

REDEMPTION

Exodus 12-15

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After 400 years of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites finally escaped from bondage. Their tormentors were dead, washed up on the shore of the Red Sea. They were free! So what did they do? They sang a praise song to God:

*"I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.
The LORD is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him.
The LORD is a warrior;
the LORD is his name. (Exodus 15:1-3 ESV)*

Exodus 12-15 tells the exciting story of the tenth and final plague on the firstborn, then Israel's thrilling escape through the Red Sea, and finally the destruction of Pharaoh's army. It's one of the most gripping parts of the Bible. But at the height of the action there are also several pauses to talk about liturgy. Exodus 12-13 provide instructions for three different feasts: Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the consecration of the Firstborn. People sometimes get tripped up reading through this section, because so much of it is devoted to worship. Secular commentators ask, "Why ruin an exciting chase scene with liturgical instructions? That's no way to tell a story." Because of this, they say that the exodus story must be a religious invention, a mythology to explain ancient Jewish religious practices like the Passover.

What they don't understand is the Gospel According to Exodus: not only are we delivered *from* death and destruction, but we're also delivered *to* the Lord, *for* the sake of the world. Skeptics wonder, "what's all this worship stuff here in the middle of this deliverance story?" But those who've come to faith in the Lord know that worship is what people who are delivered *to* the Lord do. And whenever people in the Bible worship, there's always food and music. So that's what we find throughout this wonderful story of redemption. Food and music, for future generations to be able to remember and celebrate what God did when he redeemed his people from death and destruction, to himself, for the sake of the world. In what follows, we'll focus on these feasts of redemption, because they help us understand not only *what* happened in the exodus but also *why* it happened.

THE CONSECRATION OF THE FIRSTBORN: DON'T FORGET WHAT YOU'RE WORTH.

“Redemption” is used frequently in Christian circles, but we rarely think about what it means. Recently our family tried to switch mobile phone carriers. After initiating the switch, our old carrier immediately cancelled our service, but then refused to unlock our phones. I spent hours online with them, pleading for them to release our phones from bondage. Five days later, I made contact with a kind customer service representative by the name of Jesus Cortéz (no kidding)! Jesus truly had mercy upon us, but Jesus was not our redeemer. Rather, I was the redeemer, because I had to pay the early termination fee in order to get our phones released from bondage. The debt was paid, and our phones were redeemed!

Redemption, then, at least in the biblical sense, involves buying the freedom of someone or something. It's a ransom payment. And that's what happened when God delivered the Israelites from Egypt. He redeemed them.

But why? After God's triumph in the plagues, why would he need to pay off Pharaoh in order to redeem his people from slavery? Does this mean God has to pay off Satan in order to save us? Not at all. God doesn't owe Satan or Pharaoh anything. They've stolen from him, and the only thing he “owes” them is his justice. God won't pay off Satan or Pharaoh. Rather, in his justice, God will pay off himself.

Let me explain. Everywhere you turn in the Bible there's blood, and all of it points to three foundational principles regarding God plan to rescue humanity from sin:

1. All people have sinned against God.
2. The wages of sin is death, for everyone, young and old, rich and poor, tiny and great.
3. God in his mercy will accept a perfect substitute, the death of a sinless one to redeem the life of another.

We see these principles at work in the first pages of the Bible, when mankind fell into sin. Instead of suffering death as the wages of sin, they were clothed with animal skins—the first animal sacrifice, providing a literal covering for sin. From that point forward in the Bible, every sacrifice foreshadows Good Friday, when Jesus Christ was sacrificed as a substitute for sinners. His death paid the ransom for all those who put their faith in him.

