

Egypt: Striking that He May Heal

Isaiah 19

October 6th, 2019

Big idea: The Lord promised to strike Egypt in order that they may turn to Him and He would heal them of far deeper wounds. He works the same way today.

Intro

God can use suffering in remarkable ways.

One example ties in with our book of the month. And is retold in Randy Alcorn's *If God is Good*

Steve Saint thought of Timbuktu as a made-up name for "the ends of the earth." In 1986 while traveling in western Africa for Missionary Aviation Fellowship, he found himself stranded in the real Timbuktu.

He decided to rent a truck to travel despite warnings that if he broke down he wouldn't survive in the Sahara Desert. Men armed with scimitars and knives watched him suspiciously. After he failed to find a truck, Steven's thoughts ran to his father. Nate Saint, a former missionary in Ecuador. When Steve was only five, natives speared to death his dad and four other missionaries. Now, thirty years later, Steve found himself questioning his father's death. "I couldn't help but think the murders were capricious, an accident of bad timing."

Steve asked for directions to a church. Some children led him to a tiny mudbrick house with a poster on the wall showing wounded hands covering a cross. A dark-skinned man in flowing robes approached and introduced himself s Nouh Af Infa yara.

Steve asked Nouh, through a translator, how he came to faith in Christ. Nouh said he had stolen vegetables from a missionary's garden. The missionary gave him the vegetables and promised him an ink pen if he memorized some verses from the Bible. Nouh believed the verses he learned and came to Christ. Nouh's parents threw him out of the home and pulled him out of school Nouh's mother even put a poison in his food at a family feast. He ate the food but suffered no ill effects.

Steve asked Nouh, "why is your faith so important to you that you're willing to give up everything, even you life?" "I know God loves me and I'll live with Him forever."

"where did your courage come from?" asked Steve.

"The missionary gave me books about Christians who'd suffered for their faith. My favorite was about five young men who risked their lives to take God's good news to stone age Indians in the jungles of South America. The book said they let themselves be speared to death, even though they had guns and could have killed their attackers!"

Stunned, Steve said, "one of those men was my father."

"Your father?" Now Nouh felt stunned. Steve assured Nouh of the truth of the story. And then Nouh assured Steve that God has used his father's death, many years later, to help a young Muslim-turned-Christian hold on to his faith. Steve realized that if God could plan the death of His own Son, He could also plan and use the death of Steve's dad, Nate Saint, to accomplish his sovereign purpose – including reaching one young Muslim for Christ and orchestrating this God-ordained meeting of two men at the ends of the earth.

But there are other ways God uses suffering. We see one today played out on a national scale in Egypt but with personal application for us.

1. The Lord would **strike** Egypt in order that they would return to Him and be **healed** of far deeper wounds. (19:22)
 - a. This is the controlling verse that explains the rest of the chapter.

- b. Egypt is a historic enemy of Israel.
 - i. Israel's national identity traces back to their centuries of slavery and oppression in Egypt following by God's deliverance.
 - ii. Egypt remained a threat as their power waxed and waned.
 - iii. Isaiah wrote around 700 BC. At that point the Great Pyramid of Giza was already 1,800 years old. That remarkable structure serves as an enduring reminder of their former might. It stood as the tallest man-made structure for 3,800 years until it was overtaken by a cathedral in England. Compare that to the 20th century in which the world's tallest building typically held the title for 10 years.
- c. Not merely striking and healing them of His strikes.
 - i. That sounds like the abusive husband who strikes his wife and then tries to show how compassionate he is by giving her an icepack.
 - ii. No, the intention behind the striking is to expose their far greater wounds – their separation from Him, their idolatry, their pride and sense of self-sufficiency.
- d. We can see in this a picture of how the Lord may work in our lives.
 - i. Its wrong to conclude that every time we suffer its because there is sin that God wants to uproot or we need to repent and come back to Him.
 - 1. However, that may be how He uses some suffering.
 - 2. Randy Alcorn, "God's occasional direct punishment in this life reminds us of judgment to come, just as his occasional direct rewards in this life remind us of coming reward. But we should never assume we know God's reasons when he hasn't made them plain."
 - ii. Suffering can often draw us closer to God than ease and pleasure.
 - 1. How often have you heard someone say that they were closest with God when their life was easy and free from suffering? Not often. But how often have you heard people describe the way they grew near to God when life was hard?
 - 2. Talking with one of my kids about this passage this week and she asked, "but can't God show himself to us through good things?" The answer is, of course. And He does constantly through beauty, provision of daily needs, answered prayer, and more. The whole earth is full of His glory (Isaiah 6). But there is something about pain that strips away the things we depend upon.
- e. In the first 15 verses Isaiah describes the various ways God will strike Egypt.
 - i. Two purposes behind this description.
 - 1. To motivate Egypt to turn to the Lord
 - 2. To warn Judah not to trust in Egypt for defense.
 - a. Chapter 20 how Egypt would soon be overrun by the Assyrians, which archeological records tells us is exactly what happened.
 - b. **Isaiah 20:5** Those who trusted in Cush and boasted in Egypt will be dismayed and put to shame.

