

The Way Through the Wilderness



A Study of Exodus Chapter 1-20

David B. Brown

The Way Through the Wilderness

I learned a song as a child that featured these straightforward words:

“My Lord knows the way through the wilderness, all I have to do is follow.
Strength for today is my always, and all I need for tomorrow.
My Lord knows the way through the wilderness, all I have to do is follow.”

As I reflect on these words, it appears to me that this is the message of Exodus. The LORD reveals himself to his children, rescues them from bondage in Egypt and leads them through the wilderness. In the process the LORD demonstrates his mighty power, his gracious provision, his holy pattern for worship and his promised presence.

If it is true that the LORD knows the way, then the second line is equally true. “All I have to do is follow.” Exodus says a great deal about following this LORD who knows the way. He called the Israelites to follow his directions on Passover evening, follow him through the Red Sea as he revealed the way by cloud and fire, follow his commandments for living as his holy people and follow his instructions for true worship.

The Book of Exodus has been called “the heart of the Old Testament”. Its message is fulfilled in the New Testament. It would be hard to find a single major topic of the Old or New Testament that is not exemplified in the book of Exodus. The Key to Exodus is in the name of the LORD, His supremacy and his saving action.” (Cole:18-19) Exodus looks back to promises made in the Patriarchal Age, looks forward to the arrival in the Promised Land and looks beyond to the final fulfillment of God’s promises in heaven. “When the song of the redeemed rises in heaven, it is the Song of Moses and the Lamb.” (Rev 15:3)

I learned many of the familiar lesson from Exodus as a child growing up in a Christian home. I have taught them as a pastor in Michigan and as a short-term Bible teacher in Siberia (in 2010). I have revisited these lessons at a recent Gospel Coalition gathering in Indianapolis. (TGC, September, 2023) As the season of Lent approached this year, it seemed appropriate for me to dig deeper and then write down the many lessons I have learned from Exodus.

It is good to rehearse the experience of liberation from bondage instituted by our gracious LORD, wilderness testing, revelation from God, entering into covenant with God, and the discovery of the pattern of worship he instituted among his people as that relates to our lives.

As I read, pray and write, I will remember the song that first guided me.

“My Lord knows the way through the wilderness, all I have to do is follow.”

I hope you will remember these words as well.

David Brown, Easter, 2024

Dedications

Marsha Brown, my one true love.

Benjamin Brown, our graduating senior who is about to launch on his college dreams.

Eden Tyne Brown, our first college graduate in the family.

The churches and pastors of the Midwest Presbytery with whom I've had the privilege of serving as Stated Clerk for the last five years.

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The Gospel Coalition, *Hope in the Wilderness*, Conference in September 2023, Indianapolis, IN. Plenary speakers included John Piper, H. B. Charles, Kenneth, Mbugua, Miguel Nunez, J. D. Gear, Ligon Duncan, Andrew Wilson, David Platt. All added to my grasp of the riches of the Book of Exodus.

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How Did We Get Here?

Exodus 1:1-14

Family relocation stories are complicated. We start out in one place and end in another. Or else, we stay and our family members go. Such was the story of the sons of Israel. Joseph was sold into slavery and went with a caravan to Egypt. His life was filled with ups and downs, but the LORD was with Joseph and he became the second in command, directing Egypt's Department of Agriculture. Many years later, his 11 brothers went to Egypt in search of food after a severe famine rocked the Middle East. When the brothers were surprisingly accepted and reunited with the brother they had betrayed, these 11 persuaded their father Jacob (Israel) to leave his home for the land of Egypt.

The extended family totaled 70 people when they arrived. After that generation died, we are told "the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly. They multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them."

As the generations passed, the growth in the population of Israelites concerned Pharaoh. "Behold the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them lest they multiply and if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from our land."

The Egyptians' shrewd dealings came in the form of slavery under taskmasters set over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. Store cities were built by these oppressed people. Perhaps the great pyramids themselves were the work of the Israelite slaves. The harsh treatment was intended to decimate the numbers of Israelites, but it did not succeed. Thus, harsher measures were put in place including male infanticide.

At some point the question would certainly rise to the surface: How did we get here? This would be followed by its constructive corollary: How do we get out? The answer to the first question was embarrassing to say the least. They were there because at the core of the family of origin was a sinful set of brothers who took advantage of Joseph. They were following the selfishness of their father Jacob, who had tricked his brother out of birthright and blessing in an earlier generation.

The only positive concerning their arrival in Egypt was the presence of Joseph, a brother who matured through the ups and downs of life in Egypt. By the time the 11 brothers arrived, Joseph's attitude reflected his relationship with God. When they sought to manipulate Joseph one more time, Joseph said: "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." (Gen. 50:19-20)

400 years later the people of Israel left Egypt to cross the wilderness on a journey to the promised land. The Book of Numbers lists over 600,000 people in its census. They all got out and began the journey across the wilderness. How did they get out? That's the great story before us in the book of Exodus.

Reflections: Before leaving this story, perhaps you will find it helpful to ask yourself these two questions:

How did we get here? and,

How do we get out?

These questions will force you to search through your own life and your family of origin for clues to your present dilemma. They might help you consider the promises of God, for evidences of his willingness to extend grace to you.

Culture of Life

Exodus 1:15-2:10

The culture of life disappeared in the first generation of human life. The culture of death made its first appearance in the second generation when Cain killed Abel. In the seventh generation, Lamech declared his allegiance to death in his boast: "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain 's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-seven fold." (Gen 4:23-24).

How does one restore the culture of life in the midst of a culture of death? Three precedents may help us think this through. Adam and Eve bore another son whom they called Seth. ("anointed" – Gen. 4:25) Seth called on the name of the Lord." (Gen 4:26) "Enoch walked with God and he was not, for God took him." (Gen. 5:24). Sadly, these positive efforts didn't fix the problem.

In Exodus 1:17 we read another precedent in response to the culture of death. The edict of Pharaoh was to kill all male babies, but "the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them but let the male children live." They challenged the culture of death by their life-saving actions.

I cannot help but thinking of the Pregnancy Care Center Movement when I think of these midwives. In 2015 John Stonestreet wrote that there were 1,100 affiliated pregnancy care centers serving over 1.1 million people every year in the US and Canada. In a chapter entitled "This Will Stop in Our Lifetime" he said, "It would be hard to find a better example of how a "mediating institution" has changed both the culture and the behavior of a country." (Smith and Stonestreet: Restoring All Things, 70).

These modern "midwives" and their support teams provide ultrasound pictures of life in the womb, share the good news of new life in Jesus, draft right to life laws, advocate for foster care and adoption, and declare the message that all lives are created in God's image with inherent worth and value.

But sustaining a culture of life requires something more than that, something akin to the courage of the unknown parents of Moses. They gave birth to a fine child whom they hid from the authorities for as long as they could. Then they wove a waterproof basket and placed the baby in it and floated it in the river just at the point where the daughter of Pharaoh would come to bathe. They trusted that this young woman would somehow value life over death. The step of faith worked, and Moses was drawn out of the water and brought into the royal palace, where he was nursed and nurtured in all the wisdom of Egypt.

Reflections: What are you doing personally to maintain a commitment to life in a culture of death? This may be as basic as having children and teaching them to call on the name of the Lord and walk with Him.

Are you involved in any "Mediating Institutions" such as Pregnancy Care Centers, Adoption and Foster Care ministries, tutoring and family services that declare the inherent worth of every human being.

Taking Matters into One's Own Hands

Exodus 2:11-25

The issue of injustice never seems to get resolved. People mistreat people and get away with it. In many cases, the anger that arises from injustice is righteous. The question is how to proceed in a righteous way to a peaceful and just resolution.

At the beginning of this story, Moses was a grown man, educated in all the wisdom of Egypt. He had a high status granted to him. He was mighty in word and deed. But something happened to him that was "eye-opening, consciousness-raising and heart transforming." (Ryken:61) The text says, "he went out to his people and saw their burdens and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people."(Ex. 2:11)

Some people never go out of their privileged positions to see or to identify with oppressed people, much less to call them his/their people. To Moses' credit, he took that journey. It was a journey which cut him off from his former position as prince of Egypt.

In his journey into the public square, two injustices appeared to Moses in short succession. First, he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew; next he saw two Hebrews struggling together with one clearly in the wrong. In each case, Moses took matters into his own hands in the cause of justice. His efforts failed completely. This left him *persona non grata in Egypt*. So he fled the scene and headed for Midian.

When Moses arrived, he observed some Midianite shepherds take advantage of a group of Midianite shepherdesses. His rescue of the women was commended by them to their father, and led to an invitation to eat and lodge with the family, and eventually to take one of the daughters as his wife.

Moses' effort to address the issue of injustice did not lead to the position of liberator for which he had been educated. Ryken puts it this way: "With one rash act Moses threw away forty years of spiritual preparation... Moses was trying to save God's people by his own works rather than letting God save them by his grace." (Ryken:63)

Reflections: Are you zealous for justice? Then learn the lesson from Moses' life.

It is positive to leave one's privileged position, to see people facing injustice, to call them your people and to identify with them in their oppression. However, it is negative to assume that you can save those unjustly treated by taking matters into your own hands.

Waiting for God

Exodus 2:23-25

The Hebrews spent a total of 430 years in Egypt. During the majority of those years, they were slaves. Taskmasters ruled their lives and hard labor was their plight. A glimmer of hope for release was first raised at the moment of Moses' rescue by the princess of Egypt, but his life appeared to be swallowed up by the culture of the ruling class.

A more substantial hope for release took place when Moses came of age and made the monumental decision to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. (Acts 7:23) However, when he took matters into his own hands and sought justice against the oppressors Moses became a sojourner (exile) in a foreign land.

Forty years later, the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. Finally, the focus was on God. The Hebrews waited for God. How would God respond? Four action verbs spell out the truth about God's concern.

