

## **Exodus 7:6-8:19 Taking you outside your comfort zone!**

### **Introduction**

When the police arrive at a murder scene they quickly want to determine not only the cause of death but the bigger picture of who might have been responsible and what was their motivation for carrying out this dreadful deed? In our own lives, our church and community and further afield into the wider world it is often difficult to grasp the bigger picture of what is going on at any given time. It is not just good vs evil but God's determination that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven, despite the sad and evil choices humankind makes on occasions. Pharaoh claimed divine powers that he was in control of the weather; human fertility and was the ultimate protector of the lives of the Egyptian people. Who was ultimately in control in Egypt? The contest that would shortly unfold along the banks of the River Nile would determine this question without a shadow of a doubt. Ordinary Israelites then and ordinary people like you and me today can only see part of the picture, but it is God alone on the throne. We will have many times in our lives when we stand well outside our comfort zones but we must never forget that despite our difficulties; at times our heartaches and our sorrows, that He is in control.

Moses had made significant mistakes twice since God has placed on his heart the conviction that he was called to lead Israel out of Egypt. On the first occasion he had lashed out and killed an Egyptian official and had to leave all the benefits of life in Egypt and spend four decades of obscurity in the desert of Midian. After a clear recall from God he returns to Egypt but in his enthusiasm for the cause he demands, rather than politely asks Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to have some days off to worship the Lord. As a result once again he had made life more difficult both for himself and for the Israelites. Yet God had called him to this position and he would return again and again to Pharaoh to see the job through. If he had ever been in a comfort zone it was certainly now removed. However, God did not remove the calling from his life; instead He sent Moses back once more to continue the work he had begun. Why? because ultimately something more important was at stake here. It was not Moses vs Pharaoh or the Israelites vs the Egyptians it was God vs the 'gods' of Egypt. There are many times when we will feel like quitting our post, but the Lord invites us to get up and fulfil our calling in His strength. Paul after great inner struggles came to this conviction recorded in II Corinthians 12:9-10. He had pleaded with the Lord to take the difficulties he was struggling with away from him, but that was not what happened. What did God say to Him? *But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.*<sup>10</sup> *That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. **For when I am weak, then I am strong.*** (II Corinthians 12:9-10). You cannot feel less vulnerable than the two older men about to set off on a journey to the palace once again!

### **1. The Serpent Confrontation** (Exodus 7:6-13)

(a) **The people God uses** (Exodus 7:6-7) *Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded them.*<sup>7</sup> *Moses was eighty years old and Aaron eighty-three when they spoke to Pharaoh.* In our society today we are so quick to judge people; too often the gap between being too young and inexperienced and too old to be effective is alarmingly narrow and inappropriate. The cult of youthfulness has been for a generation been 'cool'. This may be an overreaction from the past

where sometimes the contributions of younger people were ignored or inadequately appreciated. However, in the Christian Church we have a responsibility to model a community where people of all ages are valued equally for who they are; our expectations of who could do particular tasks may be unchanged but it will be more about gifting and calling not a question of age by which we encourage people to play their part in serving the Lord. In Egypt God had previously used the youthful Joseph who had been appointed Vizier (Prime Minister) in his late 20s and who was extraordinarily successful in that calling; praise God for the gifted younger people in our midst; however, here God uses two older people to accomplish an extraordinary work – in Moses’ case over the next forty years. What matters most is not your abilities but your availability to serve the Lord. Are you willing to say Lord here am I –use me!

