

Part 1: An Overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament

B. From Slavery to Freedom

4. Exodus from Egypt

We continue our overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament with a three-part look at Israel's journey from slavery to freedom, beginning with their exodus from Egypt. This exodus is recounted, appropriately enough, in the book of the same name, which picks up the story of Jacob's descendants living in Egypt about 3 centuries after the death of Joseph. The Israelites had continued to multiply rapidly; this was evidence of the fulfillment of God's first promise to Abraham. But it also was a cause for concern to Egypt's rulers, who had forgotten Joseph and how much he had done for Egypt.

As a result, the Israelites were progressively enslaved. Pharaoh didn't trust them; yet, he wanted them around to build Egypt's cities, storehouses, highways, and water and sewage systems. The work was heavy, the food substandard, the heat oppressive, the housing uncomfortable, and disease everywhere. In short, Hebrew lives were bitter (1:14) under the cruelty and oppression of Egyptian overseers. *But, Exodus 1:12 says, the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly.* Pharaoh grew increasingly concerned—so much so that he ordered the newborn male children of the Hebrews to be killed at birth.

During this time of increasing oppression Abraham's descendants wondered, "Where is God?" It may have been that they remembered what God had promised Abraham?

- I will make you into a great nation.
- I will bless you and make your name great.
- I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse.
- All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

But they didn't see any evidence that God remembered those promises or that he was even concerned for them. They groaned in their misery and Ex. 2:23 says their cry for help went up to God and was heard by him. And Scripture goes on to say that God remembered his covenant with Abraham. It wasn't that he had forgotten it; this simply signals that God was now ready to proceed to the next chapter in the fulfillment of his promises to Abraham.

However, the evidences of God's help would not be seen, except in limited ways, for another eighty years. God began by arranging for the birth and saving from death, of Moses. He used an arrogant tyrant, Pharaoh himself, to protect and educate the one who would one day be the point person in the defeat of Egypt. So, although the Israelites did not know it, help was on the way. A savior was being prepared for his role. It was important, for example, that Moses understand the culture of his day so that he could appreciate in his life's calling, the radical nature of God's counter-culture. It was also important that he understand the language and religion of Egypt so that he could later strike at the heart of their opposition to God in ways the Egyptians could understand.

Whether or not Moses had any idea of the role God was preparing him for he seems to have had the heart for it. He suffered with his people in his spirit even while he enjoyed benefits they could only dream about. And he longed for the day when he could do something about the injustices they suffered.

One day his chance came; he took revenge on an Egyptian who was abusing a Hebrew. But if Moses didn't know it right away, he soon found out that not even his own people thought he was a hero for it. Nor were they willing to accept his leadership. They asked: *Who made you ruler and judge over us?* His impulse was right, but the timing and methods were wrong, and Moses had to flee for his life. At the age of 40 he became a fugitive. He had to escape the long reach of Pharaoh and didn't stop until he reached Midian. There, God would work on him for another 40 years, teaching him the ways of the desert, and teaching him patience.

All this time Moses felt out of place. He had been out of place in Egypt; he was out of place in Midian. And, like his enslaved relatives back in Egypt he wondered where God was and what he was like. Finally, one day in his 80th year of life, Moses began to get more of an answer than he probably wanted. He was tending his flocks in the shadow of Mt. Horeb when he saw what looked like a bush on fire, but not being burned up. Checking it out, he was surprised and terrified by a message from someone who identified himself as the God of the Patriarchs.

I'm sure that Moses was happy to learn that God was concerned about the suffering of his covenant people in Egypt, but he was less thrilled when he heard that God had chosen him to take the lead in setting them free. Moses offered objections. First he protested that he was not fit for the task. And when God told him to tell his people that the God of their fathers had sent him, he wanted to know more about what this God was like.

In response, God identified himself by his covenant name (Yahweh). He said that Moses and the Israelites would come to know more about what this name meant, i.e. to know more about what Yahweh was like—by witnessing his coming actions on their behalf. The meaning of what God told Moses is something like this: "I Am who I will show myself to be in rescuing my people from their oppressors and delivering them into the land of the Canaanites."

Just who would God show himself to be in the coming events? He would show himself to be personal, one who not only heard and saw the misery of his people, but one who was also merciful and compassionate toward them. Moses also began to learn too that God is faithful, that He doesn't forget promises. Before and after Yahweh revealed his name to Moses, he identified himself as the God of their fathers, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This was not a different god; he was the one whom the patriarchs had worshiped. But he was more personal, merciful and faithful than they had imagined.