2. ***Striking*** (19:1-15)

a. **Terror** of the Lord (v. 1)

- i. Using poetic, anthropomorphic language to describe God's speedy, unstoppable advance on Egypt.
- ii. Their idols will tremble, the hearts of the Egyptians will melt
 1. Reminiscent of the Exodus in which God directly attacked the gods of Egypt.
 2. **Exodus 12:12** 'For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments-- I am the LORD.
 - a. Each of the plagues was an opportunity for Pharaoh to repent and do the right thing. Each was also a judgment on a different Egyptian god.
 - b. The Nile was sacred, they believed it to be the bloodstream of Osiris. Turning it to blood was an insult and mockery.
 - c. Frogs were representatives of the goddess Heqt so they were never intentionally killed.
 - d. Dust becoming gnats was a judgment on the earth god, Seth.
 3. So once against their very idols tremble as they are exposed for their emptiness.
- iii. Their hearts melt as their sources of strength are undercut.

b. **Civil** war (v. 2)

- i. Pattern of civil wars for Egypt going back millennia.
 1. The strong dynasties of the old kingdom from 3000-2200 BC gave way to 200 years of infighting and chaos by city-states, then another unified dynasty for 200 years, followed by 200 more years of chaos. So it will happen again, Isaiah says, chipping away at their strength from unity.
 2. War, even when considered necessary, is painful.
- ii. Martin Lloyd-Jones in 1939 (quoted in Alcorn, pg 405)
 1. God permits war in order that men may see through it, more clearly than they have ever done before, what sin really is. In times of peace we tend to think lightly of sin, and to hold optimistic views of human nature. War reveals man and the possibilities within man's nature. The First World War shattered that optimistic view of man which had held sway for so many years, and revealed something of the essential sinfulness of human nature.... It forces us to examine the very foundations of life. It makes us face the direct questions as to what it is in human nature that leads to such calamities.

c. **Empty** spirituality (v. 3)

- i. In the chaos and uncertainty, they turn not to the true and living God at first, but to occultic practices of talking to the dead, what Motyer describes as "declension into religious quackery."
- ii. People do often look for spiritual answers when life is hard, but it doesn't mean they always go to the right sources. The God of the Bible may seem too demanding with His requirement of self-humbling, admission of sin, repentance, and faith in Him. People may try a vague belief in a

higher power, or hope through their horoscope, before they see their inadequacy to build a sustainable worldview.

d. **Tyrant** (v. 4)

- i. In the short term this would occur as Esar-haddon, king of Assyria, subdued Egypt in 670 BC. This was the end of their independence and power from which they never recovered, even to this day in terms of their international dominance achieved during their great dynasties.
- ii. Esar-haddon was indeed a cruel master, like other Assyrian kings.
 1. Gloried in brutality and cruelty because it was seen as a display of dominance. They hoped the terror they caused would squash rebellions before they began. They recorded their acts in reliefs or writings, burning and decapitating enemies, mutilating bodies, exacting heavy tributes of wood, stone, and gold.

e. Drought and **economic** collapse (vv. 5-10)

- i. Without the Nile River, there would be no Egyptian society as we know it.
 1. Nothing would stop the Sahara desert from stretching all the way to the Red Sea. They don't receive significant rainfall. The rain lands in the Ethiopian highlands and flows through tributaries into the Nile. The floods began in the same weeks and receded later in a predictable pattern, bring water and nutrients that supported abundant agriculture. They developed a system of farming to maximize this pattern. The surplus agriculture supported a larger population, freeing up people for social development, culture, art, administration, mining, and writing.
- ii. But droughts did occasionally happen, and they were devastating.
 1. That's what is described here.
 2. The irrigation canals emptied, the fields dried up, the fish disappeared, the manufacturing of cloth ceased.
 3. As v 10 says, the pillars of Egypt ceased.

iii. Economic collapse can drive people to God.