(b) **The command God gave** (Exodus 7:8-9) <sup>8</sup> *The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ‘When Pharaoh says to you, “Perform a miracle,” then say to Aaron, “Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh,” and it will become a snake.’* Remember the encounter of God with Moses in the desert, recorded in Exodus 4:1-5 where as a sign of the fact that God was calling Moses to this ministry that He asked him to throw his shepherd’s staff down on the ground and it became a snake and later when commanded to pick it up the snake turned back into a staff. Why was this done? Exodus 4:5 states: *‘This,’ said the Lord, ‘is so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has appeared to you.’* Moses had seen this demonstrated, but his elder brother Aaron had to take it on trust from what Moses had reported to him about what had taken place in the desert. The stakes had significantly increased. Aaron had no place to hide because the entire court of Pharaoh would see what happened when he dropped his staff on the ground. After the heartache of the previous visit to Pharaoh the stakes were now so much greater. Would they be willing to go? Or would they request God sends someone else? Praise God they were willing to try again and not allow the heartache of their previous disappointment to hinder their service for the Lord. All of us have our heartaches and disappointments with other believers, people outside the Christian family and a range of life circumstances. The challenge for us all is to ask the Lord for strength to keep our eyes on Jesus and stand firm in His service not allowing the storms of life to keep us down. Our call to perseverance is so important. Remember Paul’s words to the Church at Corinth: *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain* (I Corinthians 15:58).

(c) **The contest that followed** (Exodus 7:10-13)<sup>10</sup> *So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials and it became a snake.* <sup>11</sup> *Pharaoh then summoned the wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts:* <sup>12</sup> *each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs.* <sup>13</sup> *Yet Pharaoh’s heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said.* Remember 1Samuel 2:30 where God declares: *Those who honour me I will honour.* There are times in life when we feel we are not given due recognition for service rendered. There are times when we are overlooked when we could contribute to a project but someone else possibly less suitable for the task is chosen ahead of us. This principle is God’s assurance to each one of us. Charles Spurgeon, the most famous Baptist minister in the English-speaking world, was accused incorrectly of raising a matter in public to the wider Baptist Union in England. Without going into all the details it became a serious controversy. History later revealed that he had been asked to do what he did by Samuel Booth, the General Secretary of the Baptist Union, but Booth never revealed his responsibility for what happened. Spurgeon correctly declared that after he was gone he would be vindicated even if it took 100 years. He was right! God honours

those that honour Him, even if for a time sometimes the opposite seems to happen when we are genuinely seeking to serve the Lord. It certainly happened here for Moses and Aaron who had come in for serious and sustained criticism from fellow Israelites after the previous visit to Pharaoh. They might have said: ‘Lord I didn’t sign up for this flak for serving God’! Although it must have hurt a great deal they dusted themselves down and did a ‘take 2’ and returned to their service for the Lord. The events were fairly straightforward. Aaron threw his rod on the floor and it became a snake. Then Pharaoh asked his officials who were the religious leaders of the various cults in Egypt, who all did the same using what might be called their demonically inspired powers. This reminds us that claims to occult powers in the form of Ouija boards and séances, for example, may sometimes be a scam, but on other occasions may be manifestations of the powers of the evil one Satan. There is much we do not know about the occult and that is not a bad thing- what is important is that as we safeguard our children by keeping them away from matches to avoid them getting burnt – so avoidance of involvement with occult activity is extremely wise. However, note something prophetic here in this passage. *But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs* (Exodus 7:12b). It reminds us of the promises of I John 4:4: *...the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world*. Sometimes the opposition to the convictions we hold seems overwhelming; for our brothers and sisters in places like Syria and Iraq or North Korea, it must feel anything but a place of victory where just surviving another day as a faithful believer is an accomplishment –knowing every day might be your last one. Pharaoh chose not to learn the lesson that stared him in the face. I think it likely that worldviews are not determined by the scientific evidence for the majority of people; their prior philosophical convictions filter the evidence presented to accord with their existing positions. Even genuine miracles indisputably before their eyes may make no difference at all. Pharaoh freely hardened his heart determined to have his way. The sad part about it later was that a time came when God allowed his choice to stand. It is a sober warning to put our faith and trust in the Lord while we have the opportunity – we are not guaranteed another opportunity!

