

Text: Exod. 8:1-15

Title: "Frogs and the freedom to worship"

Time: 7/5/2020 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: In 1785 James Madison authored his *Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments*, arguing against a bill in Virginia that would have authorized taxing citizens to support the state church, which was Episcopal. Madison viewed such a tax as an illegitimate government intrusion on man's freedom of religion and conscience. He wrote this in defense of that freedom:

"The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right. It is unalienable, because the opinions of men, depending only on the evidence contemplated by their own minds cannot follow the dictates of other men: It is unalienable also, because what is here a right towards men, is a duty towards the Creator. It is the duty of every man to render to the Creator such homage and such only as he believes to be acceptable to Him. This duty is precedent, both in order of time and in degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society. Before any man can be considered as a member of Civil Society, he must be considered as a subject of the Governor of the Universe."

The name of the Governor of the Universe is Yahweh, the God of the Bible, whom Moses and Aaron represent before Pharaoh in this passage. Unlike in colonial Virginia, there is no legislature in Egypt to whom to appeal, only a powerful tyrant who has refused freedom of worship to God's people, the children of Israel.

God calls up some freedom-fighters with this second of the ten plagues. They are not an elite fighting force, but rather Nile frogs from the tributaries, rivers, and pools of Egypt. The title of the message this morning is “Frogs and the freedom of worship,” and I want us to see three things this second plague of the frogs teaches us about God’s desire to be worshipped freely.

I. God desires to be worshipped without political interference (8:1-4).

Illustration: Madison’s perspective on religious freedom is strikingly different from that of even the most conservative defenders of religious freedom today. He states as axiomatic that what is a right before men is also a duty before God, whom he says is the Creator and the Governor of the Universe.

Today, our understanding of religious freedom has little to do with our duty before God, because we are only concerned about our civil right before men to worship in the way we want to. Whereas Madison required biblical justification for religious freedom, our world asks us to justify it on the basis of pantheistic pluralism.

Application: Exodus contains this biblical perspective that influenced Madison’s words. The Lord sends Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh to renew the request first made in Exod. 3:18. Jesus told us that God desires people to worship Him in Spirit and in truth, God’s Spirit and God’s truth. God has an interest in the freedom He is requesting from Pharaoh. His request is in favor of the duty Madison explained – that He be worshipped freely without political interference from Pharaoh. The Lord is not asking Pharaoh to force Egypt to worship Him, but He is asking that the God-given civil

right of the Israelites to worship their God be respected and honored, not interfered with.

As you know, fear of the corona virus has put our nation and its churches in an unprecedented and dangerous circumstance when it comes to both our civil right and our God-given duty to worship Him without the interference of politicians and civil authorities.

The word *church* means *summoned assembly*, and it is the opposite of the term *social distancing*. We suddenly live in a world, where the key to survival is to practice a term that is the opposite of what God wants worshippers to be, a church. We have done our best here to accommodate our society's fear of the pandemic and to demonstrate that we are honestly concerned for the safety of one another and others. But our ability to be God's worshipping church has been limited by government officials these last months to a degree that I have not seen in my lifetime.

Paragraph 18.c of the emergency order we are living under at least until the end of this month states flatly, "Pre- or post-service communal gatherings (e.g., coffee hours or other food services) are not allowed." Honestly, before the Governor of the Universe, the governor of New Hampshire is not allowed to say to our church the words, "not allowed," without first checking with the Lord. When the government tells us as a church, "not allowed," we check our Bibles to see whether that is something God says we must do. If so, our state cannot tell us we are not allowed.

We do so not because of what James Madison said or even what he and his colleagues put in the U.S. Constitution, but because this passage teaches that God desires to be worshipped without political interference. We will continue to

do our best to support the efforts of fallible civil leaders to keep citizens safe. But when they tell us that we are not allowed to do something, we will examine our Bibles first to see whether the Lord commands us to do what they seek to disallow. We must obey God rather than men when forced to choose one over the other.

II. God desires to be worshipped without religious confusion (8:5-11).

Illustration: The difference between Madison's mindset and ours today is perhaps starkest in a paragraph of the *Remonstrance* in which he speaks of the value of what he calls "the light of Christianity":

"The first wish of those who enjoy this precious gift ought to be that it may be imparted to the whole race of mankind. Compare the number of those who have as yet received it with the number still remaining under the dominion of false Religions; and how small is the former! Does the policy of the Bill tend to lessen the disproportion? No; it at once discourages those who are strangers to the light of revelation from coming into the Region of it; and countenances by example the nations who continue in darkness, in shutting out those who might convey it to them. Instead of Levelling as far as possible, every obstacle to the victorious progress of Truth, the Bill with an ignoble and unchristian timidity would circumscribe it with a wall of defense against the encroachments of error."

Madison argues against taxes to support Christianity because he believes that everyone needs to be a Christian, and the tax would hinder rather than advance that cause.