God heard their prayers. The prayers may have been nothing more articulate than "groanings too deep to be put into words." (Romans 8:26) Sighs, pain-filled cries, agonizing tears. Maxie Dunham writes, "There are times when we cannot speak. Our pain and grief cannot be expressed in words. So, in our anguished silence we lay our lives before God...and God hears the voice of our groanings, even though that groaning ...does not issue in a sound." (Dunham:53)

God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and with Jacob. One of the great words of the Bible is *Hesed*, often translated faithfulness or steadfastness. Jeremiah once wrote: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is their faithfulness." (Lam. 3:22-23) God had made a promise to the patriarchs which he never broke. He intended to settle them in the land of Canaan and to make them a means of blessing to the entire world. The writer was reminding his readers: you can count on the Covenant-maker!

God saw the people in their plight. The word implies experiential knowing. He looked upon the people of Israel and saw the extent of their problems.

God knew. He knew their problems intimately, but he also knew his plans to liberate them from Egypt. In the midst of another dark time of exile in Israel's history, Jeremiah recorded God's compassionate words:

"I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." (Jeremiah 29:11)

Reflections: Are you waiting for God? Or have you caved into the hopelessness of the culture, so piercingly portrayed in Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*. Godot never comes. Existentialist hopes come to nothing. But the God who hears and sees, knows us intimately, and remembers his covenant promises. He comes!

The Mountain of God

Exodus 3:1-9

It must have seemed to be the epitome of futility! Spending 40 years wandering in the wilderness trying to keep the flock of one's father-in-law alive sounds dreadful! How does one stave off the boredom, much less, bring meaning to this endless routine?

We are told that at a certain point Moses led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Mt. Horeb. Was it the first time he had taken this loop? I doubt it. But on this occasion, something happened that totally reshaped Moses' life. From this moment onward, Mt. Horeb came to be known as "the mountain of God." Here Moses came to know what God was like and what God planned to do.

Moses learned that **God is a fire** who is not only bright and glorious, but also fully capable of disrupting the natural creation by means of his supernatural intervention. The bush that was burning but not consumed reveals his immense power and careful planning. God used it to get Moses' attention.

God is personal. When Moses turned aside toward this curious phenomenon, the Lord saw him and called Moses by name. Isaiah wrote of this truth at a later date, recording the words of God concerning Israel: "I have called you by name; you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1)

God is holy. Moses was told: "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, you are standing on holy ground." What made it holy? It certainly wasn't the site itself. It was the presence of a holy God that made the place sacred. To his credit, Moses complied. "He hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."

God did not consume Moses in his holiness. Instead, **God revealed his providential role in history.** He said to Moses: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." This sentence would likely have triggered two memories. The first came from his earliest childhood. Moses saw his actual father and mother only in his youngest years while his mother was cramming into Moses' head the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, before he was permanently taken from them to live in the palace in Egypt.

Then the phrase would have reminded him that God had made a promise to make his people into a great nation and to give them land. None of that had come to pass yet. Something more had to happen.

God is the Redeemer. That's the central message from this encounter with God. The redemptive plans are spelled out in Exodus 3:7-8. The Lord said: "I have seen the affliction of my people ... I have heard their cry...I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them..." The deliverance would come in two parts. God would bring them out of bondage in Egypt and God would bring them in to the land of Canaan. The rest of the book of Exodus describes that liberation and sets the stage for the conquest of Canaan. It's at the mountain that Moses received a vision for the full scope of this redemption.

Reflections: Wandering in the wilderness is a metaphor for meaningless. What level of curiosity do you have for going beyond that? Do you think God is searching for you as he searched for Moses?

What difference do you think it would make to you if you were to meet this glorious, personal, holy God of history, providence and redemption as he revealed himself at the mountain?

The Great Commission

Exodus 3:10-15

In the overall story presented in the Bible, we find that God involves himself with human lives. He is not aloof from his creation. He is not indifferent to human suffering. He is the God who sees and hears, the God who calls people into relationship with himself and who makes covenant promises that impact their lives. In their time of crisis, he says concerning these people: “I have come down to deliver them.”

Moses must have been greatly encouraged with this good news until he heard the next words from God: “Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel out of Egypt.”

Moses responded to this call with two questions: Who am I? and Who are You (What is Your name?) The first question was about his ability. Whatever he had learned from his parents was but a dim memory, and whatever he’d learned in the palace was long gone. Besides, he had already failed in an attempt to bring justice. That failure cost him the next 40 years of his life. Now he was an 80 year-old shepherd.

Modern counselors might have advised Moses to trust his past learning and present training. God commissioned Moses to trust in His presence and in His promise to bring the deliverance to pass.

The second question Moses asked concerned the name of the God who called him to go back to Egypt. “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

This second question was asked conditionally. Moses wanted to negotiate the commission of God, rather than submit to it. Moses also presented the question indirectly as if it was being asked by the Hebrews. How did Moses know what they were thinking about God? He hadn’t seen any of them for 40 years. Had they all forgotten about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Had they all forgotten that God had made a covenant with them that included posterity as plentiful as the stars in the heavens and a land which was flowing with milk and honey – both plentiful and abundant? Moses was using the Hebrews to cover his hesitation. But God did not hesitate to answer him. He said “I AM WHO I AM.”

Reflections: In a recent gathering of The Gospel Coalition (September, 2023) John Piper was assigned this question. “What is the name that the Lord presents to Moses and then to Pharaoh?” Here’s his response:

“His name is YHWH. It appears 6,800 times in the Bible. I AM WHO I AM, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Here are twelve things that YHWH means:

1. He never had a beginning – nobody made God;
2. He will never end – he cannot go out of being;
3. God is absolute reality - not one of many realities;
4. YHWH is utterly independent;
5. All that is not YHWH is dependent and secondary to him;
6. All the universe is as nothing in comparison to YHWH – contingent, like shadow to substance;
7. YHWH is constant – same, yesterday, today and forever;
8. YHWH is the absolute standard for all that is good, true, beautiful;
9. YHWH does whatever he pleases – he is utterly free, no constraints on him;
10. YHWH is the Most Valuable Being in the universe – more worthy than all else;
11. Jesus is the I AM – he has absolute being – Before Abraham was I AM.
12. I AM became flesh – we have seen him – He is explosive, untamable; He changes everything.

When Faced with the Moment of Your Greatness

Exodus 3:16-4:17

Do you have any place that you return to, if only in your mind, to remind you of a major turning point in your life? For me, it was on a bridge which I crossed every day on the way to a university classroom. As I moved along with the masses of students, I realized that I was not called to merely follow the crowd, but was called to launch on my own and call others to join me.

It was T.S. Eliot's poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* that so deeply affected me. In it, the main character asked two related questions: "Do I dare disturb the universe?" "Should I...have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?" Sadly, his response in both cases was a resounding no. "I am no prophet." "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; Am an attendant lord, one that will do to swell a progress, start a scene or two..."

Who would settle for that? Who would back away from the moment of greatness so pathetically that the footman would hold my coat and snicker? Not me.

Moses' moment of greatness came at the burning bush. At that place God answered four questions. We looked at the first two questions in the previous study. The third and fourth questions are the focus of this lesson. How can I get people to believe God's message? And, why would you pick me when I lack any eloquence? Please send someone else!

How can I get people to believe me when I speak about you? I can imagine Moses' reasoning: People who have faced a lifetime of oppression are hard to impress! Since nothing has changed so far, they are not going to be easily convinced that help is on the way at the present. The LORD provided several answers. They are always worth noting.

First of all, Moses was to remind them of His name. "The God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob has appeared to me saying, I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt." Deliverance is not a self-help program. It is not a 10 step plan for more vital living. If God is not in this thing, it is never going to work.

Secondly, God provided three signs of His authority. Moses' shepherd's staff would be greater than the cobra serpent which represented Egypt's power. Moses' hand would heal the incurable wounds inflicted upon the Hebrews. Moses' changing water to blood would give notice to the true source of life. It is not the Nile River, it is the Lord who gives life to the fullest. Failure to acknowledge God's authority would force the hand of the head of Egypt to let the Hebrews go.

As to the question of God's choice of an ineloquent speaker, the answer was pointed and direct: "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Moses was so stubborn that he insisted that God choose someone else. That nearly caused a total disaster.

The one who made Moses and called him to service would prove to be more than adequate to equip him to succeed. The same is true for you and me. The only things that might hold back his plans is our unwillingness to "disturb the universe!"

Reflections: When did God meet you and call you to his service? What signs of his authority has he given you to sustain your decision to obey his call?

Return to Egypt

Exodus 4:18-31

After the LORD had answered Moses' questions and provided the support of Aaron to sustain Moses' courage, Moses finally agreed to return to Egypt. His steps included speaking to his father-in-law about the call of God in his life, fulfilling the covenant requirements which he had neglected, and reconnecting with his brother.

Moses told Jethro that he was "going back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they were still alive." What he failed to say is that God had met him at the burning bush and had commissioned him to return with the plan to deliver them. He also left out the signs of authority that he would carry with him, and the fact that God considered Israel his firstborn son. It was not simply a story of emancipation – the release of a slave - it was also of repatriation, the return of an only son to his father's loving care." (Levenson as quoted in Ryken:130).

Jethro said "Go in peace," and the LORD said Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead." It would seem that the way was entirely clear. However, there was one thing that prevented success.

Moses was going to Egypt as a child of the covenant to meet God's covenant children, but he had not yet made his own son a child of the covenant. Because of that, he experienced the sentence of death, which was only lifted when his wife circumcised their son, Gershom, and presented the blood from this ceremony as evidence of obedience. While this was a strange episode and hard to explain, it points to a huge truth which Moses had to learn: Moses was saved, and Israel after him was saved by the blood of a substitute lamb. In the fullness of time, John the Baptist introduced Jesus Christ, as the Lamb of God, whose blood takes away the sin of the world.

