

“What Does It Take to Get Your Attention?”

Exodus 3:1-10; Jonah 3:1-10 ¹

It was a fine day to be on vacation at Mai Khao Beach. Tilly Smith, a ten year-old girl, was enjoying a seaside vacation with her family in Phuket, Thailand, and they were off on a Sunday morning walk on the beach.

Suddenly, the ocean began to rush away from the shore, leaving fish flopping on the sand as it retreated. As her parents stopped to watch this most unusual sight, Tilly began to say urgently, “Mommy, we must get off the beach now! I think there’s going to be a tsunami!”

Fortunately, Tilly’s parents and many others on the beach believed her, and they left the beach at once. Minutes later, the huge tidal wave surged over the beach, demolishing everything in its path. Their resort was destroyed, but that portion of the beach was one of the few places along the shore where no one was killed . . . or even seriously injured.

Tilly credited her geography teacher with their survival. “When the water started to go funny,” she said, “I recognized what was happening and had a feeling there was going to be a tsunami.”²

That’s a great story, but the really important thing about it is that this tsunami did not strike without warning. The sea gave the warning it nearly always gives as a tidal wave approaches, but the people who saw the sign either didn’t understand what it was or didn’t believe it.

When Hurricane Charley ravaged Orlando, Florida on Friday, the 13th of August, 2004, most signs and billboards were no match for the hundred-mile-an-hour winds, but there was at least one very interesting exception. One of the billboards on Sand Lake Road survived the blast of the storm, and the hurricane winds peeled away the current advertisement to reveal an earlier message. That earlier message said, “**We need to talk. – God.**”³ The unstated question behind that sign is “**What does it take to get your attention?**”

Hold these two images in your mind while you strap on your seatbelt and travel back in time to Egypt in the summer of 1271 B.C. Rameses II is Pharaoh, and the descendants of Abraham have now been enslaved in Egypt for more than 400 hundred years.

God has chosen two brothers—Moses and Aaron—to act as divine emissaries to Pharaoh, demanding that their Hebrew people be released from the cruel slavery in which they’ve been bound for generations. We don’t know how God got Aaron’s attention for this commissioning, but we know how God got Moses’ attention with the burning bush in the wilderness.

As we join the story, there are hundreds of thousands of Hebrew slaves in Egypt, upon whom the nation’s economy is greatly dependent for its wealth. Our own nation’s economy, of course, was equally dependent on slave labor in the past, and we are similarly dependent on immigrant labor today, both legal and undocumented.

Not surprisingly, Pharaoh takes a dim view of the brothers’ bold request, after which Moses takes his walking staff and strikes the life-giving waters of the Nile River. Suddenly the water begins to turn to blood, until the whole river is blood red. The fish die, and the water becomes undrinkable. This gets Pharaoh’s *attention*, but it doesn’t change his *mind*.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on May 19, 2019.

² Duncan Latrobe, “Quake Angel,” www.nypost.com, 1.1.05.

³ www.godvertising.com

A week later, Moses and Aaron return to Pharaoh. When Pharaoh again refuses their request, Aaron points his staff toward the Nile and vast hordes of frogs begin to crawl out of the water, filling the houses, hopping into beds, ovens, and kneading bowls. Pharaoh pleads for Moses to remove the frogs, and Moses asks, “When do you want them gone?” Pharaoh’s reply is amazing: “Do it tomorrow,” he says. We’ll come back to that later.

Pharaoh continues to refuse release, and God continues to send plagues in an awful and deadly crescendo. In the third plague, all the dust of Egypt—and there’s a lot of that, since it’s summer—turns into gnats. The gnats cover everything. They clog the nostrils of every breathing thing . . . but Pharaoh does not relent.

Summer ends and fall begins, and the Hebrews are still in slavery. Toward the end of October, God sends huge swarms of flies into Egypt, but there are no flies where the Israelites live.

The fifth plague comes in late January, killing the Egyptians’ horses, donkeys, camels, cattle, and sheep, but once again, none of the Israelite animals die. Plague number six causes terrible boils to break out on people and animals throughout Egypt, but still Pharaoh refuses to let God’s people go.

In late February, a horrible storm begins at Moses’ command, a devastating storm with continuous lightning and severe hail that leaves Egypt in ruins. Everything in the fields is destroyed—people, animals, crops, even the trees. But there is no storm where the Hebrews live.

The eighth plague comes in early March. This plague is a mind-boggling swarm of locusts that covers the surface of the entire land, making all the ground look black. The locusts eat everything that has survived the hailstorm, so that not a single green thing is left in all of Egypt. Pharaoh’s officials gather their courage and approach the throne: “*How long will you let these disasters go on? Please let the Israelites go to serve the Lord their God! Don’t you realize that Egypt lies in ruins?*” (10:7). But Pharaoh is adamant. The slaves will not go free!

Several weeks later, the ninth plague brings a darkness that immobilizes all of Egypt . . . except in Goshen, where the Israelites live. As March becomes April, Moses tells his people that their ordeal is nearly over. The tenth and final plague will come soon.

“Each family must select a yearling male lamb, one that has no defects at all,” Moses says. “On the evening of the 14th, kill the lamb as darkness falls. Smear the lamb’s blood on the top and sides of the doorframes of your homes, and do not—I repeat, DO NOT—leave your homes until morning. God’s Destroyer is going to pass through Egypt on that night, but when he sees the blood of the sacrificial lamb, he will pass over your house and death will not touch you.”