1. A long-form article in *The Atlantic* somewhat derisively talked about the way unemployed working-class factory workers cling deeply to their churches and "faith" during periods of prolonged unemployment. It was obvious that the journalist viewed this as a crutch for people with nothing left to lean on. But for many in our age of relative prosperity, having their financial legs cut out from underneath them exposes the weakness of trusting in money as a savior.
2. "Indeed, as plagued by doubts and regrets as he was, the unemployed man I spoke to in Detroit could, in his moments of strength, find comfort in a perspective of grace. "I feel I ain't got what I used to have," he told me. "But I know I got God on my side. And maybe the stuff ain't meant for me ... I thank God for what I have, and that's it.""

f. **Foolish** counselors (vv. 11-15)

- i. Zoan and Memphis were the main cities in lower Egypt in the delta.
- ii. Their princes and advisors would act foolishly in response to the challenges facing their nation.
 1. Those who should have been cornerstones giving them stability (v. 13) led them astray.

iii. This is at least partly a divine, intentional act of God (v. 14) to destabilize Egypt.

1. He is not merely letting natural events take their course, although He does that. He is an actor in history not only an observer.

g. But, this will not go on forever. There is an end goal in mind. There is a healing that God wants to do.

3. **Healing** (19:16-25)

a. **Humbling** by the Lord (vv. 16-17)

i. 6 times he repeats the phrase “in that day.”

1. It’s an undated future time. May be glimpses of this fulfillment in history but the fulfillment is still future, awaiting the future return and reign of Christ. He is the “savior” in v 20 who will deliver them.

ii. Motyer – what turns out to be the beginning of blessing is to all appearances only more trouble: fear that divine power is roused against them (the uplifted hand), fear of Judah, fear of what the Lord is planning against them.

1. My note – Conversion requires a recognition that we are in great danger. The hand of the Lord is raised against us, prepared for judgment. It is stayed for the moment but will not be forever.

b. **Unity** of speech and allegiance (v. 18)

i. 5 cities, probably referring to 5 prominent cities will speak the language of Canaan, Hebrew, perhaps literally fulfilled or more likely as a way to describe their turning to God in a radical way, even adopting the language of their enemy as they embrace their enemy’s God because they swear allegiance to the Lord.

c. True **worship** (v. 19, 21)

i. The altar and the pillar refer to the common practice of building a physical monument to remember the Lord.

1. **Genesis 12:8** Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD.

2. Or Joshua piling 12 stones in Joshua 4:3 after crossing the Jordan River.

ii. Verse 21 says they will know the Lord and worship Him with sacrifice and offering.

1. Remember from Isaiah 1 that ritual can’t be separated from a transformed life or it is hypocritical worship

iii. By now you can see the contrasts

1. From terror to humbling

2. From civil war to unity of speech and allegiance

3. From empty spirituality to true worship

4. Continues . . . from a tyrant to deliverance from oppression

d. Deliverance from **oppression** (v. 20)

i. They will experience true freedom under a right relationship with their Creator.

- ii. Someone could read into this a mistaken idea that the culture and people would be merely absorbed into another culture or colonized by Judah.
 - 1. We rightly frown on the idea of colonialization today because we are all too aware of the way one people group can dominate another to their harm. But that's not what is happening here. God is rescuing them from oppression and He himself is ruling over them.

e. International ***peace*** (v. 23)

- i. Highway from Egypt to Assyria – speaks of swift and open communication and peace.
- ii. These two warring people groups would come together in relationship and worship.
- iii. The church is a microcosm of this today – people who would not necessarily be united by language, culture, or national identity who are united in Christ.
 - 1. That doesn't erase differences or guarantee ease of worshiping together.
 - 2. Even if we just think about music, there are different styles preferences represented in this room. Some of you may prefer that we sing more hymns. Some of you may prefer that we sing more songs that you hear on the radio. Some of you might prefer more electric guitar. Some of you might prefer that the drums be thrown out the front door.
 - 3. But as we worship God together, we have an opportunity to serve one another. It's easier when we remember worship is about God and for God, not about us or for us, but it's still a challenge.
 - 4. ^{ESV} **Romans 12:10** Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.

f. Equality in ***blessing*** (vv. 24-25)

- i. These were two great enemies – the historic enemy of Israel and the new enemy of Israel.
- ii. These enemies will be blessed with Israel. They are called “my people” and “the work of my hands” and “My inheritance.”
- iii. They are no longer God's enemies but in His inner circle.

4. Conclusion

- a. We learn something about God's work in nations and in individuals in this passage.
 - i. God sometimes allows hardship to get our attention – He sometimes wounds so that He can heal.
 - ii. Doesn't mean your hardships are necessarily discipline, or to get you to repent, or to push you to God. There are other reasons we suffer.
 - 1. We live in a sin-cursed, broken world so suffering is part of it.
 - 2. Suffering equips us to serve others.
 - 3. But, it can be how God desires to use it. If you are far from God, return to Him.



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