it were, look on from Goshen. There're no frogs near them. There're no lice near them. There's no darkness near them. They have light. Up until this time, they could watch safely from their homes, but in this last plague, the destroyer is coming to their home and the destroying angel is coming there with a purpose to kill the firstborn, all the firstborn. There has been sin in every home in the land, and there will be death in every home, and in this there is no difference. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Death has passed upon all men for that all have sinned. The wages of sin is death. The Israelites deserved to die just as much as the Egyptians. They were wicked. They refused and murmured against Moses and Aaron and many other things, and you know, when we look at this virus, ultimately, it's a reminder to us too, isn't it, as so many other things are also, that we must all die. The question is not if but when, and behind that is sin. The reason we die is because of sin.

But God. But God makes a difference where there is no difference. There is no difference, because all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, but God makes a difference. God puts the difference between the Egyptians and the Israelites, and the difference comes through the shedding of the blood of the Passover lamb, the blood of atonement, as it's called, the blood that takes away the anger of God because of sin. God is doing all this. It's not the Israelites' cleverness. It's nothing they've done. It's all what God has provided. He provides the specifications: a perfect lamb, a spotless lamb, and then you kill it, and you take the blood, and you apply it to the doorposts and to the lintel, and you eat it. And the truth here that stands out is that in salvation God has given what God has required, and so, yes, this destroying angel approaches your house, your door, and has a commandment from heaven that as surely as there is sin in this home, there

must be death in this home. And that will not change; that cannot change. The soul that sins, it will die. But as the destroying angel approaches the door, it sees that there has already been a death. There is already blood spilled. And in the terms of the everlasting covenant, God says, “When I see the blood of that perfect Substitute, I will pass over you and the plague will not come near you.” Payment God will not twice demand. First at My bleeding surety’s hand, and then again at Mine.

Oh, what a message for a world crippled with fear and uncertainty. It’s not a message that we are better people; it’s not that we are good and you’re bad. That’s not the difference; that’s not the message. The message is this: that God has provided in the Son of His love a sacrifice for sin. God has made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. The message is this: God is saying, “When I see the blood, I will pass over you.” Here is a cure for the plague of sin. It is complete. It is instant. It is available in the gospel for sinners. There’s no concern here with overtaxing a healthcare system. No, He is able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God through Him. There’s no need here to wait for a vaccine; there is a fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness. There’s no doubt whether this care will prove effective or not; the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleanseth from all sin. There’s no fear here in life and in death; against any of the children of Israel, shall not a dog move his tongue against man or beast, that you may know that the Lord hath put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel.

What do we do with this? What do we do with this, this voice of God saying, “I am the LORD”? This great difference that He is holding out as the thing He is pointing us to—what are we going to do with it? Well, here in Exodus there is this theme of those who cry out for deliverance. There are two cries, at least, that fall on deaf ears in Exodus—two cries that provide no help and no deliverance—and then there is one cry that is heard and is answered. There’re two failed cries. Chapter 5 tells us, in verse 15, that the officers of the children of Israel came and cried

unto Pharaoh saying, “Wherefore dealest thou thus with thy servants?” And he tells them, “You’re idle. You’re lazy. Go back to your work.” And no doubt there is another cry in chapter 11, verse 6. “There shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt.” The Egyptians now crying out to their gods, the Egyptians crying out to Pharaoh—but where’s the answer? Where’s the relief? These are failed cries that fall on deaf ears. The idols are dumb that blinded nations fear, and so are the gods of materialism, so are the gods of industry and of anything else—of sport, anything else—that we make a god. If we make it a god, it is an idol, dumb.

But here’s the cry that is answered. Exodus 2:23 says, “The children of Israel...cried...unto God by reason of the bondage.” And the cry—oh, there seems to be such a space and a difference in space—the cry reaches heaven, and in some of the most beautiful words in all the Bible, chapter 3, verses 7–8, the Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey.” Well, here’s the question though: what are we going to do? Are we going to cry out to the Lord? But now listen, Pharaoh cried out to the Lord through Moses. And what Pharaoh did, is it really not the case with the vast majority of the world today? And indeed, it’s the case with ourselves so often. Think about it. Lord willing, when this virus is gone, how many people who are in such a panic today will be praying tomorrow? Doesn’t it strike you that every time Pharaoh has this plague that comes and cripples his land and destroys his god, Pharaoh hardens his heart and doesn’t listen—doesn’t it strike you, doesn’t it make you think, “What a fool. When’s he going to learn? When’s he going to stop defying this God that is so clearly so much more powerful than he is? What a fool. What a hard heart.” Ten plagues, ten prayers, ten hardenings of heart.

How many days of prayer would we have (and we're thankful for days of prayer, every one of them)—but how many days of prayer would we have if we had ten pandemic viruses one after the other? Most likely, ten. But how many prayers once they are gone? The message is, while it is today, do not harden your heart. Take this and prove this, because this is telling us, too, that, yes, God is longsuffering, God is patient. He came to Pharaoh these ten times—ten opportunities, as it were, to repent and to bow to the living God—but there is a limit. There is a limit to God's patience. There is here the death of the firstborn. The next Egyptian deity followed quickly by the drowning of Pharaoh in the Red Sea. "My Spirit will not always strive with man." It's a call to come now; it's a call to flee to this blood that makes all the difference. That's the message God is giving us. God is calling us by His judgments and by this virus, too, to know that He is the Lord and to shelter under the blood of the covenant, which makes all the difference in life and in death.

"The blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt" (Ex. 12:13). Amen.

May the Lord bless this word.