There's no way around it. This blood sacrifice business in the Bible is repulsive. I often wonder why God's justice would require something so macabre. I'm offended that God would require something so gruesome and horrific to satisfy his justice, aren't you? And that's exactly how God wants for us to feel. He wants us to take note of our radically different viewpoints regarding our own sin. We aren't offended by our sin. We don't take it seriously. But God does. For God, it's deadly serious. We don't think that the ways we've hurt others—and the ways that we have rebelled against him—are really that bad. God, on the other hand, regards every act of rebellion as death. God is offended by it because it is so costly. From God's perspective, sin always, always leads to death, one way or another. Either our death, or the death of His Son.

So what does this have to do with the exodus? The presenting problem in Exodus is that Pharaoh has stolen from God. The solution of this problem will come as God takes back what rightfully belongs to him, and he executes justice upon Pharaoh. It's going to be a "teachable moment," when God demonstrates for all the world what it costs to redeem a life.

We get the first hint of what God will do early in Exodus, in 4:22-23. There God describes his plan to reclaim what Pharaoh had stolen from him. He tells Moses to summarize his plan before Pharaoh this way:

“Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.” If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.” (Exodus 4:22-23 ESV)

This is the first warning of the payment God would demand. It's important because this idea of all of Israel being God's firstborn means that everyone among them—man, woman, and child—was valuable to him. God would redeem them all.

In the ten plagues, God gave Pharaoh ten chances to repent and pledge allegiance to him. Throughout that time, Pharaoh and all Egypt could have repented and they could have joined with the Israelites in worshiping the Lord. But Pharaoh's heart was hard, and so he ignored every warning, and eventually the LORD came in the tenth and final plague. God claimed all the firstborn in the land who weren't redeemed, from Pharaoh's house down to his prisoners, and even the firstborn of the livestock in the field.

But the Israelites were protected. How did it happen? Each family took (12:3) a spotless lamb and killed it, and then (12:7) they spread its blood on the doorposts and the lintel of their houses. That night they hid inside their homes, beneath the blood of the spotless lamb:

The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt. (Exodus 12:13 ESV)

Notice that the Lord said, “The blood shall be a sign *for you*.” It was an outward sign, marking their family as having their ransom paid in full. And it was a sign of what was to come, when the blood of Jesus the spotless lamb would cover over all of God's people (1 Pet 1:18-19), marking them as having their ransom paid in full.

God struck Egypt with the tenth plague, and all the firstborn of Egypt died.

Then [Pharaoh] summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, “Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the LORD, as you have said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone, and bless me also!” (Exodus 12:31-32 ESV)

Pharaoh finally released them! But before we hear the rest of the story about how they crossed through the Red Sea, there are instructions for worship. Let's take a look at what is prescribed for the Consecration of the Firstborn.

You shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD's. (Exodus 13:12 ESV)

Since worship in the Bible almost always included food and drink, “setting apart to the LORD” the firstborn meant offering it to God as a sacrifice, i.e. barbecuing it and eating it in God’s presence with other brothers and sisters in the Lord. It was meant to be a time of worship and feasting, so that God’s people wouldn’t forget their worth: the death of one for the life of another.

There were also specific regulations regarding their firstborn children:

Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. (Exodus 13:14 ESV)

Thankfully the Israelites didn’t have to sacrifice their firstborn children! Instead, they could redeem them by means of a substitute, by sacrificing a spotless lamb instead. Again, it was a time of worship and feasting, so that God’s people wouldn’t forget what they’re worth.

Christian worship communicates the same thing: you are valuable to God. God gave his only Son, Jesus Christ, as a ransom for you. His perfect life was snuffed out, in exchange for our resurrection. How then should we respond to him?

Each year during our wonderful Easter Vigil service, my favorite part is the Exsultet, which is an explosion of praise when we proclaim the resurrection of Christ. One line in the Exsultet praises the Lord for sending his Son as a ransom for us; this line is something that churches sometimes exclude from their Vigil services because they’re offended by substitutionary atonement. “How wonderful and beyond our knowing, O God, is your mercy and loving-kindness to us, that to redeem a slave, you gave a Son.” It’s the best line because it reminds us of the heart of the Gospel. The Lord Jesus died to redeem us. Don’t forget what you’re worth. “You were bought with a price.” (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23). How will you respond to him?

