



THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO EXODUS

Exodus 1

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This is the first in a series of sermons on the Old Testament book of Exodus. There's a vast amount of literature on Exodus, a seemingly infinite number of dissertations published on it. Everyone agrees that it's important because it's *the* defining epic of the people of God. Beyond that, however, few people agree on what it's *for*. That's a problem.

As a Christian embassy on Capitol Hill, we don't have the luxury of simply reading ancient religious texts for pleasure. As we begin this study of Exodus together, it's important that we consider its purpose. What's this *for*? What am we supposed to do with this ancient book?

There's an old story of a missionary who was sent to a particular tribe and arrived to discover that it was the custom of the women to go around topless. So, because he wanted the tribe to learn biblical virtues like fidelity and chastity, the missionary wrote home and asked that the ladies of his home church send blouses for the women of the tribe. In the ensuing months, as blouses arrived and were distributed, the missionary discovered to his horror that sexual promiscuity actually began to increase rather than decrease within the tribe. After further inquiry he learned something very important that he had previously overlooked: in that culture, blouses were to prostitutes what in our culture barber poles are to barbers. The missionary had the best of intentions, but he and the people had radically different ideas regarding what blouses were *for*.

I once went to a potluck dinner where I helped myself to various odds and ends from a vegetable platter. Then as I picked away at the broccoli and cauliflower and so on, I bit into an orange pepper that suddenly transported me into the center of the sun. I ran to the kitchen sink to put out the fire. After the worst had subsided, I made a search through the party to find out who it was that had laid out habanero peppers for the unsuspecting guests. When I finally found her, an innocent, sweet, and somewhat spacey young student in the group, I knew right away that she hadn't meant any harm. Why had she done it? She simply said, "I thought they were pretty." She had the best of intentions, but clearly we were of differing opinions about what the vegetables were *for*.

So what is Exodus *for*? As I'll explain in the rest of this sermon, Exodus is a proclamation of good news about salvation. In Exodus, God saves his people *from* bondage, *to* himself, *for* the sake of the world. That's why this entire sermon series is entitled the Gospel According to Exodus. It's good news for the sake of the world.

SALVATION FROM SLAVERY

Exodus is a story of salvation. As the story begins in Exodus 1, it picks up where Genesis left off. Most of Genesis was the story of one family descended from Abraham, through Isaac, through Jacob. At the end of Genesis, Jacob's family had immigrated from Canaan to Egypt to escape a great famine. Now at the beginning of Exodus, several generations have passed and Jacob's family has grown into the Hebrew nation.

In Exodus 1:8-14, there's a new Pharaoh over Egypt who is no longer content to allow the Hebrews to keep multiplying. He's concerned that if another empire were to attack Egypt, the Hebrews might rebel against him and side with Egypt's enemies. So the new Pharaoh undertakes a program of "immigration reform" rolled out in several phases.

First, he subjugates the Hebrews as his slaves, and he forces them into building two fortress cities for his Empire: Pithom and Raamses. And there are a number of indications in Exodus that this was the worst kind of slavery, perhaps even worse than the slavery of the American south, because even though Pharaoh enjoyed the economic benefit of slave labor, he was primarily motivated by a genocidal purpose. He wanted to get the Hebrews first, before they got him.

In the Hebrew text of Exodus, there is great emphasis on Israel *serv*ing Pharaoh, a word that is repeated five times in vv 13-14, like a hammer falling again and again and again. What's in view isn't the hardship of manual labor, since virtually all work in the ancient world was manual labor. Rather, the emphasis is on the bitterness and ruthlessness of the ways the Hebrews were treated. Pharaoh was a wicked tyrant who encouraged his foremen to be wicked tyrants. As a result, the Egyptians beat the Hebrews mercilessly.

As if that weren't enough, Pharaoh rolls out the next phase of his immigration reform in vv. 15-22: infanticide. He orders the Hebrew midwives to be his secret assassins and murder every male baby born to the Hebrews, which is further evidence of his genocidal intent. Then when the midwife plan doesn't work, Pharaoh imposes a final solution: a mandate that baby Hebrew boys be thrown into the Nile.