## **2. The First Plague: The Nile changed to blood** (Exodus 7:14-24)

(a)**The transformation from life to death** (Exodus 7:14-19) <sup>14</sup> *Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Pharaoh’s heart is unyielding; he refuses to let the people go.’* <sup>15</sup> *Go to Pharaoh in the morning as he goes out to the river. Confront him on the bank of the Nile, and take in your hand the staff that was changed into a snake.* <sup>16</sup> *Then say to him, “The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: let My people go, so that they may worship Me in the wilderness. But until now you have not listened.* <sup>17</sup> *This is what the Lord says: by this you will know that I am the Lord: with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood.* <sup>18</sup> *The fish in the Nile will die, and the river will stink; the Egyptians will not be able to drink its water.”* <sup>19</sup> *The Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron, “Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt – over the streams and canals, over the ponds and all the reservoirs – and they will turn to blood.” Blood will be everywhere in Egypt, even in vessels of wood and stone. The first three plagues were a gradual deprivation of comfort for the Egyptians. The significance of the Nile cannot be underestimated. Its waters provided not only this essential substance for life, but its soil deposits delivered during flooding enabled crops to grow in abundance in nearby locations. Without its blessings as seen in Joseph’s day famine and devastation was inevitable with the potential for vast numbers of deaths. The Egyptian god Hapi was pictured as a bearded man with female breasts and a hanging stomach depicting advanced pregnancy. Worship songs sung to the Nile river god in honour of his*

achievements were intended to confirm further evidences of his power. Pharaoh turns up possibly for the Hapi praise service, but God and Moses gatecrash the celebrations. What would unfold before their eyes was a sight of utter horror. Exodus 7:19 explains the extent of the deprivation. It is a solemn occasion that Moses and Aaron picture on the banks of the river. After the previous miraculous act of God they must have travelled that day with a lighter spirit. We too in our service for the Lord do so in the light of our past experiences of answered prayers and God's gracious undeserved blessings. This is why it is such a good idea to keep a journal or diary in which we write down answered prayers or special blessings so that on days when we are really struggling that our spirits can be lifted to remember encouraging times of former days. I know from personal experience how easy it is to focus on my current problems or difficulties or some form of injustice or unfairness –and if we are honest most of us can come up with a few things in our personal experiences of life! Yet I need to tell myself and you may need to do the same that we must count our blessings and give thanks to the Lord. Psalm 107:1-2a declares: *Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His love endures for ever.* <sup>2</sup> *Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story...* We can all be encouraged by personal testimonies. However, are we willing to share something of His goodness in public? Too often we are too generous putting other people ahead of ourselves in giving a word of praise to the Lord.

(b) **The confirmation of the power of God** (Exodus 7:20-24) <sup>20</sup> *Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord had commanded. He raised his staff in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was changed into blood.* <sup>21</sup> *The fish in the Nile died, and the river smelled so bad that the Egyptians could not drink its water. Blood was everywhere in Egypt.* <sup>22</sup> *But the Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts, and Pharaoh's heart became hard; he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said.* <sup>23</sup> *Instead, he turned and went into his palace, and did not take even this to heart.* <sup>24</sup> *And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile to get drinking water, because they could not drink the water of the river.* The constant refrain of the next few sections of the book of Exodus is... **just as the Lord had said...** (Exodus 7:22b). God keeps His promises. Do not forget that this is the case. The timescale can often be longer than we would like but the reality of the promise is guaranteed. It is not difficult to imagine the scene in the blistering hot sunshine with the increasing smell of rotting fish and other sea creatures becoming increasingly difficult to handle. It is bad enough something in your fridge being slightly off – and unsuitable for eating, but this was serious. One lovely summer holiday our family spent was in Cornwall when I was a teenager. We were housed in single gender dorms in that Christian holiday home. You can picture quite a few of us housed closed together. I made a poor call that holiday that the other guests in the dorm didn't let me forget. I caught a mackerel on a fishing trip and wanted to take it home. I wrapped it in paper and put it in a draw in the bedside cabinet next to my bed. I had five more days left of my holiday. No-one mentioned it on day 1, but on day 2 and 3 I was in bother! Even when the fish was removed the smell remained! Multiply that many times to get something of the stench by the River Nile. Multiply the inconvenience as people searched desperately inland for drinking water. Was it convincing to Pharaoh? No! Amazingly whatever Moses did the Egyptian priests could do the same. Remember what God had said to Moses about the extent of the plague: *Blood will be everywhere in Egypt, even in vessels of wood and stone* (Exodus 7:19b). What were these *vessels*? Some Bible versions suggest it is cooking utensils in people's homes. It might be correct, but another very possible explanation is that these were the images of the Egyptian gods that were ceremonially washed every day by the Egyptian priests [John Currid, *Exodus* Volume 1, p. 168]. If this is correct then it looks closer to something out of a horror film as the precious statues of their gods looked humiliated in the presence of their