Moses and Aaron met in the wilderness on the outskirts of Egypt. At this happy reunion Moses and Aaron shared all that God had said, and all the signs that God had given to him. Together they went to the camp of the Hebrews and gathered them. As Moses performed the three signs granted to him, the people believed and bowed down their heads and worshipped.

Moses' initial fear was unfounded. Many of his people were still alive and they received the good news with a rousing expression of praise. The exodus was at hand. God would claim his people as his firstborn.

Reflections: God treats his people as sons, not slaves. His children can be sure of repatriation with the Heavenly Father. The first deliverance was at hand when Moses spoke to the elders of Israel. At a later date, the Prophet Habakkuk urged God's people to wait for a greater fulfillment.

"For still the vision waits its appointed time; it hastens to the end – it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay (Habakkuk 2:3)

Are you patiently waiting for deliverance and meanwhile worshipping the LORD of covenant promises?

First Meeting with Pharaoh

Exodus 5:1-23

One of the kindnesses of married life is the discovery that you have a partner who cares about what is happening in your life. For example, when I've told my spouse about important upcoming meetings, she has talked it through with me, prayed for me, and afterward asked me, 'how did the meeting go?

Moses and Aaron's first meeting with Pharaoh started out with a bold request. "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.'" They must have thought that it was a fair and just request from an authoritative Lord. Pharaoh did not. He said, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go."

Their second request was less confrontational and more reason-driven. "The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God, lest he fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword." This God that you do not know has summoned us to a three-day feast and sacrifice in the wilderness. If we do not go, we might be subject to his judgment. If that happens, you'll lose your work crew. Please! Pharaoh was not persuaded. Instead, he accused Moses and Aaron of taking the slaves away from their work.

Harsh criticisms were followed by harsher work conditions. Quotas were continued, but now the slaves were required to gather the raw material (straw) for making the bricks. The cruel plan was intended to keep the slaves from having regard to the "lying words" of Moses and Aaron.

No crying to Pharaoh and no reasoning about the quota and the lack of supply of straw to make bricks mattered. The top-down mandate sent through Egyptian task-masters and Jewish foremen led to beatings and intimidations. Meanwhile, Pharaoh wrote off the complaints as if the slaves were idle.

The Jewish foremen were the first to complain about the new set up. They saw that they were in trouble and met with Moses and Aaron as they came out from Pharaoh. "They said to Moses, "The LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us."

If Moses' wife had listened to the plan, prayed for him and promised to be there to listen to him at the end of the day, I can imagine her saying, *How did your meeting go?* And Moses saying, *"Not well at all!"*

In fact, Moses was so undone by this first meeting that he turned to the Lord and poured out these most painful words: "O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? ²³ For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all."

Reflections: Is there anything positive to discover from Moses' first meeting? And, practically speaking, is there anything to learn from your latest interactions in the working world? Perhaps we need to remember that the opposition we face in the world often comes from people who do not know the Lord. Insofar as that continues, they will not likely respond to a mandate from God or to a reasonable request which we might make. Our next step is to turn to the LORD. While our first prayer after such a meeting may sound critical of the LORD, it is worth saying. God can handle it and will respond.

When Maxie Dunham the well-loved preacher looked at Moses' initial failure before the Pharaoh and subsequent desperate prayer in Exodus 5:22 he urged his hearers to "live the questions now." We are all called to wait for an answer on many occasions. If we have not yet obtained answers to personal, family or work problems, we can at least keep the question in front of God and live until answers come.

When we look at Exodus 6, we read the LORD's immense answer to Moses' questions. It starts with an overview of God's plans: "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand he shall send them out, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land."

The LORD's message to Moses was that he was in control. In fact, he was so fully in control that Pharaoh the enslaver would be the one to drive them out. The Bible describes God's control over events as his sovereignty. He is the King who is seated on the throne; and He determines what will happen in the world he rules.

The second response of the Lord is a reminder of his covenant. Four times in verses 2-8 we read the words, "I am the LORD." It is the covenant name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. But it is not just a name, amazing as that is. The LORD has revealed himself to be a covenant making, promise keeping God from the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob onward. We can count on the LORD to come through!

The fundamental promise He made was first of all to make them a great people through whom he would bless the world; and then, to settle them in a land flowing with milk and honey. A multiplication of people was already taking place even in the midst of slavery. Now the second promise was about to be fulfilled.

Commentators note that in this section of Scripture (6:6-8), The Lord presents seven "I will" statements pertaining to salvation." Philip Ryken reflects on them as follows:

"The first two I will statements speak of liberation.

I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

I will deliver you from slavery to them.

The third I will statement pertains to redemption.

I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment."

The fourth and fifth I will statements pertain to the promise of adoption.

I will take you to be my people and I will be your God.

The sixth and seventh I will statements are called "the promise of possession."

I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.

I will give it to you for a possession." (Ryken:173-174)

Reflections: This revelation of God's sovereignty, His glorious name and his master plan (seven 'I wills') would be the lasting picture of salvation in the world until Jesus fulfilled God's saving plans in the incarnation, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ followed by the outpouring of his Spirit on all flesh. Don't just live the questions; Live the answer revealed in Christ!

Brothers Dwelling Together in Unity

Exodus 6:9-7:13

In the next to last Psalm in the Songs of Ascents the supporting role of Aaron is celebrated.

“Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.

It is like the precious oil on the head running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes. (Psalm 133:1-2)

Aaron eventually became the High Priest of Israel. Before that there were three parts that he played in the life of Israel.

First, Aaron established a family. It was an act of faith for a Hebrew man to marry, bear children and raise a family in Egypt. He was part of a slave class. He had no rights, no guaranteed income, much less the promise of a life of safety for himself or for others who might sit around his tent in Goshen.

In many nations birthrates are plummeting below zero population growth levels. It's too risky, too painful, and too distracting to bring children into the world. This was not the case with the Hebrews in Egypt. Parents took on the risk and grew their families.

At the outset of another time of Exile, the LORD urged his people to “take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage. Multiply there and do not decrease.” (Jeremiah 29:6) Aaron's courage led to the establishment of the priestly line of the worshiping people of God that outlasted his life.

Second., Aaron responded when God called him to come alongside his wavering brother, Moses. It is likely that Aaron and Moses had not had contact from the time Moses fled to Midian until the day the LORD asked him to be Moses' mouthpiece. Should he trust this one-time murderer? Should he make common cause with someone whom the government has been searching for. Taking a risk with relationships doesn't promote survival! But Aaron was willing, not only to listen, but also to support and accompany Moses as he carried the LORD's mandate to Pharaoh.

Third, Aaron became the one who “proved” that the Lord was behind the liberation plan by working a miracle. At God's command, Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh. It became a serpent. When Pharaoh's magicians duplicated his effort, Aaron's serpent swallowed the magicians' serpents/staffs. Aaron presented God's claims to the tyrant. He would return many more times before the issue was settled.

Reflections: How have you prepared for the moment of God's call on your life?

Have you stayed true to the LORD and raised a godly family?

Have you come alongside your brother no matter how risky that choice would be?

Have you demonstrated God's sovereign plans to the authorities who neither know nor honor the Lord?

“Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.”

How to Deal with a Hardened Heart

Exodus 4:21; 7:14, 22

Do you know anyone who has a hard heart? Perhaps you have sought justice from an adversary, but the enemy hardened his/her heart against you. Perhaps you have wanted to share the good news of new life in Christ, but the one you dearly longed to reach responded with a heart of stone.

In the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, this condition of hardness of heart is defined as a “state of persistent and sometimes hostile rejection of the Word of God. This involves not simply a refusal to hear the Word but a refusal to respond in submission and obedience.” Pharaoh was a classic case.

In the case of Pharaoh, he is said to harden his own heart (Exodus 8:15) On the other hand, God is also said to harden Pharaoh’s heart. (Exodus 4:21; 10:1).” In some way both of these statements are true.

We may not be able to fully explain the interaction between human will and divine sovereignty as it pertains to this issue. We should at least consider what this means for those summoned to speak on God’s behalf.

God had barely persuaded Moses to return to Egypt with the instruction to “do before Pharaoh all the miracles I have put in your power.” Then he added these words: “But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.” What did that mean? Simply, that the liberation of the slaves was not going to come by successful negotiation or even by clever efforts put in front of Pharaoh. Liberation was going to be a work of God’s sovereign intervention in which God would demonstrate to Pharaoh that He was the LORD, not Pharaoh.

If Moses thought that he might prevail against Pharaoh in any other way, those words should have laid that fantasy to rest. But we are success driven. We think we can come up with a winning plan of our own. Philip Ryken said, “Moses misunderstood his calling as a prophet. Moses was a pragmatist. He had a performance-based approach to prophetic ministry. He assumed that it was up to the prophet to get results. If people listened to him, then he was doing his job; if not he should find some other line of work.”

Moses was not the last pragmatist in leadership! Philip Ryken tells the story of a fellow pastor who struggled with this issue. He tried his hardest to succeed as a church planter, but failed. This triggered a time of despondency and resentment against God. Eventually (this pastor) came to understand that his real problem was his definition of success, and that “God’s servants are not called to be successful but to be faithful.” (*Liberating the Ministry from the Success Syndrome* as quoted in Ryken:200)

Reflections: How do we pursue this better course? Jesus’ final words in Matthew 11 help me to pursue this course. It includes a word of thanksgiving, a word of knowledge and a word of invitation.

A word of Thanksgiving: “I Thank you Father that you have hidden these things from the wise and learned...and revealed them to little children.”

A Word of Knowledge: “No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

A Word of Invitation: “Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

God is sovereign from beginning to end. Our call is to be faithful and obedient and wait for the movement of God in our world.