Recall that we began this message with a question about what Exodus is for. At the end of Exodus 1, there's no doubt that it's at least about salvation from slavery. Clearly, the Hebrews were in bondage to a brutal tyrant and in need of God's liberation. As we read on in Exodus, we will learn all about God's deliverance of his people from bondage, and it will be immediately applicable to our own circumstances. Apart from God's intervention, we too are enslaved to a brutal tyrant who beats us mercilessly. Satan is the Father of lies and the author of destruction. He is hell-bent on destroying us, and apart from Jesus we are helpless to stop him.

Thus, Exodus is in the first place about salvation, and particularly salvation *from*. The Hebrews were saved *from* death and destruction under Pharaoh. Likewise, when we turn to the Lord Jesus Christ, we are saved *from* death and destruction under Pharaoh's ultimate supervisor, Satan. Every Advent season we remember together the old promises about Jesus, written long before he was born, that he would bind up the brokenhearted, and give liberty to captives, and open the doors for those in prison, and proclaim the year of Jubilee (Isa 61). In Nazareth, at his hometown

synagogue, Jesus read this old promise and claimed it for himself, as his calling (Luke 4). Jesus saves us *from* sin, and death, and enslavement.

By the way, as we learn more about salvation *from*, don't think that the Christian application of the Exodus is only about deliverance in the afterlife, having nothing to do with the present. Don't think that what Jesus offers is merely a transaction, a get out of jail free card in exchange for your soul. On the contrary, the salvation Jesus offers is for today and tomorrow and the rest of our present lives, as well as for eternity. Do you have a toxic work environment? Is your boss or your co-worker driving you to despair? Call out to Jesus for deliverance *from* whatever it is that is oppressing you. Or maybe it's something else. Maybe you're in debt. Maybe you're in a relationship with someone who doesn't know and love Jesus. Maybe you're addicted to drugs or porn or something. Maybe you're trapped in depression or chronic illness. Call out to Jesus for deliverance *from* whoever or whatever is oppressing you.

In the next message in this series, we'll see how the Lord responds when we cry out to him. Here's a preview:

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew. Exodus 2:23-25.

God heard, God remembered, God saw, and God knew. If there's anything we learn from Exodus, it's that the Lord hears the cries of his people.

SALVATION TO GOD

Thus far what we've discovered is that at least part of what Exodus is *for* is salvation *from* bondage. But did you notice in Exodus 2:23 (above) how long it took for God's deliverance to come? The new Pharaoh in Exodus 1:8 who became a brutal tyrant over the Hebrews died in 2:23, before any report of God hearing and responding to the cries of his people. In other words, God did not act in a decisive way to deliver his people for at least a generation.

This is our experience as well. For every Christian I know whom God has instantaneously healed through anointing with oil and the laying on of hands, there's another whom I know who has received the same ministry and yet continues to suffer. For every Christian I know who has been delivered from a toxic workplace, there's another I know who is still suffering. etc.

This shows us that Exodus is a bit more complicated than simply a message of deliverance *from*. There's something else here that has to do with patience and perseverance in the midst of hardship, suggesting that God's chief aim isn't simply to make us happy. And there are important hints to this effect embedded within Exodus 1. Let's take a look at some of these.

First, note that the Hebrews kept flourishing in spite of Pharaoh's oppression. Exodus 1:12 says, *The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad!* Up to this point in the

book, there's been no explicit mention of God. And there's no explicit reference to him here, either. But how are we to understand what's happening here? Is this merely coincidence, or is God at work behind the scenes, in spite of Pharaoh's efforts to the contrary?

We find the first explicit reference to God in 1:17. Because the Hebrew midwives feared God more than Pharaoh, they let all the Hebrew children live. Consequently, in vv 20-21, *God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.* Or a better translation would be, "he established their households." Not only did the Hebrew mothers get to keep their babies, but even the midwives had babies in spite of Pharaoh's oppression. So there's a lesson here about God's presence and activity behind the scenes in difficult times, even when it seems like he doesn't hear us.

