

LESSONS FROM EXODUS
YAHWEH: THE GOD WHO SAVES
Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road
Plymouth, Michigan 48170
Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 10.07.2001

In a little more than a month, we will celebrate the Thanksgiving Holiday. For you history buffs, Thanksgiving was proclaimed a national holiday in America by President Lincoln in 1863. Now, I would like for you to imagine what Thanksgiving would be like if there had never been a Declaration of Independence. In other words, how much of our celebration revolves around the thanksgiving we have for the country in which we live? But, who came first—the Pilgrims or the Patriots? Which came first—1621 or 1776? My point is this: July 4, 1776, America's birth as a free nation *is the crucial event* for our country. And so, everything that had happened before and everything that has happened after is seen through the lenses of this crucial event. Even though the Thanksgiving Holiday traces its roots back to 1621, much of its modern meaning derives from the crucial event of 1776.

In a similar way, Old Testament Israel's life-story did not begin with the time of Abraham or even with the Creation, although our Bible starts there. Rather, Israel's history as a nation had its true beginning in a crucial historical experience, an event so decisive that all that had happened before and all that did happened after was seen in the light of this event. The decisive event for Israel was *the Exodus from Egypt*. Even today, the Jewish people understand their duty and their destiny in the light of this event. Perhaps it is not too much for me to say that what the Cross of Christ is to Christians, the Exodus from Egypt is to Jews. And yet for Christians, we bring *both* of these saving events together in the Lord's Supper. We remember and we revere the Messiah who saves us, and we do this in a meal that has its roots in the Passover, which was a celebration of the God who saves. It is no surprise, then, that the Exodus—and the events and experiences with it—*is the pivotal event in the Old Testament*. Apart from the actual story itself, the Exodus theme is referred to about 120 times in the Hebrew Bible.

The Ten Commandments—almost anyone you talk to has heard of the Ten Commandments. Now they may not know what all of the commandments are, but they—more than likely—know what you are talking about. But do you recall *how* the Ten Commandments begin? Do you recall *how* God introduces and identifies Himself? Look with me at Exod 20, beginning at verse 1:

Then God spoke all these words, saying: “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods in My presence” (Exod 20:1-3).

Notice that God did *not* say, “I am Yahweh, your God, creator of the heavens and the earth; you shall have no other gods in My presence.” God identifies Himself, not as the Sovereign Creator, but as the Saving Redeemer. God bases His claim to Israel’s allegiance on His role as their Savior. We might compare the words of God to Israel through His passionate prophet Hosea:

Only I Yahweh have been your God
Ever since the land of Egypt;
You have never known a [true] God but Me,
You have never had a savior other than Me (Hos 13:4).

Perhaps you are thinking, “Enough already! Royce, what is your point?” Ok, here is the main point of this entire lesson: *Yahweh, the God of Israel, is above all else the Great Redeemer. Stated another way: The supreme characteristic of Yahweh is that He is the God who saves.*

What I would like to do now is back-up. I have told you the main point. You now know how this movie ends. But let’s back-up and let’s delve into the story of the Exodus in the book of the Bible that is named after that very event. For this lesson, I have chosen to dive-in at chapter 5 of the Book of Exodus. The translation that I will be reading is my own. As I translated this text, I did so as if I was writing a script for a dramatic presentation. This means that I have taken the liberty to add a number of details as I try to recreate for you the scene and the story. We begin at verse 1 of chapter 5.