devotees. In the pictures of the judgement of God in the last days in the book of Revelation (Rev.16:3-6) one picture was of this plague being reenacted on a much wider stage in the oceans. God is the giver of life and of the blessing of fertility for conception of life and the producing of the necessary crops to sustain life. It is not Pharaoh or any other god who is in charge. Jesus reminded His followers of this fact in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:25-27, 33-34: *‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?’*<sup>26</sup> *Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?’*<sup>27</sup> *Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?...*<sup>33</sup> *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*<sup>34</sup> *Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. Do we need that assurance today?*

### 3. **The Second Plague: Frogs** (Exodus 7:25-8:15)

(a) **Allegiance to a higher authority** (Exodus 7:25-8:7)<sup>25</sup> *Seven days passed after the Lord struck the Nile. 8<sup>1</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh and say to him, “This is what the Lord says: let My people go, so that they may worship Me. 2 If you refuse to let them go, I will send a plague of frogs on your whole country. 3 The Nile will teem with frogs. They will come up into your palace and your bedroom and onto your bed, into the houses of your officials and on your people, and into your ovens and kneading troughs. 4 The frogs will come up on you and your people and all your officials.”’ 5 Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron, “Stretch out your hand with your staff over the streams and canals and ponds, and make frogs come up on the land of Egypt.”’ 6 So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land. 7 But the magicians did the same things by their secret arts; they also made frogs come up on the land of Egypt.* Their key message here is given in Exodus 8:1: ... *so that they may worship Me*; The Israelites had a higher allegiance; their calling in life was to serve or worship Yahweh. A clear message was being communicated that Pharaoh was respected as the head of state but he was not ultimately in charge. This was, therefore, a ratcheting of the challenge by Moses and would not have been missed by Pharaoh. It was a polite exchange in terms of tone and measured on the part of both men in the words chosen, but the effect was clear that a new relationship between these two people groups was required. The only question was how it would come about. The nuisance factor was now greater in that the homes of ordinary Egyptians and the palaces of the nobility were equally affected by this plague. This was a challenge to the power of the Egyptian goddess Hekhet who was usually depicted as a human female with a frog’s head. She had the power, according to Egyptian religious authorities for controlling the population of frogs in Egypt, by balancing their numbers with those of the frog-eating crocodiles. Yahweh the God of Moses has challenged this ‘control’ by decreeing an abundance of frogs in the land. Hekhet was unable to compete with the God of this enslaved people- rather embarrassing for Pharaoh and his officials. What is equally extraordinary is that the Egyptian priests could replicate this miracle in multiplying the frog numbers. What the passage hints at but doesn’t make explicit is that they could create the problem but had no power to resolve it. There is a limit to their challenge. On the surface it looks impressive, but challengers to Almighty God will always ultimately fall short in overreaching the powers they possess. In this world there are many occasions where the people of God seem weak and helpless in the face of dictatorships, maybe Communist or Fascist; or religious extremism like the

Ayatollah Khomeini inspired Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979; for a time it looks as though they will be erased from the face of the earth overwhelmed by the power of this revolution. Yet their allegiance to a higher authority will ultimately be vindicated as more and more people, in time, see that the Lord God Almighty reigns! Our periods of trials are for a season - not for ever. Remember Paul's encouraging words in Romans 8:35-39: *Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?* <sup>36</sup> (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") <sup>37</sup> No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. <sup>38</sup> And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. <sup>39</sup> No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord (NLT). Be encouraged by these words.

