

The Day When Evil Is Swallowed Up Exodus 7:8-13

Evil is never shy. It loves to parade itself. It delights to raise itself up like a cobra and show off its glories, drawing attention to its venomous power and magnifying its threat. It is proud, impatient and puffed up; it seeks its own; it rejoices in iniquity. Evil gets in your face and declares its superiority, demanding submission and threatening consequences if you refuse.

That was certainly the way of things with Pharaoh. Upon entering his throne room, Moses and Aaron would have been dazzled with walls festooned with emblems of the mighty Pharaoh's power, depictions of his military victories and pictures conveying his god-like authority. The throne itself would have been massive, carved out of ivory and encrusted with gold and gems. But at the centre of that throne sat the great man himself, with the crown upon his head. John Currid explains, "Depicted on the front of the king's crown was an enraged female cobra, or serpent. This uraeus was thought by the Egyptians to be energised with divine sovereignty and potency."

It was all very impressive and daunting. Evil often is, especially when it has swallowed up all its enemies. And the serpent was central. The word for serpent used here in Ex. 7 is 'tannin' – it has a wide range of meaning – sometimes serpent, but also reptilian monster, sea creature, or even dragon. Is this not Satan himself? The serpent that deceived and destroyed in Gen. 3; the monster that devours and crushes and swallows up in Jer. 51:34; Leviathan the twisted serpent that is in the sea, Is. 27:1b; the fiery red dragon that seeks to destroy the Lord's Christ, Rev. 12:4–5.

The conflict between Moses and Pharaoh was a conflict between the LORD and Satan. This is the first skirmish of the war, the first challenge by God's representative upon Satan's representative, as the spiritual forces of the heavenly places do battle through their human agents. The outcome is a sign to Pharaoh of what is surely coming. The man who wore the emblem of Satanic power, claiming to have swallowed up all his enemies, has his own serpents swallowed up before God's man! This was the day when the evil that had swallowed up so many for so long was itself swallowed up by God.

(1) God Constrains Evil (v8–10)

The first act of the drama entails the rod of Aaron being transformed into a 'tannin', that monster-dragon-serpent. God planned for the war to begin here.

But why is this the starting point? Remember that the serpent was a creature made by God in the beginning, Gen 3:1. When Satan appeared in the form of a serpent, he could only do so because he was himself a creature, and the serpent was itself created – everything is under the power and authority of the creator! The evil intent is not from God, but the capacity to act must be from God. That's the message of Aaron's rod becoming a serpent – the God who creates all things, constrains all things, so that when evil is manifested, we know it is confined and restricted by God. After all, the rod could have turned into a snake-killing creature like a mongoose or a hawk, but God was proving something here – he not only defeats evil in the end – he also constrains it along the way.

There are many applications of this great truth. For Moses and Aaron, the message was that they did not need to be afraid of Pharaoh or his cobra-headress – the God who creates all things, constrains and limits the power of all things, even when they do evil. The Lord Jesus understood this as he stood before Pilate, Jn. 19:10-11 – the Roman governor had no power except what God gave him. For us today, often it may seem that evil is out of control, unconstrained, without any limits – but that is not the case! God always constrains evil, and

he does so for his own purposes, according to his perfect plan. This is the insight that we are given in the opening chapters of Job. Job himself knew nothing of the “divine counsels” involving Satan – he only experienced the evil outcome – yet all along, God was constraining the evil and directing it unto his own glory, through the good of his servant, Job 38-42.

(2) God Permits Evil (v11–12a)

Having shown that he has power over evil, to constrain it, by unleashing a serpent upon Pharaoh, God then demonstrates that it is his purpose to permit evil, according to his will, in the serpent-antics of Pharaoh’s men. There may have been an element of trickery involved in their rod-to-serpent transformation – there often is when the great deceiver, Satan, is behind things – but it is certain that they were real serpents unleashed by Pharaoh’s wise men.

And it doesn’t really matter how they did it. The message is that they can bring forth real serpents, able to do their serpent-thing! Just like the serpent in the garden, they seek to destroy through deception. Just as God permitted that first act of the dragon in Eden, so he permits every act of evil that has ever happened since. Of course, this permitting is not the end of the matter – the end is in verse 12b with the swallowing-up. And we must not forget what we have already seen – the evil that God permits, he also constrains so that it never goes beyond the boundary he sets. But nonetheless, he does permit the evil.

Why? For his own glory through the good of his people. This was a message that Moses came to understand so well that he wrote Gen. 50:20. Job experienced it as he came to realise the Lord's purpose through his suffering. Paul expressed it most wonderfully in Rom. 8:28-30. But of course, it can only be true for Joseph, or Moses, or Job, or Paul, or us, because it was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, where the greatest evil (the cross) was permitted by God in order to attain the greatest good (salvation).

We need to grasp this truth, and to exercise more faith as we are confronted by evil in this age. Whether it is persecution, affliction, or fear of what may come, we need faith, born at the cross, to see and believe that God is working for our good and his glory even through all evil.

(3) God Swallows Up Evil (v12b)

What a moment that must have been for all present! For Pharaoh’s henchmen. For the king himself, with his cobra-crested crown. And most of all, for Moses and Aaron. The serpent-ruler, who had swallowed up so many, was now himself swallowed up.

How does God swallow up the evil of death? By dying in the person of his Son. He takes on the tannin, that monster-dragon-serpent, by entering into his realm, seeming to come under his authority, and then swallowing him up! This scene before Pharaoh was fulfilled on Calvary’s cross, as Christ swallowed death, by emerging from death, like Jonah from the fish’s belly, Mt. 12:39-40 with 1 Cor. 15:54-55.

That day before Pharaoh has three levels of fulfilment: first the day of resurrection, when Christ burst forth from the tomb; second, every Lord’s Day, when we proclaim that he is risen; then finally in the great day of the Lord that is to come. That day is surely coming, when all evil will be fully and finally swallowed up, never to be seen or felt or experienced or even remotely hinted at ever again! But remember this – it will be forever to the glory of the Lord that he bears the marks of the evil done to him, for it was in suffering at the hands of all evil that the Christ swallowed up that evil forever. Glory to the lamb that was slain!