Purposeful Plagues

Exodus 7:14-8:19

It is a common question that everyone must ask at some point in life. Why me? Why am I experiencing upsetting results in my life? These upsets may ruin our routines and convictions about the way things run. Sometimes the so-called laws of nature stop working as expected or we get inflicted with irritations. More deeply, these upsets may actually bring about destructions. Deepest of all, the plagues that beset us may result in death. (Kaiser:348) Why me, indeed?

The Ten Plagues inflicted upon Egypt had a variety of purposes. John Stott summarizes these in three categories: They brought judgment against the recalcitrant Egyptians. They were used to persuade Pharaoh to release the Israelites; but supremely, they were inflicted so that “you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth;” or, “that you may know that I am the LORD.” (Stott:56)

The first three plagues were the mildest, but they set the pattern. A warning was given to Pharaoh as he went out to the Nile for water in the morning. This was followed by a warning delivered to Pharaoh in his palace. The third plague commenced without warning. (Kaiser:348) Each of the first round of plagues commenced with an attack against the false gods of Egypt. Did Egypt worship the Nile as the giver of life and fertility? It is an unworthy god, unable to make good on its promise. God changed the Nile’s water into blood, killed the life in the river and cut off the fertility of the land and people with one motion from Moses’ staff. (For a complete study on the Plagues, see Ryken: 215-324)

Did the Egyptians mistakenly think that the frog-goddess Heqet breathed life into human bodies, when the Scriptures clearly state that God breathed life into the man so that he became a living being? The plague of frogs multiplied these false symbols of divinity. As a result, the whole land was filled with them. When they died, the whole land reeked from the odor of dead frogs. Goodbye dead gods!

Were the Egyptian leaders boastful about their divine ability to bring order out of chaos? Simply by stretching out his staff at the LORD’s command, Moses disrupted this false narrative about Pharaoh’s ability to control the natural world. Whether the dust Moses stirred up became gnats, flies, lice, maggots, sand flies or mosquitoes, the Egyptians soon enough got the point. “This is the finger of God” declared the magicians of Egypt.

The worship of false gods did not go away with the commencement of ancient plagues. In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he describes the world’s idolatry as follows:

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (Romans 1:18-23)

Reflections: God condemns the worship of creation as an inexcusable suppression of truth! It dishonors our Creator and leads to futility and to the foolishness of glorifying birds, animals and creeping things.

Is your heart an idol factory? (Tim Keller often borrowed this original comment of John Calvin) It has been said that Egypt worshipped everything that moved. It is no surprise, then that God attacked the false objects of worship. The Egyptians loved their bugs, admired their hard work. Their myths included the notion that the beetles rolled the sun into a ball and hid it from them in the evening only to roll it back in the morning. They made jewelry in the shape of beetles. These were called scarabs.

When Moses awoke one morning and met Pharaoh at the Nile River, he presented the LORD's demand along with a consequence for refusing to comply. "Let my people go that they may serve me. Or else, if you will not let my people go, I will send swarms of flies on you and your servants...but on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell so that no swarms of flies shall be there.

Besides humiliating the Egyptians for worshiping "sacred bugs," this plague introduced the distinction between God's people and God's enemies. This would reveal to Egypt "that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth." Ineffective bargaining from Pharaoh commenced. Moses stood his ground. Pharaoh asked Moses: "Plead for me!" But Pharaoh had no intention to fulfill the LORD's demand. As soon as the plague of flies was removed, Pharaoh hardened his heart and did not let the people go.

Sacred cows are mostly identified with Hindus, but in a very real sense the Egyptians worshiped cows. The bull was the god of fertility, the embodiment of the gods. Female cows represented love and beauty, motherhood and fertility. In reality, there's no such thing as a sacred cow! Ryken summarizes the results of this plague: "God was proving himself to the Egyptians on their own terms, exposing the cult of the cow as a false religion." Ryken:263)

Within a short time, and without any notice, Moses was directed to take handfuls of soot from the kiln and throw it into the air in the sight of Pharaoh. It was a form of divine retribution. Egypt had made the Israelites make bricks and dry them in the sun, or in the kilns. Surely, they had incurred serious skin diseases by laboring in the heat of the sun and the kiln. Their diseases might have resembled black lung disease suffered by coal miners, or skin cancer from exposure to asbestos, lead or other toxic substances.

When the Egyptians were afflicted with the airborne soot particles from the kiln, they broke out in boils. This was a heightened judgment from the hand of God. For the first time, the plagues attacked and endangered humans directly. With this plague, three consequences appeared. The Lord differentiated between his people and Pharaoh's people, The medics and magicians of Egypt proved to be ineffective healers, and Pharaoh's hardened heart was finally hardened by God to the point of no return.

While we have already addressed the issue of the hardness of heart of Pharaoh, it is worthwhile to return to it with another warning. In Psalm 95:7-11 the Psalmist exhorts God's people to avoid the hardening of their hearts as did those who made it out of Egypt, only to rebel in the wilderness. "Today, if you hear my voice, do not harden your hearts as at Meribah...when your fathers put me to the test." The consequence of the hardened heart is judgment. As the Lord said: "They shall never enter my rest."

Reflections: God's rest comes from believing in the living God and his living and active word and then holding our original confidence in the good news firm to the end. (See Hebrews 3:12-4:12)

Total Destruction, Darkness and Death

Exodus 9:13-10:29

Weather predictions are made every day in the modern world. We sometimes laugh at them as if the predictions are always wrong. On certain occasions, we laugh at them to our own peril. The most dramatic illustrations concern the occurrence of hurricanes, tornados and cyclones.

In Egypt, Moses served as more than a meteorologist. He came with a word from the Lord. On the Lord's command, a catastrophic hail storm was about to land in Egypt. Some heeded this word from the LORD and protected themselves, their livestock and their slaves. The rest decided to take their chances. Such a neglect led to the destruction of livestock, people and every plant in the field.

This plague was followed by an even fiercer form of destruction. Locusts swarmed by the millions and millions, wiping out whatever was not destroyed by the hail storm. By the end of these two incidents, Egypt was economically ruined. Pharaoh's officials (servants) knew it and said to him, "How long shall this man (Moses) be a snare to us? Let the men go that they may serve the Lord their God. Do you not understand that Egypt is ruined?"

Pharaoh seemed to take his officials' advice and summoned Moses. He admitted: "I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you. Now, therefore, forgive my sin, please, only this once, and plead with the LORD your God to remove this death from me." Readers should not take encouragement from such desperate confessions and requests. Pharaoh, like so many public leaders, operate on the level of expediency. They borrow spiritual phrases for political purposes. They are not ready to make a change of heart, only to get out of present troubles when they speak to God-sent leaders.

Moses had watched Pharaoh's folly too often to be fooled. Therefore, when Pharaoh resisted for the eighth time, he stepped forward with the ninth plague from the hand of God. God sent darkness that could be felt over the entire land of Egypt, even as the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings in the land of Goshen.

The darkness lasted three days. This was long enough to destroy the Egyptian myth that the sun was a god and that the Pharaoh was the embodiment of the gods of morning noon and sunset. It was also sufficient time to force Pharaoh to say to Moses "go, serve the Lord; your little ones may go with you, only let your flocks and herds remain." Some might say that Pharaoh was making his best offer and that Israel should accept it. But Moses would not compromise when it came to God's plan. When Pharaoh told Moses, 'Get away from me, take care to never see my face again for on the day you see my face, you shall die," Moses did not cower. Instead, he simply said, "I will not see your face again."

Reflections: When Pharaoh spoke his last words to Moses and Moses responded, the negotiations came to an end. There would be no more warnings. There would simply be the execution of the plan of God to deliver his people at Pharaoh's expense. Here's a lesson to be remembered by all who refuse God with a hardened and a prideful heart. There's no escape for the enemies of God. Only death and destruction awaits.

The Tenth Plague Announced

Exodus 11:1-10

Who gets the last word when conflict rises to its highest level in your family, in your city, in your world? It is an important question to answer at all levels. The future of the family, the city and the world may depend on it.

Pharaoh's outburst against Moses closed the door to further negotiations. Moses agreed that it was over. On the way out the door, the LORD told him that he was going to bring one last plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt. So Moses got the last word; actually he got three last words.

First of all, Moses made a "go-fund me" request before all the people of Egypt. The request was favorably received. Some might think of the Egyptian people's positive response as a form of reparation. Fairness would require that the slaves be repaid for their labor. The text suggests that the Egyptians respected the Hebrews and held Moses in high esteem. (Ryken:321) Justice and mercy motivated them.

The next last word from Moses included the most frightening warning any family could imagine. "About midnight ...every firstborn in Egypt shall die, from the firstborn in Pharaoh's house to the firstborn of the lowliest slave and the firstborn of whatever cattle were left."

Finally, Moses told Pharaoh that God would make a distinction between Egypt and Israel, and that because of it, all the servants of Pharaoh would come down to me and bow down to me, saying, 'Get out, you, and all the people who follow you.' And after that, I will go out."

Pharaoh's hardness of heart sealed his demise. Because he would not acknowledge God nor listen to his servant, Moses, Pharaoh lost everything. His nation was decimated by the plagues. His economy was ruined. His religion was exposed as worthless. Pharaoh's identity as the son of the Sun god was fully disproved. His power was taken away. People would bend the knee to Moses rather than to him.

Reflections: What is the enduring message of the plagues? In my recent study from James, I came upon the warning to the rich which opens the fifth chapter. It sounds like a clear match to Pharaoh's attitude.

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ²Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. ³Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. ⁴Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. ⁵You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

How will you respond to these "last words to unjust oppressors?"

Preparation for the First Passover

Exodus 12:1-13

Preparations for major holy days require much thought. This is why the church calendar includes such seasons as Advent, Lent and Pentecost. We spend four weeks considering the incarnation of the Son of God. We spend forty days contemplating the death of Christ on our behalf. We spend fifty days embracing the truth of the resurrection, and looking forward to the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The Redemptive story starts well before all of these observances by Christ-followers. As we come to the holy day of Passover, it is important that we take a thoughtful look at this event. Three basic questions should be answered. What is Passover? What does it signify? and, To what does it point?