(b) **An arrogant response** (Exodus 8:8-15)<sup>8</sup> *Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, 'Pray to the Lord to take the frogs away from me and my people, and I will let your people go to offer sacrifices to the Lord.'* <sup>9</sup> *Moses said to Pharaoh, 'I leave to you the honour of setting the time for me to pray for you and your officials and your people that you and your houses may be rid of the frogs, except for those that remain in the Nile.'* <sup>10</sup> *'Tomorrow,' Pharaoh said. Moses replied, 'It will be as you say, so that you may know there is no one like the Lord our God.'* <sup>11</sup> *The frogs will leave you and your houses, your officials and your people; they will remain only in the Nile.'* <sup>12</sup> *After Moses and Aaron left Pharaoh, Moses cried out to the Lord about the frogs he had brought on Pharaoh.* <sup>13</sup> *And the Lord did what Moses asked. The frogs died in the houses, in the courtyards and in the fields.* <sup>14</sup> *They were piled into heaps, and the land reeked of them.* <sup>15</sup> *But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said. Moses with a sense of irony invites Pharaoh to set the time to end the plague. 'Tomorrow,' Pharaoh said.... There will, sadly, always be people who will procrastinate regarding the good news we present to them of Jesus. However reasonable the 'reasons' given for putting off committing their lives to Christ, they risk missing out forever on faith in Him by assuming they have endless time and opportunities. Is there anyone here who needs to take that step of faith today? You have put it off before – but now is the time to trust the Lord. It can be believers resisting the promptings of God to some form of obedience in service, assuming tomorrow will always be there to make that choice. Sometimes in His grace it is, but not always.*

#### 4. **The third plague: Gnats** (Exodus 8:16-19)

<sup>16</sup> *Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron, "Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the ground," and throughout the land of Egypt the dust will become gnats.'* <sup>17</sup> *They did this, and when Aaron stretched out his hand with the staff and struck the dust of the ground, gnats came on people and animals. All the dust throughout the land of Egypt became gnats.* <sup>18</sup> *But when the magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, they could not. Since the gnats were on people and animals everywhere,* <sup>19</sup> *the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God.'* *But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the Lord had said. This time there is no audience with Pharaoh the plague begins with no warning. The Egyptian officials cannot replicate what has happened. They conclude: 'This is the finger of God.'* The name for God here is the generic **Elohim**, God Almighty, the Creator God. They are stopping short of acknowledging Yahweh the God of the Israelites as being responsible. Progress is happening, but it is being resisted all the way. It is not a lack of evidence but a lack of willingness to heed what is taking place before their eyes. There are plenty of people who will in

a vague general sense acknowledge the existence of God, but fall short of committing their lives to follow Him or in ordering their lives in accordance with what He has planned for them. It is a kind of halfway house acknowledgement that there is a higher power than me in this world. I am not arrogant enough to declare that I am totally in control of my destiny- that would be delusional thinking, but I am not yet prepared to accept that I need to trust Him with my life. Our faith in God to be effective must be personal and a choice we actively make. David could utter the words of Psalm 23 and mean every one of them because of the very first words- *The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall lack nothing* (Psalm 23:1). Sometimes the Lord has to allow us to be removed from our comfort zones for us either for the first time or afresh to place our lives fully in His hands. May we give Him the first place in our lives and wholeheartedly serve Him. Amen.