After Moses and Aaron had met with the leaders and the people of Israel and had told them that Yahweh was coming to their rescue, they went to Pharaoh. They said to Pharaoh, “Yahweh, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Release My people! I want My people to celebrate a festival for Me in the wilderness.’” But Pharaoh retorted, “Is that so! Who is Yahweh that I Pharaoh, [the divine son of Ra], should pay any attention to what He says and so release Israel? I do not acknowledge Yahweh’s authority; furthermore, I have no intention of releasing

Israel.” Intimidated by Pharaoh’s aggressive arrogance, Moses and Aaron responded, “This was not our idea. The God of the Hebrews has manifested Himself to us, and this is what He told us to say to you. So, please, let us go a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to Yahweh our God. Otherwise, our God may become angry and strike us with disaster. Of course, if He does that, you will lose your work-force.” But the king of Egypt said to them, “Moses and Aaron, who do you think you are to distract the people from their work? You get back to work! You listen to me. These peasants are now a horde, and you are causing them to neglect their work.”

And so that very day Pharaoh gave orders to the work-bosses over the people, and their section-leaders as well, specifying: “You are to stop gathering straw to give to the people for brick-making as you have done up to now. They can go and they can gather straw for themselves. But do not reduce their production quotas by a single brick. They are lazy and obviously do not have enough to do. That is why they have time for all this talk about going into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to their God. Load the loafers down with more work. Make them sweat! Then they will have their hands full and will pay no attention to Moses and Aaron’s pack of lies that promise deliverance” (Exod 5:1-9).

At this point, life becomes inhumanly harsh for the Israelites. In fact, the Hebrew work-leaders confront Moses and Aaron with these words: “May Yahweh judge you and punish you because you have made us disgusting in the opinion of Pharaoh and in the opinion of his advisors. You have given them a good excuse to massacre us” (Exod 5:21). Wow! Those are strong words. Let’s pick-up at verse 22 of chapter 5 and continue reading into chapter 6.

Then Moses turned on Yahweh and protested, “Lord, why have You mistreated Your own people like this? Why did You send me? From the minute I came to Pharaoh to deliver Your message, he has been even more brutal to Your people. Things have only gotten worse. You have not even begun to rescue Your people!” (Exod 5:22-23).

[Now if this were a movie, the music would change. Imagine that you are hearing the theme from *Rocky*—that’s what I would play—because we are about to have a real fight on our hands. Let’s continue with the script.]

But Yahweh said to Moses, “Get ready! Because now you are about to see what I am going to do to Pharaoh. If he wants a fight, then I will give him a fight! When I get through with Pharaoh, he will be so anxious to get rid of My people that he will force them to leave his land!” (Exod 6:1).

Do you hear what Yahweh is saying? What indescribably incredible words! God is practically warning Moses to stand back and watch out because he is about to see something the likes of which has never been seen before. Pharaoh, who believes himself to be the

incarnation of a god and thus that his power is unlimited, his will is incontestable, and his utterances are unalterable, this Pharaoh is going to get whooped. God does not say that He is going to take His people from Pharaoh. No. No. No. He says that He is going to make Pharaoh give them up. God (May we use the word “boast”?) . . . God boasts that He is going to make Pharaoh do what He, that is God, wants done. This is the language of a fight. Of course, you already know who the winner is going to be—I told you at the beginning of the lesson. Now, look to verse 6 of chapter 6. Yahweh, the LORD God, is the speaker.

Moses, this is what I want you to say to the Israelites: I am Yahweh. I will free you from the oppressive burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their slavery, and I will redeem you with mighty power and with marvelous acts of judgment. And I will take you to be My very own people, and I will be your God. And you will know by first-hand experience that I am Yahweh your God, the One who has freed you from the oppressive burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land which I solemnly swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, and I will give it to you as an inherited possession. I am Yahweh (Exod 6:6-8).