Did you also notice that the more the Hebrews prosper under oppression, the more foolish Pharaoh appears? It begins in 1:8, when this Pharaoh doesn't "know" Joseph, which is stupid because it was under Joseph's administration that Egypt became a great empire in the first place. Only a fool would reject that legacy. Next Pharaoh makes his plan to enslave the Hebrews, using the same kind of language as the foolish builders of the Tower of Babel. 1:10, *Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply.* He's anxious and increasingly acting out of fear rather than wisdom. Then the midwives really make a fool out of him, by claiming hilariously and insultingly that the Hebrew women are more "vigorous" than the Egyptians. So God ends up establishing even the midwives' households. This is a wonderful irony, because in Egyptian the name Pharaoh means "great house," yet in Exodus, it's the house of Israel (Jacob) and not the house of Pharaoh that becomes great. In fact, here in Exodus 1, it's the midwives whose names are mentioned: Shiphrah and Puah in 1:15. Meanwhile, Pharaoh's name isn't even recorded. Nobody remembers the king's name, but the two ladies who outfoxed him are remembered forever. All of this points to another lesson: God's justice will prevail. Sooner or later, the broken will be repaired, the wrong will be righted, and by the grace of God, the good will eventually and inevitably eclipse the bad.

Let's now return to the question of what Exodus is for, in light of the themes of perseverance and justice that we see here in Exodus 1. These themes point us beyond salvation *from*, and on *to* the character of God. In other words, Exodus is about not only deliverance *from* slavery, but also deliverance *to* the Lord.

Think about it this way: of all the manifold stories of deliverance throughout human history, why does the exodus of the Hebrews get special treatment? Why does it occupy this prominent position in the Bible? At least in part because the Exodus wasn't only an exodus *from* Pharaoh, but it was also an exodus *to* the Lord.

Flip over to Exodus 14, in which the Hebrews safely cross through the Red Sea and the chariots of Egypt are drowned in the waters. That's where the story of the exodus ends. If you'll keep turning pages, you'll see that Exodus goes on for many more chapters, all the way to chapter 40. What is all that about? At least in part it's the story of who God is, and what it's like to be in covenant with him. These former slaves of Pharaoh, without any written book of Scripture, must learn who their Savior is, who they've been delivered *to*.

Of course, salvation *to* the Lord is also relevant and applicable to us today. When we become Christians, we're not merely saved *from* death, but also saved *to* Jesus and resurrection life through our union with him. We become his disciples and fix our eyes on him. He is our King and our guide and our example. We love him and follow him.

Those who have struggled with addiction know that it's very difficult to kick a habit as long as it remains central in one's affections. But when you set your heart on something or someone else instead of your addiction, love becomes the impetus for change. It's the same in the Christian life, as we'll see in the remaining chapters of Exodus. Devotion to and love for the Lord emboldens and empowers us for change.

So what is Exodus *for*? It's a story of deliverance from bondage, but it's also much more. It's every bit as much about what we're saved *to* as what we're saved *from*. Through our study of Exodus, I pray that our love for the Lord Jesus might grow deeper and stronger than ever.

SALVATION FOR THE SAKE OF THE WORLD

Yet even summarizing the purpose of Exodus in terms of salvation *from* and *to* is inadequate, because it fails to capture the overarching purpose of Exodus. Exodus is more than a rescue story and it's more than a love story.

As we'll see, God's chief ambition in Exodus is not to make his people happy. This is not to say that God is a wicked tyrant like Pharaoh. Nothing could be further from the truth. It's just that God's love for us, and our love for him, isn't all consuming. Or to put it another way, there's more to life with God than snuggling.

Exodus 15 is the capstone to the exodus account. It's a wonderful praise song that the Hebrews sing to the Lord after he rescues them from Egypt. It's all about how the chariots of Egypt were drowned deep at the bottom of the sea. Perhaps it's a stretch to liken this song to snuggling with God, but it is the closest thing to a warm fuzzy that we'll find in Exodus. It's a celebration of praise, a party between God and his people.

But after the song comes to an end, there's more to life with God than snuggling or celebration or praise. In fact, there's a certain rhythm to life with him, sometimes in motion, and sometimes still. In chapters 16-18, the Hebrews are tested three times while on the move with the Lord. And each time they learn a little better how to trust and obey and depend upon him. Then in chapter 19 they reach Mt Sinai and they come to a full stop. It's when they're stopped that God speaks to them. So there's something even way back then about being still and quiet before the Lord that allows us to hear what it is that God is saying. In any case, what God is doing with them in the wilderness is training and preparing them for mission, for the sake of the world.

That this mission is ultimately the purpose of Exodus is hidden in plain sight in the preamble, in Exodus 1:1-7, which concludes in this way: *But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.* Exodus 1:7.