Moses also began to learn something of the holiness of God. That was driven home to him in the fiery sign of God's presence and in God's requirement for Moses to remove his shoes. It's no wonder that Moses was frightened. And the more he and Israel came to know about God's holiness in the years ahead, the more they would be astonished that Yahweh, as holy as he was, made it possible for people to live in his presence without themselves being consumed. All of this is captured in the name Yahweh, God's covenant name. God thus guaranteed his continuing interest in his people.

Not that this was all perfectly clear to Moses at first. But God would prove the truth of his name. So with a few more ineffectual protests and some signs from God and the promise of the support of Aaron, Moses left Midian to journey back to Egypt. There, as God commanded, he and Aaron met with Pharaoh and conveyed to him Yahweh's demand that they be given leave to travel into the desert to offer sacrifices to the Lord.

Pharaoh could hardly believe what he was hearing, and rejected the demand outright. After that, the conflict between Pharaoh and God escalated in an ever more tragic sequence of demands and refusals in which plagues from God were unleashed upon Egypt. It took ten plagues, each one worse than the preceding, to complete the breakdown of Pharaoh's resistance. The Creator who had so long before brought order out of chaos, now reversed that gracious act by replacing order in Egypt with chaos.

This showed Egypt and Israel who was really in charge. It was not an ego trip for God, for the fate of his universe hung in the balance. And God did not quit until everyone came to see who the rightful authority was. Finally, after God's terrible judgment on the firstborn of Egypt Pharaoh gave up and released Yahweh's people.

At the beginning the Israelites had shut their ears and hearts to Moses' announcements of God's purpose, but by the end they, like Moses and Aaron, were ready to do just what the Lord commanded (12:50). The faith of Moses' people grew, their depression was lifted, their hope was roused as they saw the power that Yahweh demonstrated over Egypt.

And through all this, the attitudes of the people of Egypt were changing too. They began quite satisfied with the way Israel was forced to serve them. But they soon began to see that they were no match for Israel's God. In the end Egypt's people got sick and tired of fighting God. Some of the Egyptians even joined the Israelites when they departed Egypt, that joining being a symbol not only of changed political allegiance but of a change in who they worshiped.

But the conflict that had raged in Egypt was not yet entirely over. Pharaoh changed his mind yet again and chased Israel to the Sea. And with that, the Israelites lost their faith, doubting that God would be able to finish what he had started. Moses was the mediator in all this. To answer the terror of Israel, he gave the answer that men and women of faith must always give in the face of despair (14:13-14), "*Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today....The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.*"

When Moses spoke those words of encouragement to the people, he spoke by faith, not by sight. He didn't take a vote to determine majority opinion. Rather, praying all the while, he exercised the faith that God had given him, to call the people to faith. You'd almost think that Moses knew ahead of time what God was going to do.

But he didn't. He was not only ignorant about how God would deliver Israel. He didn't even know that God would deliver Israel. He had God's promise; and he had faith, but that's all the guarantee he had. So even though he may have said it confidently, Moses was all the while praying his heart out. "Lord, don't make me out to be a liar. Do what I said you would do."

And God did. He moved between Israel and Egypt to keep them separate while Israel passed through the sea to safety. And what God was doing on Israel's behalf became more and more evident as the day progressed. As they followed the lead of Yahweh, the foes that pursued them got no closer.

The attention of God, which meant favor for his people, threw the enemy into confusion (14:24). The wheels of Egypt's state-of-the-art chariots came off and the soldiers recognized the hand of Yahweh in it. They recognized that it was the Lord who had thrown them into confusion because he was fighting for Israel.

It was the same pillar of fire and cloud that stood between Egypt and Israel. It was the same God who looked down on both. But what meant life for the one meant disaster for the other.

This is a picture of Judgment Day when we all will stand before the same God. Some, when they see Christ coming on the clouds of heaven will say, "Come Lord Jesus, Come quickly." Others will call out to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" But then it will be too late to change sides.

When Egypt's army realized what was happening, they tried to flee, but it was too late. This mighty military power that dared stand against Yahweh and challenge his right to the service of his people, was overthrown and its army drowned in the sea. The victory was complete. Yahweh's power and faithfulness, and his character as a kind, merciful and powerful God, in question until now, was finally proved beyond doubt.