In a future lesson, I plan to return to this text. But for today, I want to focus on the four verbs of redemption: “I will free . . . I will deliver . . . I will redeem . . . I will take you.” According to several rabbinic sources, it is on the basis of this four-fold promise of redemption that there arose the obligation to drink four cups of wine at the Passover Feast. Now, some of you may be thinking—and you are kind enough to keep it to yourself—so what? Well, that is a good question. You see, in order for us to fully appreciate the significance of what Jesus did at what we call “the Last Supper”—which, in fact, was a Passover Meal—we need to understand that the four cups of wine which were a part of “the Last Supper” were interpreted in the light of what we refer to as Exod 6:6-7. Here is my point: Jesus used the third cup, which was associated with the promise “I will redeem you,” to refer to His atoning death on behalf of all those who would believe in Him. The cup which Jesus refused to drink was the cup of consummation; the cup associated with the promise “I will take you to be My very own people and I will be your God.” Jesus promised to drink this final cup with His disciples when the fullness of God’s Kingdom would be a reality. When we participated, just a few moments ago, in the Lord’s Supper, we celebrated that *Yahweh is above all else the Great Redeemer*. In our communion, we celebrated that *the supreme characteristic of Yahweh is that He is*

the God who saves. We shared in a meal that proclaims the LORD God as the one and only Savior from the Exodus from Egypt to the Cross of Golgotha. And we shared in a meal that proclaims our Savior is returning some day to take us to that ultimate banquet with Him. And what a banquet that will be! Every Sunday, when we come to the Lord's Table and partake in the Lord's Supper, we remember and we revere Yahweh for His mighty and marvelous works of salvation in the past, and in the present, and in the future. *Let the world know that the Sovereign who reigns is the Savior who redeems!* That is the good news of the gospel.

I wish that I could end this lesson on this upbeat note; but I cannot. There is something else about the story that we have been studying that we cannot overlook. We have seen how Moses and Aaron were intimidated by Pharaoh and cursed by their own people, all because they informed Pharaoh of Yahweh's demand to release the Hebrew people. Pharaoh responded with bold and bullish brutality. This, in turn, caused Moses to ask Yahweh, "What are You up to? You have only made matters worse for the Israelites." God reassured Moses with promises of awesome acts of power and judgment, and sent Moses back to the people with a message overflowing with the hope of freedom, deliverance, redemption, and possession of the fulfilled promises of a Saving Sovereign. And so, I ask, how did God's people respond to God's promises? We read as follows from verse 9 of Exodus chapter 6: "So when Moses repeated to the Israelites the words [of Yahweh], they would not listen to Moses because their spirits were crushed by cruel bondage." When we read on in the story, we find no further attempt is made to speak to the people until the very eve of their liberation (Exod 12:3).

"They would not listen to Moses because their spirits were crushed by cruel bondage." That statement breaks my heart. What else could God say to lift the spirits of His people? The answer: nothing else. The time of promising was done; the time for performing had come. And so begins the battle between Pharaoh and Yahweh, and you know how that battle ends.

The Israelites' unwillingness (And may I be so bold as to say their "inability"?). . . the Israelites' unwillingness and their inability to listen to Moses is a powerful testimony to the fact that the willingness and the ability to hear the word of God can be adversely affected by the conditions in which people live. Until the conditions are made better, the

good news of God cannot break through into the minds and hearts of the people. Without hope, they cannot hear. Their future must come from outside of themselves. And that is the whole point of this lesson: *God acts anyway. Yahweh is the God who saves!*

I am fairly certain that all of us who belong to this congregation believe that we have a responsibility to proclaim the good news of the Gospel to those who are not a part of the people of God. But—and get ready, here comes a tough question—do we also have a responsibility to help them hear? What is our responsibility when we have the opportunity to teach those who are beaten-down by life and whose spirits are crushed? Can we share hope without first sharing help? How do we help the hopeless to hear?

These are hard questions, and I pray that we are *always* bothered by them. Yes, I believe that we must share both help and hope. Sometimes, that help may be in the form of food. It may be in the form of clothing. It may be in the form of shelter. It may be in the form of a listening ear and a sympathetic shoulder. It may be in the form of much needed friendship. Whatever the form of help, it will most surely involve loving the unlovely, accepting the unacceptable, and serving the sinful. It will not be easy; but neither is getting your people out of Egypt or carrying your cross to Calvary. God acts. The question is, do we?

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