If the language of verse 7 seems vaguely familiar, that's because it's echoing the creation mandate from the preamble to Genesis, found in Genesis 1:28, in which humanity is made in the image of God and given the dual responsibility of multiplication and stewardship. Mankind is told to "multiply and fill the earth" in order to steward it as God's ambassadors (which is what it means to be an image of God).

God's plan for the world was stymied in the Fall, when humanity turned away from the Lord and became subject to sin and death. So in Genesis 12 God called Abraham to himself, and promised that he would multiply his descendants into a great nation, and through him all the nations of the world would be blessed.

In Exodus 1:1-7 we see God keeping his promise to Abraham and also God's determination to accomplish what he set out to do in Genesis 1. From time to time we hear the Old Testament prophets foretelling a time when God will fill the earth "with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." (Hab 2:14). What are they talking about? They're looking forward to that day when God's people will have multiplied and filled the earth, and be faithfully serving him as his image bearers, his ambassadors. Make no mistake; this is God's mission. This is what he will most certainly do, and Exodus is merely the next chapter in the story of how God will do it.

The point that I'm driving at here is that Exodus is *for* more than salvation from slavery, and even more than salvation to God. Ultimately, it's *for* the salvation of the world. God saved the Hebrews *from* Pharaoh, *to* himself, *for* the sake of the world. And, if you're a Christian, he saved you *from* sin, *to* himself, *for* the sake of the world.

The mission, for the sake of the world, is explained more clearly when the Hebrews arrive at Mt Sinai:

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Exodus 19:4-6

Why are they to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation? *For* the sake of the world, so that all the other nations might also come to him. God will save the Hebrews *from* Pharaoh, *to* himself, *for* the sake of the world. And, if you're a Christian, he saved you *from* sin, *to* himself, *for* the sake of the world.

The Apostle Paul says the same thing in a different way in his letter to the Ephesians:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:8-10.

The "good works God prepared beforehand" were spelled out in Genesis 1:28. We are to multiply and fill the earth as God's ambassadors and governors of the world he made.

CONCLUSION

Every year we have our Annual Parish Retreat in the spring. We like to go out to a beautiful retreat center in Middleburg, Virginia. Our only complaint is that there's simply not enough space to accommodate our growing church.

Imagine if God provided us with the resources to purchase a new property and develop a new and even better retreat facility. What if we found and purchased the perfect site, and drew up plans to build the perfect lodge, and then on the first day of construction, we discovered that the site was contaminated with toxic waste? Imagine then that we set about to clean up the site, and after a great many years it was declared free and clear of the waste. What then? Was our goal simply to deliver the land *from* toxic waste? No. We bought the property for a reason. We worked to deliver it *from* toxic waste, *to* our church, *for* building the perfect retreat center. The mission wouldn't be finished until then.

God's plan from the very beginning has been to turn our entire world into an enormous retreat center, a global temple. He has always intended to fill it with the knowledge of his glory, as the waters cover the sea. But just as he was breaking ground, God found a toxic waste problem of global proportions. Sin and death stood in his way. So the Lord set to work at great cost first to clean up this waste, and then to accomplish what he originally set out to do. In other words, God set out to deliver his people *from* bondage, *to* himself, *for* the sake of the world.

If we sum up Jesus' death on the cross simply in terms of toxic cleanup, we are missing God's larger purposes in salvation. In other words, Jesus didn't die only to give us salvation *from*, but also salvation *to*, and ultimately salvation *for* the sake of the world.

The Gospel According to Exodus prepares us to understand Jesus' greater Exodus. It began with the incarnation, when he left his home in order to enter in to our world of toxic waste. As we read in Matthew 2 in the story of the Magi, Jesus was born under the nose of one like Pharaoh, a new tyrant who did not know him. Herod "the Great" was another anxious king who was determined to get God's people before God's people got him. So he decreed infanticide for those he was supposed to govern, and the babies of Bethlehem were massacred. Yet just as God had saved another Hebrew named Joseph thousands of years prior, this time he led Jesus and Mary with her husband Joseph down to Egypt, where they too escaped destruction. Then after Herod died, God heard the cries of his people, and sent Jesus back to Israel, to continue his exodus to the cross, to deliver his people *from* the toxic waste of sin, *to* God, *for* the sake of the world.