

Part IV: Understanding the Old Testament

4: Exodus and Redemption

As we turn the last pages of Genesis, we see God working toward the fulfillment of His promises to Abraham. God's people had grown significantly, which was perfectly in line with His promise that Abraham's descendants would be "as numerous as the stars in the sky." But as soon as we start reading in the book of Exodus, it looks like something has gone wrong. Exodus begins with a significant problem: God's people are slaves in a foreign land.

Israel's Captivity

Understand that the first two chapters of Exodus cover four hundred years. We can quickly read over descriptions of the Israelites¹ making

1 The "Israelites" are the descendants of Abraham. They are named after Jacob (Abraham's grandson), whose name God changed to "Israel."

Pharaoh's² bricks and building Pharaoh's cities, yet overlook the fact that this had been going on for a long time! These short stories summarize a huge amount of suffering. Understandably, the Israelites seem to have given up hope by this point—after all, they were forced to continue in backbreaking labor day after day, generation after generation, without any indication that it would end.

This raises an important question: Was God really keeping His promises to Abraham if his descendants were slaves in Egypt? The answer is yes. In fact, God specifically told Abraham that this would happen:

The LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.”
(Gen. 15:13–14)

God's promises to Abraham were exactly on track, and as the book of Exodus opens, the scene is being set for the greatest act of redemption that the world has seen to this point. Here we find God's people in an impossible situation without any hope of relief. If God is going to keep His promises to Abraham, then He will have to accomplish something spectacular. As it turns out, God's display of power in Israel's exodus is frequently mentioned in the rest of the

2 “Pharaoh” was the title of the ruler of Egypt.

Bible as clear evidence of God's commitment to His people and His power to redeem.

Moses's Encounter with I AM

Adding to the agony of slavery, Pharaoh commanded that all male Hebrew babies were to be drowned in the Nile River. It is at this seemingly hopeless time that we meet Moses. By his mother's cunning and God's provision, Moses survived this slaughter. At this vulnerable moment at the beginning of his life, no one could have predicted how greatly God would use Moses.

After Moses's mother saved him by floating him down the Nile in a basket, Pharaoh's daughter discovered, raised, and educated him. Though trained in the house of Pharaoh, it seems that Moses deeply understood his connection to the nation of Israel. In fact, it was an early attempt to fight for his people by murdering an Egyptian that led Moses to flee to the wilderness.

During this period of exile, God was preparing to rescue His people from slavery:

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

It is important to recognize that what God was about to do here was directly related to His covenant with Abraham. Though the situation seemed entirely hopeless, God “saw” His people, and He “knew.”

Just as He did with Abraham, God chose to begin this next phase of redemptive history through one man: Moses. As Moses tended his father-in-law’s sheep in the wilderness, Moses had an unforgettable encounter with God—an event that changed his life and shapes our understanding of who God is.

1. *Read Exodus 2:23–3:22 carefully. It records one of the rare instances when a human being had an audible conversation with Almighty God. What stands out to you about Moses’s encounter with God in this passage?*

When Moses saw the burning bush, he walked closer to see what was going on. As he approached, He heard the voice of God telling him to take off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. As God revealed His plan to use Moses to set Israel free, Moses asked God two questions.

The first question was “Who am I?” Who am I, God, that You would send me, a stammering shepherd, to defy a powerful king and lead Your people? The second question was, “Who are You?” When people ask who sent me, what should I tell them?

Though Moses was backpedaling from what God was calling him to do, these are both excellent questions. They are the most fundamental questions we could ever ask, because everything in our lives—not only here and now, but for all of eternity—is based on a right answer to those two questions: Who am I, and who is God?

God answered Moses's first question by pointing to Himself. Moses asked, "Who am I?" and God simply replied, "I will be with you." God's response at this point should be fundamental to the way we view ourselves. From the very beginning, God's people are known as those whose God is with them. We belong to Him, and there is no way that we can define ourselves apart from God. It is His presence with us that enables us to accomplish the tasks He gives us.