What is Passover? Passover is the event in history when the LORD called the entire congregation of Israel to gather in their homes to prepare for God's imminent deliverance from bondage in Egypt. The preparations included the selection of a lamb without blemish for each household; the keeping of the lamb in the household for four days; and the killing of the lambs at twilight.

When the lamb was slaughtered, some of its blood was to be painted on the doorpost and lintel of the entry way into each house. The lamb itself was to be roasted and eaten along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Any extra that was not eaten was to be burned. Participants in the Passover meal were to eat this meal in haste with belt fastened, sandals on the feet and staff in hand.

What does Passover signify? The LORD's Passover signifies the judgment of God. On that night the LORD passed through the land of Egypt and struck down the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast. It also signified God's judgment on all the gods of Egypt. As the LORD promised, "on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments. I am the LORD"

Passover also signified the way of escape from the judgment of God. "When I see the blood, (on the doorposts and lintels of the houses of the obedient Jews) I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt."

To what does Passover point? The dominant message is that of substitutionary atonement. Following the requirement put forth by God, every family in Israel chose a lamb, slaughtered it, then painted its blood on the entry way of their houses. The Lamb itself was roasted and eaten. By God's decree, the lamb, represented by its blood, took the judgment that was destined for all sinners that night.

Reflections: Why was the blood of the lamb sufficient as a substitute? If we look back through the history of the redemption, we see that God killed an animal to cover sinful Adam and Eve. In Abraham's day, God provided a lamb as a substitute for Isaac. In the annual Day of Atonement, the high priest made atonement for the people of God by slaughtering a lamb and sprinkling its blood on the mercy seat.

In the death of Christ, we behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Paul told the Ephesians that "In him (Christ) we have redemption through his blood." When the LORD sees the blood of his Son, he passes over sinners and does not execute his just judgment upon them. Christ is God's gracious gift for us. Our response is to acknowledge Christ's blood as the acceptable and sufficient means of bringing atonement and to put our trust in Christ alone for salvation. Have you done so?

The observance of Passover on the day of deliverance was not to be a one-time event. It was to be the celebration to keep forever as an annual feast. What should be remembered each year? And by what signs and symbols should these things be remembered? It was a hasty event in the first year, but God's intention was that it should become a seven-day feast to be remembered in all generations.

Perhaps you have been invited to a Seder meal at some time either by your Jewish friends, or by others who wished to help you remember Passover in a more meaningful way. The word seder means 'order' as in order of service for celebrating the Passover. While the order of service for a seder meal embellishes the story as presented in Exodus 12, it identifies the many significant symbols with their meanings.

This study, taken from Exodus 12:14-28, focus on the elements of the Feast of Unleavened Bread that the Lord presented to Moses.

First of all, this Feast of Unleavened Bread is the celebration of the beginning of the year. It is a Memorial Day when the people of God remembered the start of their new life as a nation. For 400 plus years, the Hebrews were slaves who could not call anything or any time their own. But now they were free from bondage to the Egyptians. God was bringing them together as his firstborn, his chosen people, his congregation. This fact was to be celebrated by the creation of a new calendar.

Second, the Feast was a reminder of God's call to Israel to become a holy nation. They were not just to be saved, but to be set apart and sanctified. A seven-day feast of unleavened bread would reinforce this message. The leaven of life in Egypt was to be exchanged for a life without the corrupting influence of evil and the worship of false gods. At the beginning of the Feast, the Jews went through the ritual of searching their homes for leaven and sweeping it out the door. Later the Lord would state his intention more fully. "You shall be holy for I the Lord am holy." (Leviticus 19:2)

Third, the feast celebrated the end of suffering by God's answer to the people's prayers. Four "I wills" from Exodus 6 should be recited as proof that God had interceded to set them free. Lest they forget how bitter life was in Egypt, the people should include a portion of bitter herbs. Everyone should taste the herbs at the feast. The idea of looking back to the good old days in Egypt was a cruel myth. It was bitter.

Fourth, the Feast was to celebrate the salvation of the firstborn of Israel by the application of the blood of the Passover Lamb to the doorposts and lintel. The people were saved by the blood of the lamb applied to their lives. When the Lord saw the blood, he passed over the homes of those who obediently marked their habitations as belonging to the Lord.

The Lord told the Jews to 'keep the feast to the LORD throughout your generations as a statute forever. By doing so, they would pass on their faith story to their children and their children's children. "When your children say to you, 'what do you mean by this service? you shall say it is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, for he passed over our houses...when he struck the Egyptians, but spared our houses.

Reflections: This Feast points us to the observance of the Lord's Supper in the church. "Do this in remembrance of me" said the Lord. Remember the Lamb whose body was broken and whose blood was poured out. He saved you so that you might be holy as he is holy. He saved you so that your homes might become his home and the place where the next generation would hear the story and be saved.

Death or Deliverance

Exodus 12:29-13:16

Every family has a firstborn. In recent years, the prospect of the baby's coming has been celebrated in advance with a "reveal party." A shower may also be given in advance to help the family clothe their newborn. Upon the birth, the baby is named, welcomed, baptized and cared for.

While we cannot make absolute comparisons between the modern and ancient practices of welcoming firstborn babies into the world, we can see from Scripture that the Hebrews thought the first to open the womb represented the prime of human strength and vitality. If he was a son, he inherited a double portion of a father's inheritance and the leadership role in the family. He also carried responsibility for the family at the end of his father's life.

The Egyptians made more of their sons. According to Philip Ryken, "Pharaoh's son was the prince of Egypt, the next in line to sit on the throne. More than that, the Egyptians believed that he was a successor to the gods... he was expected to rule Egypt as god." (Ryken:318)

The death of the firstborn of Egypt represented the death of a god. That is a crucial point in the story. Scripture tells us that "the Lord God is a jealous God. He does not share his glory with another. (See Isaiah 48:11) But it was not just Pharaoh's firstborn son that died. At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt. (Ex. 12:29)

He would have done the same with the firstborn of the Hebrews, but for one measure. If the Hebrews received the gracious provision of the Lamb and publicly indicated their faith in God's provision, by painting the blood on doorpost and lintel of their homes, the angel of death would Passover these homes and the firstborn would be spared.

Gratitude was the most appropriate response to God's gracious deliverance of the firstborn. To make sure the Hebrews didn't miss this necessary response, the Lord commanded Moses: "Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and beast is mine." (Ex. 13:1-2). Set them apart. Then tell your sons what the Lord did in history to distinguish between Egypt and Israel and what you have done in response.

"Therefore, I sacrifice to the Lord all the males (animals) that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem." You were destined for death, but God delivered you by the gracious acceptance of the death of the lamb and the outpouring of his blood as a substitute for your death.

Reflections: Who is the firstborn in your household? Besides celebrating his/her coming with reveal parties and baby showers, you probably have invested much time and training into that child so that he or she will have all the advantages necessary to succeed. The one advantage most needed by that child is the knowledge of God the Redeemer. What have you told your firstborn about God's grace in sparing your child? What response of gratitude have you instilled in that child?

Have you communicated this grace from God to all of your children to the end that all of them claim their deliverance through the blood of the lamb? "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." John 1:29

Perhaps you have heard of the idiom “Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea.” That was the situation the Hebrews found themselves in shortly after they left Egypt.

Yes, the immediate pain of servitude was over. Yes, there was a joyous and hasty exodus of 600,000 men accompanied by an equal number of women and children. Yes, they left with their possessions, along with gifts bestowed upon them by sympathetic Egyptians. Yes, they had sheep and cattle and unleavened bread to eat.

Pharaoh’s insistence that the Hebrews leave was a dream come true, not to mention a million prayers and promises of God answered. Then there was the unexplainable phenomena of the presence of the cloud and pillar. The Lord was going before them and was providing protection and light. Within a short while they were camped by the shores of the Red Sea.

But then Pharaoh changed his mind. This devilish figure woke up to the fact that he had lost his entire workforce. “What have we done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?” (Exodus 14:5) Pharaoh would not let this liberation movement stand. He made ready his chariot and gathered his army with him accompanied by 600 chosen chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt led by their officers, horsemen and army. They went in hot pursuit of the Israelites. It wasn’t long before the Hebrews were overtaken as they camped by the sea.

Quickly, the dream turned into a panic inducing nightmare. They were trapped! What was to happen next? No one knew. The first reaction to the crisis was fear. The text tells us, “And the people feared greatly.” This is a typical human reaction to humanly unsolvable dangers. Besides the two common alternatives of fight or flight, the emotion of fright seems perfectly normal.

The text also says the people cried out to God. This would seem like they were exercising proper religious responses to circumstances. However, their cry was a lengthy criticism rather than a prayer.

¹¹They 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? ¹²Is 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.”

Moses offered a godly perspective which we would do well to receive whenever we find ourselves in difficult (humanly impossible) situations where there are two equally undesirable options.

¹³And 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. ¹⁴The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”

Reflections: The LORD does not bring us out of slavery just to allow us to be enslaved again to sin, death and the devil! Nor does he plan to destroy us in the deep blue sea. Moses’ word is the answer to our fears. The Lord will bring salvation. He will fight for us. This leads to the Lord’s next word: “Tell the people of Israel to go forward.” Are you preparing to move forward by faith in God’s word?

Baptized into Moses in the Cloud and the Sea

Exodus 14:15-31

As a growing child, I was told an important interpretive key to the Bible's two testaments. "The new is in the old concealed; the old is in the new revealed." In other words, there are treasures hidden in the Old Testament that are only revealed in their full meaning by accepting the words of the New Testament.

As we look at the story of the Red Sea crossing, we can observe many marvelous facts. But what do they mean? and how do they apply to us? Let's start with the Old Testament then look in the New Testament.