And with that, Israel's doubts about God were answered again. God did know what he was doing after all. He was faithful to his word; he did have the power and integrity to follow through on his promises. He was indeed, Yahweh, the faithful, covenanting God. Israel saw this for the first time, and for the first time, we read (14:31), "*the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.*" Ownership of the people was finally and firmly established.

From that point on, Israel was to meet up with other tyrants who, like Pharaoh, wished to separate Abraham's descendants from their God and return them to false service. But Israel, at least at this point, had it right. Freedom is not simply the escape from an oppressive ruler; it involves whole-hearted allegiance to the rightful ruler. In other words, freedom is not so much a successful declaration of independence as it is a proper declaration of dependence upon the Creator and Redeemer of the World.

After the Red Sea crossing, God led his people back to the place he had revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush – Mt. Horeb (or Sinai). There he gave them the Constitution of the Kingdom he was establishing—the Ten Commandments and many other laws to guide his covenant people in the conduct of their lives. And some of the most detailed of God's guidelines, as detailed in the last third of the book of Exodus, involved the construction and dedication of the tabernacle.

You might wonder about the reasons for the tabernacle. Why was God so very particular about the conditions under which he would be willing to live with Israel? Simply put, it's the same reason he had to exclude Adam and Eve from Paradise after their bid for independence. There is no room in God's holy presence for sin.

God had graciously not separated himself completely from sinful humanity; he was still present and graciously providing what his world and its inhabitants needed for day-to-day life. But things were messed up. The earth did not easily yield its produce and people were constantly in conflict with each other and constantly losing sight of the purpose for which they had been spared. People then had what all people have today, what has been described as a god-shaped vacuum in themselves that longed to be filled. But they needed help to know the true God.

God provided that help by concentrating on one man, Abraham, with whom He would live, and whom He would make into a great nation, and through whom He would bless the whole world.

But it was not easy for, if the Exodus stories show us anything, they show that Abraham's descendants were far from sinless; rather, they were inclined to disobedience. God had to insulate himself from such sin, not so much for his own benefit—he would not have been harmed by contact—but the people would not have been able to live in the presence of his holiness.

True, God had made special arrangements for Moses to see his glory without dying, but it was common knowledge that "You cannot see God and live." So the tabernacle was God's way of reestablishing a holy place in the midst of an unholy people. That's the point of all this attention to the design and construction of the tent of meeting. To allow his holy presence among the people without condemning them to death, God prescribed a tent of meeting, and holy furnishings, and a tribe of priests, and a set of careful rituals.

And when the people had obeyed all of Yahweh's instructions and the work was finished, then it happened, "*then the cloud [the presence of Yahweh] covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle*" (40:34). And the people knew that God was in their midst.

God stayed there, with Israel in all their travels. And nobody said, "What a lot of bother." This was the greatest thing the people could imagine, Yahweh living in their midst, protecting them and leading them wherever they would go. Indeed, this was nothing less than God reestablishing his presence on earth. Once again, as it had been with Adam and Eve in Paradise, God communed with the people who were the crown of his creation, at least with a representative portion of them. It wasn't quite the same; the Garden of Eden had been a perfect place with sinless people and this was the wilderness and a bunch of people who would prove far from sinless. But it was a significant advance in God's plan to reclaim his whole Creation.

How different was this situation from the godlessness that prevailed on the earth not that long after God had purified it with the flood. And how different it was from the life enjoyed by the Patriarchs, even though they experienced many blessings from God.

And how different it was from the predicament in which Israel found herself at the beginning of the book of Exodus. There, enslaved and bitter, not seeing or even sensing God's presence. Here, free, at peace, and attended by the constant presence of Yahweh.

The Israelites had started out not knowing much at all about God, and they came to know him as Yahweh their deliverer, Yahweh their King and Governor, Yahweh the gracious and forgiving God, and now, Yahweh, the God who was present, who had come to live right where they lived.

Sounds almost too good to be true doesn't it? Well it was, and that's why we have the wilderness years, which are the subject of the next lecture. The problems during that time weren't due to any lack of effort on God's part; they simply reflected the persistent sinfulness of the human heart—a problem that would not be adequately addressed until a better mediator and savior than Moses came along.