In response to Moses's second question ("Who are You?"), God said very simply, "I AM WHO I AM." This is not a dismissive statement. It is very significant, and there's much to be learned from this declaration. God was explaining that He cannot define Himself by pointing to anyone or anything else. The name I AM speaks of His eternity. Whereas an appropriate name to describe us would be "I became" or "I was brought into existence," God's name is "I AM" because He has always existed. He is who He is, and that is who He will always be. This is a statement of absolute being, absolute power, absolute importance. God is who He is, and He never changes.

When we examined the creation account, we briefly looked at God's personal name in Genesis 2. That name is "Yahweh" (translated in most English Bibles as "the LORD," with all capital letters), a name that comes from this statement to Moses. "Yahweh" carries the significance of God's statement to Moses: I AM WHO I AM. The name "Yahweh" is actually used over six thousand times in the

Old Testament—three times as often as the simple name for God, “Elohim” (which is the title for God we saw in Genesis 1). The implication of this frequent use of God’s personal name is that God aims to be known in Scripture not just as a generic deity, but as a specific person with a wholly unique character and a special relationship with His people.

It’s impossible to convey exactly what this encounter must have been like for Moses. He walked away from his sheep because he saw something remarkable—a bush that was burning without being consumed—but he had no idea that he was actually walking into the presence of the living God. God immediately commanded Moses to take off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. As soon as Moses saw what was really happening, he hid his face. God’s holiness was more than he could bear. All he could do was listen and obey.

Let My People Go

God then sent Moses back to Egypt to lead His people out of slavery and into the land that He had promised to give Abraham’s descendants. When Moses arrived, he gave Pharaoh a simple command from God: “Let my people go!”

Not only did Pharaoh refuse to let Israel go free, he intensified their labor to the point that the Israelites got angry at Moses for provoking Pharaoh. Even Moses himself seemed to have lost heart at this point. But God continued to carry out His plan of redemption, showing His resolve to keep His covenant with Abraham and to free His people from bondage.

2. *Read Exodus 5:22–6:13. What does this passage reveal about God and His relationship to His people?*

Understand that this battle is nothing short of a showdown between Yahweh, the God of Israel, and Pharaoh, the supposed son of the sun god, Ra. The Egyptians earnestly believed that their king was a god, and as such, he was responsible for maintaining order in the natural world. When God used Moses to deliver the ten plagues, He was demonstrating His absolute power over everything that Egypt's god-king claimed control over. Many of the plagues seem to have been directed against specific Egyptian deities (e.g., the plague of darkness would have been an embarrassment to Ra, the sun god), but all of them would have undermined Pharaoh's claim to deity.

Just as we saw in the accounts of creation, the flood, and the tower of Babel, we are seeing that God controls every aspect of the world He created, and He will not share His authority with anyone. He fights for His own glory and proves that He is the ultimate power and only true God.

The Passover Lamb

Though God clearly demonstrated His power over Pharaoh and all of Egypt's gods through the first nine plagues, it was the tenth plague

that ultimately got Pharaoh's attention. God warned that unless Pharaoh released His people, every firstborn in the land of Egypt would be killed. Tragically, Pharaoh refused, and the consequences were devastating:

At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians. And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead. (Ex. 12:29–30)

It is difficult to image such a scene. It is morbid and hard to stomach, but it teaches us an important lesson about God. Just as He is faithful to keep His promises of blessing, God is also faithful to carry out His warnings of wrath. This is important to keep in mind in a time when so many doubt and even ridicule God's intention to punish.

Notice that God had graciously offered the Egyptians an alternative before it got to this point. Pharaoh could have submitted to God's call and his nation would have been preserved. God also provided an alternative for the Israelites. Any Israelite who put the blood of a lamb on their doorpost would be "passed over"—the angel of death would move on to the next house.

Imagine what this would have been like for the Israelites. Imagine bringing a cute lamb into your house, a lamb that you and

your kids feed, care for, and play with. And then, just when your kids are getting used to this nice little lamb, you slaughter it. You take its blood, and as your children watch, you wipe it across the doorpost over your home. That's an image that sticks with a kid—and a family.