The facts of the Red Sea Crossing include these at least: At God's command Moses lifted up his staff and divided the Red Sea so that the people of Israel could go through the sea on dry ground. It was a supernatural event that employed natural causes (wind) like many of the plagues that came before this event.

When the Egyptian chariots and horsemen went into the sea in pursuit of the Hebrews, the LORD threw the Egyptian forces into a panic. The wheels came off their chariots as they tried to flee and they recognized, "the Lord fights for them against the Egyptians."

After the Israelites successfully crossed the Red Sea, Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course. Because of that act, the water covered the chariots and horsemen of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the Red Sea, and not one of them survived.

The meaning of these facts is partially revealed at the end of the story; the application is more fully revealed in the New Testament.

Through this episode the LORD said, "I will get glory over Pharaoh and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD." In Philip Ryken's marvelous exposition of the Book of Exodus, he makes this point in the book title, "Exodus, Saved for God's Glory," and many more times in the commentary. "God's grand purpose in everything he does is to display his glory." (Ryken:383). In this particular incident God gained glory at Pharaoh's expense, just as he gained glory at Satan's expense by allowing his Son to be crucified at Calvary.

Through this episode, the LORD "baptized" the Hebrews. That's how the Apostle Paul interprets it in First Corinthians 10:1-6. It was at least a "type" of that sacrament to come. "For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea."

Paul's allusion to this OT baptism into Moses, the cloud and the sea turned out to be less than positive. All were baptized, but "with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness." What they missed is what the Puritans called "making use of, or "improving one's baptism."

Reflections: Have you improved your baptism? J.I Packer identifies seven ways to do so. See it as **a gospel service** where God offers deliverance from evil; See it as **a marriage service** when I was given to Jesus to be his covenant partner; think of it as **a burial service** when I commit the man I was by nature to total destruction. See it as an **Easter festival** proclaiming Jesus' resurrection and mine in and with his. See it as **a birthday celebration**, for new birth is what co-resurrection with Christ effects. See it as an **admission ceremony**, bringing me into the family of God as an adopted member. Think of it as **a commissioning service** entering me into a life wholly given to serve Christ and his cause." (Packer:156ff)

The Song of Salvation

Exodus 15:1-21

In his book, *Reflections on the Psalms*, C. S. Lewis shares his thoughts about why we delight to praise what we enjoy. "...the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment. It is its appointed consummation...the delight is incomplete till it is expressed." (Reflections, Lewis: 90-98)

Moses burst into song once the people of Israel reached the far side of the Red Sea. Miriam and all the women went out with tambourines and dancing and joined the song. God had saved his people! They could not contain their joy. Soon a million people joined the choir and sang the song of salvation. Whether they all sang all the words, or just joined with the chorus, we are not told. But it must have been an exhilarating night of praise.

"I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously, the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

The full text of the song may be outlined in a variety of ways. I was blessed to sit under the teaching of Tom Schreiner and James Hamilton as they explained the chiasmic structure of the song and then led the class to appreciate the substance of this praise song.

The "outside story at the beginning and end is this: The LORD is a man of war, the LORD is his name. (v3) The LORD will reign forever as the indomitable One. For when the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and horsemen went into the sea, the LORD brought back the waters of the sea upon them, but the people of Israel walked on dry ground in the midst of the sea. (v. 18-19)

As we explore it more deeply, we find that Moses praises God with specifics pertinent to his saving work: "Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy. In the greatness of your majesty, you overthrow your adversaries. (v. 6-7). You have led in your steadfast love the people you have redeemed. You have guided them by your strength to your holy abode. What's more, you have sent a signal to the people of Philistia, Edom, Moab and Canaan, that causes them to tremble and be seized with fear and dread. God's people, whom you have purchased will pass by and be planted on your holy mountain, the sanctuary which your hands have established. (Vs. 13-17)

In the very center of the song the main point is made and celebrated with two rhetorical questions. "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" What Moses learned at Mt. Horeb has been lived out in Egypt and in the wilderness through which God's people passed on the way to the Red Sea. It has been more than borne out in the Red Sea crossing! And now they were standing in God's presence, saved out of bondage and prepared for the pilgrimage that would bring them into the promised land.

Reflections: Moses' song doesn't just express the joy of salvation, it completes the enjoyment, especially as the people bring it to its consummation by joining their voices, their instruments and their dancing to this great event. Come sing the song of salvation.

"I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously,
the horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

No Water, Bitter Water, Springs of Water

Exodus 15:22-27

Standing on the banks of the Red Sea was a momentous occasion for the Israelites. They had been saved from 430 years of slavery. God had graciously exercised his mighty power through a series of plagues and supernatural signs to liberate them. They had been baptized into Moses in the Red Sea. Now, following Moses' song of praise, all Israel began to sing and dance.

Then (the next day?) Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea. He would get them started on a pilgrimage through the wilderness to the promised land. What else would they have wanted to do? Getting as far away from Egypt as possible must have been their heart's desire. Arriving in a land flowing with milk and honey must have been their aim. From all appearance they had adequate supplies of meat and bread. What's more they had the financial resources that sympathetic Egyptians had given to them.

The only thing they lacked was a steady supply of water. The Nile River and the Red Sea's tributaries were soon behind them. They would have to rely on the occasional oasis, the spring or wadi in the wilderness. But Moses had lived for 40 years in the wilderness, so the journey seemed doable.

Three days into the journey they changed their minds. They found no water; then they found bitter water. So they cried out to Moses, "What shall we drink?" They faced an existential threat. Fortunately, the same God who had saved them was available to sustain them. When Moses cried out to the LORD, the LORD showed him a log. When Moses threw it into the water, the water became sweet.

A lesson was to be learned at Marah: "The Lord made a statute and rule and there he tested them. He called them to listen to his voice, to do what is right in the LORD's eyes, to give ear to his commandment and to keep his statutes." In response, he promised: "I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians. I am the LORD, your healer.

We all need the LORD's healing, for we have been broken by sin or slavery, from bitter experiences, from inadequate resources, or from other griefs and losses in life. We live in an environmentally broken world. Yet, the LORD is up to the challenge of changing our lives from bitter to sweet, just as he was up to the challenge of making the bitter water sweet in the wilderness. In fact, as we read in the last verse of this episode, He is ready to lead us to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palms.

The invitation to experience sweet springs of water is amplified many times in the Bible. Isaiah speaks of it saying, "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (12:3); and, "Come everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; come, buy and eat." (Isaiah 55:1)

In the gospel, Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water. (Jn 4:10). Then, "On the great day of the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'out of his heart will flow living water.'" (Jn. 7:37,38)

Reflections: To the question: What shall we drink? We see God's final answer as the saints are guided by the Lamb to springs of living water (Rev.7:17). The thirsty are given water from the springs of the water of life. (Rev. 21:6); Then the final invitation is made. "Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price. (Rev 22:17) Come! Sweet water is yours for the asking!

Testing 1,2,3: Water, Manna and Quail, Sabbath

Exodus 16:1-36

The way through the wilderness was planned by God. His cloud by day and pillar by night was the GPS system given to the people of God. These two guidance devices supplemented the personal knowing, seeing, hearing, and covenant keeping qualities of the LORD. If that were not enough, there were times when He showed his glory in the clouds and revealed his law in words spoken to Moses. All of this was the LORD's way of assuring the Israelites: "I've got this."

Thirty days into the journey, however, when the Lord commanded them to depart from Elim's Palm Springs and enter the wilderness of Sin, the people's confidence faltered. They were afraid that they would run out of food, just as they had run out of water on an earlier occasion. As a result, "the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled."

This was not the first time they grumbled, nor would it be the last. In fact, on at least 15 different occasions we hear of grumbling in Exodus. The word may be translated "growling, murmuring, whining." It was aimed against God, against Moses, against Aaron. Grumbling carries the connotation of "wearing out another by complaining. Grumbling against God is declaring that God is not sufficiently good, faithful, loving, wise, powerful, or competent."

In this chapter we see that the LORD responded to grumbling with grace and favor, but also with purpose. "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not."

If the provision of water in the wilderness was the first test, the second test pertained to the provision of food, and the third test addressed the issue of the sabbath. Manna was given to the people of Israel early in the morning and at the end of the day, quail came up and covered the camp in response to their anxious fears of starvation.

The instructions that the LORD communicated through Moses, addressed the third test: Will you walk in my law or not? Will you trust me enough to find a rhythm in your life that includes rest? Perhaps, they had been unable to practice a sabbath during their slave days in Egypt, but now they could put this in place. Sabbath is a time to reflect on the grace and goodness of God and to rest in him.

Why does God give us trials? James answers at the outset of his salty epistle. "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let your steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing." (James 1:2-4)

Facing tests is the path to maturity. When we joyfully engage in the tests given by God, we learn perseverance. This in turn reshapes our character. Only those people who willingly accept trials sent from God become perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Reflections: Are you going through a test right now? Consider what the LORD has in mind as He puts it in front of you. He is calling you to walk in His law, to remember that He is the LORD your God, that he is your Savior, your healer, your provider. Remember that he who saved you is the one who has promised to sanctify you wholly. The Apostle Paul put it this way to the Philippians: "I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Christ Jesus." (Ph 1:6) Rest assured!

Is the LORD Among Us or Not?

Exodus 17:1-7

Stage three in the pilgrimage of the congregation of the people of Israel took them from the wilderness of Sin to a camp called Rephidim. The name of that destination sounded promising – Resting Place. But upon arrival, the people discovered there was no water to drink.

Rather than perceiving that this was a test from God, to be faced with prayer and patience, the thirsty pilgrims made it an occasion for quarreling, grumbling, accusation and angry threats. By the time the crisis came to a head, the Israelites had turned the tables on God and made a formal charge against the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?” In fact, they were putting God on trial.

Three complaints came from the congregation of Israel. They were made to Moses, but God was the One with whom they were quarreling. Philip Ryken identifies these themes of their quarrel.