Application: That is not why politicians argue against taxation (or more precisely against tax-exempt status) to

support ministries today. Ours is a pantheistic world of pluralism in which every religious entity, each individual human heart included, is considered an equally authorized authority on equally valid religious belief. Whereas once we needed to consider every citizen equally free to worship, today we must consider every citizen's worship equally true. The first is the Christian blessing of religious freedom, the second is the pantheistic tyranny of pluralism.

So our America is not much like Madison's America, but that is ok in a way, because our America is a whole lot like Moses's Egypt. We know what to do in our time and place because it is the same kind of time and place that Moses and Aaron faced in 15th century B.C. Egypt. In our passage, God is confronting a world of religious pluralism with His request that His people be allowed to worship Him. In a world of pluralism like ours, God still can demonstrate who the true God is and who the true people of God are.

The magicians and Nile of Pharaoh represented the false polytheistic religions of many gods. One commentator mentioned that 80 or so gods have been counted by Egyptological studies of this period (Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*, 94). The Nile and the magicians could produce frogs, but they could not make them go away. God could and did. And we read of one place twice, where the frogs would not be removed – the Nile (vv. 9, 11). Egypt's greatest god would remain frog-infested even after the removal of the frogs, because the true God said so.

We have been called to be people of this true God in a day of great religious confusion. God desires to be worshipped without that religious confusion, and we must stand clear against it, determined to worship only the true Trinitarian God of the Bible, in His Spirit and in His Truth, while rejecting the deities created by man's imagination today.

III. God desires to be worshipped without the hardened heart (8:12-15).

Illustration: The last time my son went fishing and ate the fish he caught, he burned the carcasses of the fish in our fire pit. He did that because we have had some bad experiences with old fish carcasses and garbage cans at the parsonage. Maggot-infested, dead, and decaying fish carcasses stink.

Application: It turns out that the same is true when it comes to frogs (v. 14). In the book of Exodus, four things are said to smell bad:

- (1) metaphorically, the fragrance of the Israelites in the nostrils of Pharaoh (5:21);
- (2) literally, the Nile River's blood and dead fish (7:18, 21);
- (3) literally, these dead frogs (8:13); and
- (4) literally, rotting and worm-infested manna (16:20, 24).

I want us to learn two lessons as a side note from the stench of these piles of stinking frogs.

First, literal/physical stench is not a matter of personal opinion or taste, even though it is a category of aesthetics or beauty. God says in His word that these piles of frogs, the Nile, and rotting manna all smell bad, and so they do. If we say, "Well, you know, I really actually like that smell and hate the smell of flowers," we would be wrong. We would be just as wrong as if we were to call good evil and evil good, or the truth a lie and a lie the truth.

Second, this stench is associated with death and decay. Our noses help us to discern that death and decay are aesthetically ugly. So beauty is associated with life and sustenance, whereas ugliness is associated with death and decay. Sue's rose blossoms were new and fully alive a few weeks ago,

and truly beautiful. Now they are brown, decaying and uglier. Beauty comes from the life-giving creation of Genesis 1-2, and ugliness comes from the life-destroying Fall of Genesis 3. Do the things we count as beautiful come from God's life-giving creation, or man's life-destroying Fall? Does our taste in aesthetics match God's? Can we smell what stinks?

But as we come to the end of this passage's plague, once again God has been merciful, the frogs are gone, relief has finally come, and this time it is all because Pharaoh granted Moses permission for the people to worship. Would it not have been wonderful if the account ended here? Imagine reading only of the two plagues of Egypt, not ten!

But sadly, even more effective than political interference and religious confusion as a hindrance to free worship is the hardness of the human heart. Many this morning fail to worship the true God, not because of political interference or real religious confusion, but because of a hard heart.

Here again *hard* is the word for *heavy*. Pharaoh's heart becomes too heavy to move here, even for the change he had promised he would make. Jesus spoke of would-be disciples, who put their hand to the plow and look back instead of pushing forward. He said such a one is not fit for the kingdom of heaven (Luke 9:62). That was Pharaoh – not yet fit for heaven. Is it any of us?

What causes Pharaoh's reversal? Perhaps it was the pride and procrastination of getting to decide to wait for tomorrow (vv. 9-10). Or perhaps it was just the effect of newly found breathing room (v. 15). Whatever the case, Pharaoh has failed to move from where he started at the beginning of the second plague. He was one who denied the Lord His due worship then, and he continues to be now. Many in

our world refuse to worship freely Sunday after Sunday, not because of political interference, nor even because of religious confusion, but rather because of a heart that is too heavy to move, one that refuses to change.

Conclusion: I suppose had Moses told Pharaoh that the frogs would be removed after their three days of worship, Pharaoh would have let them go just to get rid of the frogs. But even then, his heart would have been unchanged.

Freedom-fighting frogs can deliver from political interference and even religious confusion for a few days, but only God's Spirit and God's truth can really change the human heart from hard immovable heaviness to softened light-hearted delight in the worship of our worthy Savior.

What is your heart like this morning? Will you learn the lesson of the frogs and determine to worship freely?

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*