And imagine your little boy or your little girl asking, “Why did you do that, Daddy?” And your response would be: “The lamb was a substitute. Instead of someone in our family dying, the lamb died. Look at your brother, and realize that the lamb died instead of him.”

The stark reality of that night is that the only people who were exempt from judgment were those who put blood on their doorposts, and in so doing, trusted that death would pass over them. It's not that the Israelites didn't experience God's judgment because they were better people. They escaped God's judgment simply because they trusted in the sacrifice provided by God. And everyone—even slaves—who trusted in that sacrifice was spared on that night.

This is the picture we see throughout Scripture, and it is important to keep in mind for the next session when you read about God's covenant with Moses and the laws that God gave to govern His people. Keep in mind that from the very beginning the only way to receive forgiveness was through trusting the Forgiver. The only way to be a recipient of the promises of God is to trust God. The people were saved only because they trusted God as they saw the blood of a spotless lamb over their doorposts.

This night was the first Passover, an event that the Jews have celebrated once a year ever since. It is full of significance that Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, recast the Passover celebration in terms of His own death and resurrection. Jesus could hardly have been clearer that He was laying down His life for His followers, as their Passover Lamb.

Paul makes this connection explicit in the New Testament where he told us, “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7).

3. *How does God’s provision of the Passover Lamb for the Israelites help us understand Jesus’s sacrifice for us?*

Through the Red Sea

Though the death of every firstborn in Egypt convinced Pharaoh to release the Israelites, he soon changed his mind and chased after them. This provided the backdrop for one the most memorable events in salvation history. As Israel sat with their backs to the Red Sea, Pharaoh’s army approached rapidly. It seemed certain that their exodus from slavery was over immediately after it began.

But nothing is too difficult for God; nothing can stop Him from fulfilling His promises. He proved this by splitting the waters of the Red Sea, allowing His people to walk across on dry land, and then destroying Pharaoh and his army as the waters closed in around them. As God redeemed His people by leading them out of slavery, He demonstrated in dramatic fashion that Israel’s God is unlike any other so-called god.

4. *Read Exodus 15:1–21. How did the Israelites describe God’s act of redemption immediately after He led them out of slavery?*

Take a minute to consider the exodus account. Though God sometimes makes direct statements about who He is and how we should relate to Him, He often reveals Himself to us through His actions. Reflect on what God did as He called His people out of Egypt and answer the questions below.

5. *What do God's actions in Israel's exodus teach us about God?*

6. *The story of the exodus sets the paradigm for what God's redemption looks like. How have you seen God's hand at work in your own life?*

A Forgetful People

As we close this session, it may be helpful to take note of Israel's long-term reaction to God's incredible deliverance. What did they do, time and again, in response to God's redemptive grace? They forgot! They complained! They longed for the days when they were back in Egypt.

As we read these accounts, it seems unbelievable. How could this people who had so clearly seen God's hand at work stop trusting God and begin complaining about their circumstances?

But before we become too critical of the Israelites, let's look at our own lives. We may not have been saved from an oncoming army by walking through the sea on dry land, but those events are a part of our heritage. Not only that, but we have seen God come through for us in incredibly powerful and personal ways. No matter what we try to make ourselves believe in our darkest moments, every one of us has unmistakably seen the hand of God in our lives. But we forget. We complain. We lose our trust in God and try to go back to doing things our own way.

Take some time to learn from Israel's example and focus on remembering God's provision in life's most difficult circumstances.

7. *What does Israel's tendency to forget God's redemption and begin complaining teach us about humanity?*

8. *Make this more personal. Take some time to write about the times that God rescued you. What can you do to keep yourself focused on who God is and what He has done?*

9. *Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to make the story of Israel's exodus vivid to you. Ask Him for the faith to believe that He will come through on His promises to you no matter how desperate the situation appears. Pray that God would help you trust Him for your salvation.*



Watch the video for this session at multiplymovement.com.