- a. They demanded God’s provision. “Give us water to drink.” Of course, God had done that before, but that was then. What about right now? What have you done for me lately, God?
- b. Next, they denied God’s protection. “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst? The complaint was void of substance. All they had to do was think about it for one minute and they would be able to count many protections the LORD had offered so far. The water from twelve springs had satisfied their thirst until yesterday! Then there was the continuing supply of manna and quail. The Lord protected them with a cloud by day and fire by night. He was moving them toward the promised land. Or was he?
- c. Thirdly, they doubted God’s presence. Is the LORD among us or not? (Ryken:449)

When Moses heard the accusations and dissatisfactions voiced by the Israelites, he cried out to God. “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

Rather than pouring out wrath on these demanding, denying and doubting masses, the LORD’s answer was full of grace which offered another growth opportunity for them. Moses was instructed to pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel and the staff with which you struck the Nile River.” These elders would witness the kindness of the LORD at His expense.

For his part, The LORD promised, “I will stand before you on the rock at Horeb. You shall strike the rock and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” Later in Israel’s history the Psalmist extolled the Lord as the rock of our salvation, but then warned the worshippers, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. (Psalm 95:1, 7-9)

Reflections: It is a serious offense to put God to the test. Bringing a legal case against the LORD is unacceptable folly. To avoid this in our lives, we need only to remember what he has done. Hear the wisdom of Psalm 103 and heed the advice:

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits,
who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.
The LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed.
He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.” (Psalm 103:2-5)

The LORD is My Banner

Exodus 17:8-16

Do you remember your first battle? Who picked the fight? Who threw the first punch? Who won? After I was involved in an incident which included an unfortunate racial comment and response, I had to put up or shut up. So, we met outside of the school building after school and went at it. It was shortly after that seventh-grade tussle that I was introduced to wrestling in Phys Ed. That became a much more positive outlet for me, and lasted for more than ten years.

Back in the time when Israel was traversing the wilderness, a bully named Amalek fought with Israel. The Amalekites were great grandsons of Esau. Why the fight? Perhaps Isaac's favoritism toward Jacob at Esau's expense had never been forgotten, though 400 years had since passed. Perhaps the Amalekites saw the arrival of the congregation of Israel in Rephidim and felt that this horde of people and livestock would eventually threaten the territory, especially the water supply they counted on in the Negev.

Whatever the case, the people of Amalek picked the fight and launched it before registering a complaint against the Israelites. Their method was atrocious. As described in Deuteronomy 25, they targeted the helpless, the weary stragglers, the women and the children who could not keep up with other pilgrims.

It was apparent that Moses would need to muster a force and go out to fight with Amalek. But by now, Moses realized that he needed something else. "Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." The sword and the staff would be Moses' strategy.

This brief passage describes the impact of the combined strategy. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. Moses determined to keep his hands raised, but his hands grew weary. At this point we hear about the support provided by Aaron and Hur. They sat Moses down on a rock, and came alongside him to steady his uplifted hands.

The outcome of this battle was an overwhelming victory at the expense of the Amalekites. It would last in perpetuity. For God had seen Amalek as a usurper who had lifted his hands against his anointed and would not tolerate it.

In memory of this first battle, Moses built an altar and called the name of it, "The LORD Is My Banner." What did Moses mean by this title? Ryken says, "A banner is a military standard, a piece of cloth bearing the army insignia and raised on a pole. It establishes their identity, keeps their bearings and gives them hope. When the soldiers looked up, they saw Moses with uplifted hands. The staff in his hands kept pointing to God. Thus, they would know: The LORD is my Banner. (Ryken:466)

Reflections: In what way do you acknowledge your dependence upon the LORD? How do you remember the lesson about persevering in prayer to the LORD. What causes you to recall that everyone has a part in the battle, from Joshua and the chosen soldiers on the field to Moses, Aaron and Hur on the hill?

The apostle Paul appealed to the church in Ephesus: "to take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayers and supplications..." (Eph. 6:17-18)

The sword of the Spirit and the staff (of intercessory prayer) belong together as we engage in spiritual warfare. When we hold both, we can be assured that "His oath, His covenant, His blood [will] sustain us through the whelming flood." (Excerpt from *On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand*, by Edward Mote)

Moses' Family Reunion

Exodus 18:1-27

Edith Schaeffer's *What is a Family?* is a classic presentation of the meaning of family. In her first chapter she describes a family as "the most versatile, ever-changing mobile that exists". "It is a moving, changing collection of objects constantly in motion, yet within the framework of a form." (Schaeffer:18)

Moses was part of an ever-changing family mobile. We are not told all the details, but we can at least reflect on some of the dynamics. His parents should be noticed as the courageous ones who brought him to life, and nurtured him on milk and on the milk of the Word of God. When they were forced to expose Moses to the outside world, they devised a creative plan that ended him in Pharaoh's court. Moses had a sister and brother. They contributed to his survival and his calling at significant moments in his life. When Moses fled from Egypt, he married into a Midianite family that included a father and seven daughters. One of those daughter's became his wife, and from their relationship, two sons were born.

When God met Moses at the burning bush at Mt. Horeb, he gave Moses the assignment to rescue the people of Israel. They were his firstborn, the family he had called into being, the ones through whom he planned to bless the entire world. As an incentive to obey, God promised that Moses "would return to that very place and serve God on this mountain." Moses finally agreed to engage in this rescue plan, said a respectful goodbye to his father-in-law and took his wife and boys with him. On the way his wife made sure that their firstborn son was included in the covenant family of God by circumcising him.

Nothing more is said of Moses' wife and family until the people of Israel arrived back at Mt. Horeb in fulfillment of God's promise. But now, Moses was close enough to his Midianite home, that it was time to have a family reunion. Moses sent his wife and children to their father's nearby home to visit him and to invite him to meet them at the mountain. Soon they were all together.

What went on at the family reunion? First there was a warm welcome accompanied by testimonies to the LORD's salvation of his people. That led to a declaration of faith in the LORD made by Jethro; and finally, Jethro gave wise advice which Moses implemented.

Reflections: This story has many applications for us, for we are all people in families that are moving and changing within the framework of a God-ordained form. Here are three questions to answer.

Are you willing to arrange a family reunion? Edith Shaeffer says, "family reunions ... are not a luxury that takes too much time and effort and money, but a definite necessity on someone's part if the mobile is to be beautiful and not lopsided and broken." (Schaeffer:26) Take the time and travel to make it happen.

Will you arrange time in the reunion to share the story of the saving work of God in each family member's life? When Jethro heard these powerful gospel stories, he professed his faith in the LORD and brought a burnt offering to God. Philip Ryken outlines the parts of the gospel story. We were in bondage, but God redeemed us by his mighty outstretched hand. Since then, God has delivered us from all the hardships we have faced in the wilderness journey to this very day. Allot plenty of time for this event!

Will you allow a family member to speak into your life a word of wisdom which you need to hear? Consider Edith Shaeffer's final thoughts: "There are no beautiful mobiles ... which have never been in danger of being broken." "People throw away what they could have, by insisting on perfection which they cannot have and looking for it where they will never find it." (Schaeffer:32). Keep this most versatile mobile moving within the framework of this form.

I Carried You on Eagles Wings

Exodus 19:1-8

Have you ever had a mountain top experience? I have. It was in the mountains of Colorado, though it wasn't at the top. As for the experience, it was the time when I came to know God personally. By following the instructions from an Inter-Varsity booklet, *How to Have a Quiet Time*, I started with a prayer in which I presented myself to God and asked God to show himself to me. I then opened the New Testament and "read until I heard God speaking to me." Then I wrote a journal entry pertaining to that message. I concluded my time on the mountain by pledging to apply God's word during that day.

Moses had a mountain top experience at Mt Horeb. There he met God at the burning bush. After hearing God speak, Moses reluctantly took on the huge challenge of delivering God's people out of slavery in Egypt. Among the incentives that moved him forward, Moses was promised that he would meet God again on this mountain.

The second mountaintop experience at Mt. Horeb took place three months after the exodus began. The text tells us that "Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God." On this second occasion, the LORD called to Moses out of the mountain with a message for Israel.

The message has been called "The Eagles' Wings Speech" (Kaiser). The words God spoke to Moses were formal. Their substance is "cast in the familiar Near Eastern suzerainty form." It was a covenant renewal speech. Kaiser identifies the pattern consisting of five parts. (Kaiser:415)

Preamble: v 3b. A summons by God. "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the people of Israel." Jacob had humble beginnings. He could only count 70 people in his entire clan. But now his offspring, the people of Israel, had become a nation of a million lives. How did this happen given the circumstances of slavery that lasted for 430 years?

Historical Prologue: v. 4. Israel survived the Egyptian oppression by the gracious intervention of the LORD. To the Egyptians he was like a bird of prey who destroyed them in their evil ways. To the Israelites, he was like the protective mother eagle who "carried you on (her) wings and brought you to myself."

Stipulations: v. 5a. Such a gracious salvation demanded a response. The expectations were clear, "Obey me fully and keep my covenant." Philip Ryken explains these stipulations as follows: "Anyone who wants to enjoy fellowship with God must make a basic commitment to do everything God says." (495)

Blessings: vv. 5b-6a. On the condition of such obedience, three blessings were extended to the Israelites. Out of all the nations, you will be my treasured possession... and you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." This blessing is an immense favor from God. It is not to be taken for granted.

Acceptance in a solemn assembly: vv. 7-8. When Moses spoke these words to the Israelites, they all responded together: "We will do everything the LORD has said." Amen, we might say, sounds great!

Reflections: What happened once this covenant renewal speech was ratified? First of all, the LORD articulated his specific demands in the form of the 10 commandments and the content of the Book of the Covenant. Then the LORD called Israel to make a sanctuary (Tabernacle) with its richly ornamented Ark, tables, basins, lampstands, and altars that he might dwell in their midst and they might worship him in holiness. How the Israelites failed to keep the stipulations and what God did in response to that failure awaits the introduction of a new covenant mediated by Christ who kept the conditions on our behalf.