PASSOVER: DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME.

As we’ve seen throughout the Gospel According to Exodus, we’re not only delivered *from* death and destruction. We’re also delivered *to* the Lord. And so the Passover is another feast described in Exodus 12-13, pointing us forward toward communion with the Lord. The instructions for Passover begin in Exodus 12, where the Lord introduces the feast this way:

“This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you.” (Exodus 12:2 ESV)

Do you see what’s happening here? God is giving them an entirely new calendar. Redemption marks the zero point on their timeline as a people. Just as engaged couples become a new family after their wedding, from the exodus onward, the Israelites were to be a new family, with new customs, living a new life in communion with their Redeemer.

In the subsequent verses, God explains how they were to prepare the Passover feast, and then how they were to eat it, and then what they were to say in subsequent years when their kids asked what it all meant. All of these details were intended to help them establish Passover as a family tradition through which successive generations would be catechized in the faith of the Lord.

The idea of a family tradition assumes that there's a recognizable family who observes it. That's why a substantial portion of ch. 12 is devoted to identifying who is in the family, and prohibiting those outside the family from eating the Passover with them. Passover wasn't for foreigners of any variety, even if they had lived with the family for years. It didn't matter how close they were, they couldn't participate. There was only one exception:

If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. (Exodus 12:48 ESV)

The word translated "come near" is a key word in Exodus, and *the* key word in this passage. It's the same word that was used when Moses was coming near to the burning bush, and God told him to take off his sandals. Exodus 12:48 says that anyone may "come near" and commune with God in the Passover feast, but they must first take the plunge and fully become a part of God's people. No one who is still technically outside the faith is allowed to participate. Why? Because only those who have identified themselves with the Lord should "come near" in this communion meal with the Lord. That's why each week in our communion service we make clear that it is only for those who have been baptized in the name of Jesus. All are welcome, all may come, so long as they have undergone this external identification with the Lord.

Passover, then, represented a new calendar, a new family tradition, and a new family. And the purpose of Passover was twofold: to remind them of what God had done in the exodus, and also to renew and refresh their relationship with him in the present. It's analogous with the Lord's Supper today. When the Lord Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me," we're not only to remember his crucifixion, when he ransomed us from death, but also to celebrate Easter and enjoy his presence with us, as our savior and friend. It's both a memorial and a celebration, of the death and resurrection of Christ who is now here with us.

But why is this so important? Why do we need to draw near to God, over and over again in this way? He saved us, didn't he? Isn't it a huge waste of time to keep coming back to him in worship again and again? No! When we're near him, he stands between us and our enemies. He protects us, and we find peace and safety in him. We see this in the thrilling chase scene in Exodus 14.

On the second day after the Israelites set out on their journey, they encamped by the shore of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:1-4). Meanwhile, (14:5-9) Pharaoh didn't know when to leave well enough alone. Using the latest and best instruments of war, he pursued the Israelites with an awesome array of soldiers and chariots. And so, the Israelites began to come unglued:

When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD. (Exodus 14:10-14 ESV)

This time, it was their terrifying arch-enemy Pharaoh who was “coming near.” What did they do?

They said to Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians?’ For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” (Exodus 14:11-12 ESV)

In other words, they panicked. In fear, they fell into a false dichotomy in which there were only two options: either slavery under Pharaoh, or death on the shore of the sea. But Moses had a lot more experience with the Lord, and so he reassured them of what God would do.

And Moses said to the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.” (Exodus 14:11-14 ESV)

Two days earlier when they set out on their journey, the Lord made his presence known to them as he had to Moses earlier at Mt Sinai: through a fire that burned but did not go out. By day it was visible as a plume of smoke, by night it was seen as a flame. Up to this point, the fire/cloud had been in front of them. But after they cried out to the Lord, something happened:

Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night. (Exodus 14:19-20 ESV)

Why couldn't Pharaoh and his armies "come near" God's people? Because the Lord had moved in between them. God didn't scold them for cowardice. Rather, he moved between his people and the enemy as if to say, "if Pharaoh is going to get to you, he's going to have to get past me first."