And so it was. God’s Death Angel passed through Egypt, and a great tidal wave of grief sucked life out of every house that was unprotected by the blood. Unbelievable destruction came to Egypt that night, but the destruction did not come without plenty of warning. That terrible outcome could have been avoided.

Fast forward now to the year 753 B.C., to the great city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. (Today, the ruins of Nineveh are a part of the city of Mosul, in northern Iraq.) Nineveh is a wicked city, and God has sent the prophet Jonah to announce its imminent destruction. Unlike Pharaoh, though, the king of Nineveh is convicted by Jonah’s announcement of God’s judgment and proclaims a time of national fasting and repentance. The Bible tells us that “*when God saw that they had put a stop to their evil ways, he had mercy on them and didn’t carry out the destruction he had threatened*” (3:10).

Many points could be made from these stories, but I want to emphasize just two: first of all, **God's judgment does not come without warning**. Second, **God's judgment can be escaped by repentance**—by putting a stop to and turning away from—the behaviors that have led to judgment.

There are those who say that the attacks of 9-11, our accelerating fires and hurricanes, floods and mudslides are God's judgment on the wicked. Perhaps they are, but we need to remember that Jesus told us that people who suffer and die in disasters are not necessarily more wicked than those who escape them (Luke 13:1-5). Jesus did say, though, that "you will also perish unless you turn from your evil ways and turn to God" (Luke 13:3).

That any disastrous event represents God's *judgment* is difficult to prove, but there can be no doubt that disasters should be understood as God's *warning*. C.S. Lewis wrote that "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."⁴ And again we sense the question, "**What does it take to get your attention?**"

Nathan once told me that he had heard someone claim that 144 of 145 precursors to God's final judgment had already happened. Such claims have been made for 2,000 years, and the people who make them have obviously not read what Jesus said about His return. Listen to this:

"No one knows the day or the hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows. When the Son of Man returns, it will be like it was in Noah's day. In those days before the Flood, the people were enjoying banquets and parties and weddings right up to the time Noah entered his boat. People didn't realize what was going to happen until the Flood came and swept them all away. That is the way it will be when the Son of Man comes. Two men will be working together in the field; one will be taken, the other left. Two women will be grinding flour at the mill; one will be taken, the other left. So be prepared, because you don't know what day your Lord is coming. . . . You must be ready all the time. For the Son of Man will come when least expected" (Matthew 24:36-44).

Did you get that? The way I read it, the more specifically people try to predict Jesus' return, the more confident we can be that they've got it wrong: "*The Son of Man will come when least expected.*" But when Jesus does return, it's going to be a lot like the tsunami: "*People didn't realize what was going to happen until the Flood came and swept them all away.*" And we can't say there has been no warning.

Yes, there are rumblings today. There have been rumblings in every generation. God's actions in human events are always intended to cause us get our priorities straight and to learn more of the character of Christ. That's always what God is trying to do.

God's invitation to us is to "*Come Closer! Come in Farther! Come up Higher!*" God wants us to find pleasure and meaning in this life, but not to mistake it for the Main Event. And the more we insist on going the wrong way and seeking the wrong goals, the more God ratchets up His efforts to get our attention. "**We need to talk,**" God says.

Left to ourselves, you and I completely misunderstand God's purpose in our lives. God is not particularly interested in our material prosperity. Material prosperity is, in fact, one of the primary things that keeps us from God.

⁴ *The Problem of Pain*, p. 91.

The main thing God wants to accomplish in us in this life is to shape our character into the likeness of God's own character, so that we can experience all that God intends to give us in this life and in the life to come. The principal danger to our character development is our persistent and self-centered efforts to "take care of Number One," and God's actions in our lives are intended to prevent us from trading temporary experiences in the present for the Eternal Joy that is to come.

My friends, all of God's actions are acts of mercy . . . but sometimes they are a severe mercy. **What does God have to do to get your attention?**

Let's return to Pharaoh and the frogs for a moment. If my house, my bread, and my bed were full of frogs, I'd want them gone NOW! But Pharaoh didn't say "Now." Pharaoh said "Tomorrow." Pharaoh wanted one more night with the frogs. And as hard as it is to believe, you and I do that, too.

If you're here this morning and you've never chosen to receive the forgiveness for your Sin that God purchased on the Cross, what's holding you back? God's message is clear:

*"Turn from your sins! Don't let them destroy you!
Put all your rebellion behind you, and get for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit.
For why should you die, O people of Israel?
I don't want you to die, says the Sovereign LORD.
Turn back and live!" (Ezekiel 18:30-32).*

If you've never surrendered your life to Christ, what "frogs" are you befriending that are keeping you from Him? What are you reluctant to release to God? What does it take to get your attention?

But the frogs also have a message for those of us who have already been born into the Eternal Kingdom. Scottish theologian J.B. Phillips famously noted that most people's understanding of God is at about the same place it was when we were twelve years old.⁵ And do you know why? It's because we've made friends with the frogs, and we don't want to let them go. "Tomorrow will be soon enough to grow in grace," we think.

Read the signs, my friends. Jesus is going to return when we least expect Him, and He's going to want to know what we have done with what we've been given. So what frogs are in your pockets this morning? What is there in your life that you know isn't supposed to be there? What should be there that you know is absent? Don't squander the opportunities God is giving you to develop the character of Christ!

What would you do differently if you knew for sure that Jesus would return this Thursday? Why not do that now? And are you going to just stand there and watch the sea recede without telling your friends what that means? **What does God have to do to get your attention?**

⁵ J. B. Phillips, *Your God is Too Small* (Macmillan, 1960).