Installation Service

Exodus 19:9-15

From time to time, I have had the privilege of participating in an installation service for a new pastor in a church. It is a joyous but also a solemn occasion. In it, a charge is given to the pastor and another to the congregation. A biblically based message is given and then a prayer is offered in which the elders place hands on the new minister and pray over him. At the end of the service, the new pastor gives a blessing to the people he will lead.

In the passage before us, we observe that the LORD himself gave the message. (“The Eagles’ Wings Speech” Ex. 19:4-8). He also charged Moses and validated his leadership by coming to [him] Moses) “in a thick cloud that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.” (Ex 19:9)

Next comes the charge to the congregation of Israel. Moses would participate in this in three distinct ways. First of all, he would obtain words from God and communicate what he received. Scholars tell us that the congregation of Israel camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai for 11 months. There they received messages from God through Moses that eventually became 58 chapters of the Holy Bible (Exodus 20-40, all of Leviticus and the first half of Numbers). The people must get ready to receive the Word of God.

The second part of the charge pertained to their consecration. Moses was to consecrate the people to God. The LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. (Ex. 19:10-11a) While we cannot say with certainty how Moses carried out this consecration, it is must have included some sacrifice, similar to the Passover sacrifice of the lamb. The people were called to respond by washing their garments and by abstaining from sexual relations for a brief time that they might focus entirely on the Word of God.

Finally, Moses was charged to bring a word of caution to the congregation. “Set limits for the people all around.” He must tell them: “Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.”

Why was this caution necessary? The most basic answer is that God is holy and we are not. Philip Ryken introduces his sermon on this passage by reminding his readers of the transcendence and immanence of God. He says the pendulum swings in church history between emphasis on one or the other, although both are equally important and must be held together. He surmises that we live in an age of immanence that sees God more as a personal friend than a supreme deity.

He illustrates the necessity of coming back into a balanced understanding by quoting Annie Dillard. She writes in *Teaching a Stone to Talk* about how dangerous it is to come into the presence of the living God. “It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. (Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, pp. 40-41, quoted in Ryken:501-502)

Reflections: The last time I was on a pastoral installation commission I gave the message from Isaiah 6. The vision Isaiah received in that context was of such a magnitude that Isaiah fell face down and cried out, “Woe is me for I am lost. For I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts.” How have you prepared for a meeting with the One who is almighty, sovereign, glorious, high and lifted up, transcendent and holy, holy, holy?

On the Third Day

Exodus 19:16-25

The storm was predicted three days in advance. The early spring like weather made me skeptical that any big deal would materialize. Then it happened. A lightning bolt pierced the darkness of the night. It was followed by the loudest crash of thunder I had ever heard. In fact, it was so powerful that the neighbor's car alarm went off. Then my security alarm went off. Sounds intensified from the car and the house. Lights flashed orange on the inside security panel. The security company sent a text message and a follow up phone call. Are you okay? When I managed to remember the passcode that was to signal that I was safe from all harm, the caller told me to have a good night and stay safe. (Total transparency: my wife was the brave one who went downstairs to make sure that no burglar had broken in and to shut off that loud, flashing warning system! We would live without that alarm system until the storm passed!)

On the third day the LORD came down on Mt. Sinai. Here's how the meeting was described.

“On the morning of third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast so that the people trembled.” Then Moses brought the people out of the camp and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mt. Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder, Moses spoke and God answered him in thunder.” (19:16-19)

Walter Kaiser said of this moment: “The advent of God took place amid a most impressive display of cosmic disruptions.” What difference did it make? Here are a few impressions.

First, this was a time of fear and trembling. Everyone in the camp trembled. (v. 16) In a corresponding verse in Hebrews, the writer reveals: “so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear. (Heb. 12:21). “A deep moral impression was made on the people for they were in the presence of the glorious majesty of the Holy God. who was about to reveal his person and character in his law. This magnificent event will be unexcelled until the Lord Jesus returns again in blazing fire.” (Kaiser:418)

Secondly, this was a time of intentional movement. Moses brought the people out of the camp; Moses was called up the Mountain; the Lord came down on Mount Sinai; the priests (firstborn sons) were invited to come near to the LORD; Moses was told to go down to get Aaron and to bring Aaron with him.

Thirdly, this was to be a time of intense anticipation. Of course, the immediate thing to anticipate was the revelation of God's law by which the people of God were to live in response to a holy God. God speaks to his people with clear guidance for living according to his will.

Reflections: This moment anticipates something greater than the revelation of God's moral law. This is spelled out in detail in Hebrews 12:18-24. “For you have not come to what may be touched (Mt Sinai); “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” Mt Sinai reveals our sin; Mt Zion reveals the one who took away our sin by bearing it in his body on the cross. Because of His sacrifice, we may leave all fear and trembling behind and join the festal gathering and assemble with all those enrolled in heaven as forgiven and perfected saints.

Ten Commandments

Exodus 20:1-21

The thunder and lightning, sound of the trumpet, smoke and earthquake on the mountain was God's way of presenting himself to Israel. If there ever was a theophany, this was it! God has shown up and manifested himself to human beings.

It was not just a "sound and light show," however. "God spoke all these words." The first thing he says is a reminder of who he is and what he has done. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The Covenant God has kept his gracious promise and has delivered his people. His relationship with them has risen above every storm, all complaining, grumbling, doubts and fears and the rebellions of his people. He has met them at every crisis and has maintained watch over them day and night. He has brought them to this place for a covenant making ceremony.

On this day, the LORD articulated his law in ten words. Kaiser summarizes the purpose of these precepts: "The purpose of the law of God was 1) to show man's awful sinfulness in his moral distance from God; 2) to show man's need for a mediator if he ever was to approach God; 3) to show man how to live more abundantly by using the unchangeable perfections of the nature of God as revealed in the moral law as his guide." (Kaiser:420)*

The "Ten Words" spoken by the voice of God reveal the three right relationships that God requires: First and foremost, God demands single-minded devotion to him. "You shall have no other gods before me." If the people of Israel were at all observant during their sojourn in Egypt, they would have seen that the Egyptians worshiped everything that moved and worshipped Pharaoh as a god-like being. Because of that, the One and only true God had completely decimated Egypt and all her so-called gods. The LORD called Israel to avoid making any visual or verbal representations of God. Name Image and Likeness (NIL) is a 21st Century concept with 10 commandment roots. Athletes demand payment for the use of their name, image and likeness. But God says, there's no place for promoting the names of anyone but the One invisible God according to His Holy name. Making an image of him to worship can only defames him.

Second, God called Israel to remember the Sabbath. This is a proper response to God's work of Creation and Redemption. In six days, the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them. Then he rested. In a short season he used Moses to redeem the people of Israel from the house of slavery, so that they, too, could rest in prospect of a final rest in the promised land. Ryken notes the word remember in his commentary on the sabbath. Remember, the LORD's Day is for worship, mercy and rest.

Third, God calls them to "Honor your father and mother." Family is the basic building block of society. When parents raise children in honorable ways and children honor their parents, the children learn how to bless the society into which they will emerge. Honoring parents teaches them to not murder, not commit adultery, to not steal, lie or covet what God has given to neighbors but not to them.

Reflections: But what if I do not keep these ten words? It appears that the words God spoke frightened and convicted the people. Hence, they said to Moses: "You speak to us and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." It is a fearful thing to stand in the presence of God. The only way we can do so is if the LORD sends his mediator. This is exactly what he did when he sent his one and only Son. The Apostle Paul taught his "son" Timothy this truth when he wrote: "There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" He is the LORD of Glory. He came from heaven to earth to ransom us by his blood shed on the cross. Follow him and he will lead you through the wilderness, be the fulfillment of the law in your place, and give you his salvation so rich and free.

Afterward:

This devotional was originally intended to be a forty-day study for Lent. As I delved into it in my morning time, I found three things conspiring against the plan: First, there were more than forty lessons in this great book of Exodus; second, the travel through the wilderness was put on pause when the people of Israel arrived at Sinai. The theme of the way through the wilderness would not be picked up until Numbers 10; and third, I was unprepared to write about the Book of the Covenant, the articles ordained by God to be made for divine worship and the building of the Tabernacle.

At another date, I would like to go back to Exodus 20 and do a more in-depth analysis of the Ten Commandments and write more extensively about the uses of the law and the relationship between the Law and the Incarnate LORD. Then, if God allows, I will pursue the study of the topics listed below and write some more. If you're curious, you can note the headings I have saved for that later date.

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| 1. The Love of God Commandments | Exodus 20:3-11 |
| 2. The Love of Neighbor Commandments | Exodus 20:12-18 |
| 3. Understanding the use of Law until the Lord's coming | Exodus 20:19-21 |
| 4. Understanding the Law in light of the Lord's coming | Romans and Galatians |
| 5. The Book of the Covenant | Exodus 20:22-23:19 |
| 6. The Promise of Conquest of the Land of Canaan | Exodus 23:20-33 |
| 7. Ratification: We Will Do Everything the LORD Has Said | Exodus 24:1-18 |
| 8. Articles for Divine Worship in The Tabernacle | Exodus 25 -31 |
| 9. False Worship of the Golden Calf; | Exodus 32 |
| 10. Moses the Mediator | Exodus 33-34 |
| 11. Building the Tabernacle: Gifts and Artisans | Exodus 35-39 |
| 12. The Glory of the LORD Filled the Tabernacle | Exodus 40:1-38 |

For now, there are 31 devotions for the thirty one days of March, or for the next time you can put together 31 days to explore Exodus. Lord willing, we will meet again in the pages of the book of Exodus and we shall pick up the journey once again.

David Brown, March 1, 2024