On the morning of the third day, God parted the Red Sea and more than a million people crossed to the other side as if on dry land. Then the Egyptians followed them in and the LORD closed the sea back upon them. At dawn, instead of seeing Pharaoh's army coming and being terrified, they saw Pharaoh's army washed up on the shore, and they were moved to praise.

How about you? Have you seen God's salvation at dawn on the morning of the third day? If so, then do you find yourself free from the need to worship? Or do you find even greater need to draw near, and to stand behind him, with the Lord between us and every enemy?

If you're a Christian, then you've been redeemed *from* death *to* the Lord. He loves you, and so he wants you to come to him. To listen to him through his Word, and to feast with him at his table. He wants for your kids to grow up knowing him. He wants for us to be a unified family, one people, one Lord, one faith, one baptism. That's why he calls us to worship again and again. Do this, he says, in remembrance of me.

UNLEAVENED BREAD: COME, FOLLOW ME

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is the last feast that's described briefly in this passage. It's a seven-day continuation of Passover. Each year, for seven days after Passover, the Israelites were to keep their homes clean of yeast, and they were to eat flatbread as a way of remembering the sudden call of the Lord.

God sent the Tenth and final plague on the firstborn of Egypt at midnight. Then Pharaoh released the Israelites and they were able to leave quickly the next morning. The last thing that they had time for was to set out their bread to rise. Six hundred thousand men, together with at least as many women and children, had to drop everything and follow the LORD. No time to iron their shirts or to fix their hair. It was simply time to go.

"A mixed multitude" joined them (Exodus 12:38). This refers to all the Egyptians and others who decided, after seeing God's supremacy in the plagues, to throw their lot in with the LORD and his people. (That's why provision is made for them to pledge allegiance to the LORD and to partake of the Passover meal in the future.)

In the Gospels, there are at least half a dozen episodes and parables that make the same point about being ready to follow Jesus when he calls. When Jesus encounters Peter and Andrew, James and John on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he calls them to leave behind business and family and follow him. When Jesus encounters Levi, the tax collector, again he must abandon he's lucrative and shady profession and immediately follow the Lord. When other would-be disciples say to him in one form or another, "I'll follow you when it's convenient," Jesus says in effect, "No. It's now or never. Come, follow me."

The Feast of Unleavened Bread is a foretaste of Jesus' call, a reminder that the Lord bids us to leave everything else behind and follow him. This can be terribly unsettling, because it sounds like we're being asked to be irresponsible and throw our lives away by doing something foolish. But it's not intended in that way at all. Rather, it's meant to be good news for three reasons:

1. More than anything else, we were made to follow Jesus. We were created to be with him. Wherever he goes is where we want to be. It's certain to be the most satisfying and joyful path for our lives.
2. Because he's the Lord, he will take care of everything as he takes care of us. If what you're working on when he calls is important, he won't let it die or fail. Remember, he's restoring and redeeming the whole world.
3. Finally, and most importantly, it means we don't have to get "ready" to follow him. In fact, no matter how much we study or prepare, we'll never be more ready to follow him than we are right now, because following him is intrinsic to our nature. We were made to follow him, and we learn as we go.

Following the LORD could mean a big move, going somewhere far away in order to serve him in a different place. More often than not, however, it means staying put and following him within the context and relationships he has already given us. The main point isn't where, but simply an outward orientation, moving from selfishness to selflessness in his service.

Through Jesus Christ, God offers us redemption from death and destruction, communion with himself, and a missional life, with him supplying our every need. What do you say? Are you ready? Hear him as he bids you, "Come, follow me."