

LESSONS FROM EXODUS
YAHWEH: THE GOD OF PURPOSE
Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road
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History. In less than thirty minutes, this sermon will be “history.” Now if I said this sermon is going to be two hours in length, many of you would discourage me from being so long-winded with the warning, “If you do that, you’re ‘history.’” History—what is it?

According to Henry Ford (1863-1947), “History is bunk.” Let’s be honest. Most of us, remembering when we were students or those of us who are students, do not become excited about history classes. Some of us would agree with Ford: “History is bunk.” Others of us would not go that far, but we would admit, “History may not be bunk, but it sure is boring.” And yes, a few of us—including myself—enjoy the study of history.

George Santayana (1863-1952), a contemporary of Mr. Ford, had a much greater appreciation for history. He said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Well, whatever may be the lessons of history, one thing seems certain: we are not very good learners. Another way of putting that is to raise the question, Why is it that nobody listens when history repeats itself?

In the world of ancient Mesopotamia, the Sumerians, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians shared a similar view of the passage of time. To them, past, present, and future were all part of one continuous stream of events in heaven and on earth. There was a beginning in the distant past, but there was no middle and there was no end; gods and humans alike just continued on and on and on. Since there was no “end” of time—that is, time had no termination—there was no “end” for time—that is, time had no destination. Without an ending point, time was pointless. Generally speaking, the Ancient Near Eastern worldview devalued history.¹ Although the gods intervened in

¹See Bill T. Arnold, “The Weidner Chronicle and the Idea of History in Israel and Mesopotamia,” in *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context* (ed. Alan R. Millard, James K. Hoffmeier, David W. Baker; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 129-148.

history, there was no concept among the ancient peoples of a God who was the supreme sovereign over history and who had a purposeful plan for history.

Ancient Israel, however, had a decidedly different view of time and history, because Israel had Yahweh as her God. For the first time in human history, there was an interest in the unique events of history because they revealed God's will for His people. And also, for the first time, there was a definite plan in history, which had a specific ending point. The Israelites were the only ones in the ancient world to have an eschatology—that is, a doctrine of last things. After all, there can be no belief in last things unless there is a belief that some things are going to be last. For Israel, history had a beginning and it has a conclusion.

Ok. Here is the bottom line: History is *not* a procession of causeless, undirected, meaningless happenings but it *is* the deliberate, purposeful, unfolding plan of the LORD God. *Yahweh is the God of purpose!* This means that you and I cannot begin to understand the Old Testament if we see it simply as great literature, or interesting history, or the development of lofty ideas. It does not claim to be merely a book of *secular* history. It is *sacred* history to both Jews and Christians, because in these historical happenings, as seen through the eyes of faith, the ultimate meaning of human life is revealed. History is His-story—God's story.

If I may be so bold, there is a common expression that I wish to challenge. We often, quite innocently, speak of God “intervening in history.” To say that God intervenes, seems to suggest that He interferes with and interrupts the normal course of events. But exactly what do we mean by “intervenes”? Exactly what do we mean by “the normal course of events”? Is it normal for God to *not* intervene? Sometimes, when speaking of God “intervening in history,” we refer to His “supernatural acts of intervention.” But, if His intervention is supernatural, does that mean that His non-intervention is natural? Please bear with me. I am not trying to get my kicks by playing word games. I am trying to cause all of us to think about a very complex subject; namely, God's involvement in our world. This is my point: The words “intervention” and “supernatural” describe our perspective of things. From our perspective, such things are not normal. But our perspective is a very limited one. We see only a part of the picture, not the whole picture itself. And to paint a picture of history that leaves out God is, I believe, to paint a picture

that is abnormal and unnatural. God is the director of history, and history is the stage upon which He acts. *God's "intervention"—as we perceive it—is the normal, natural course of events.* Without Yahweh, there is *no* history—end of story!

So, what is the plot of this story? As we continue our study of the identity and character of Yahweh in the Book of Exodus, our question for today is: What is God's design for our destiny? Look with me, please, to Exodus chapter 5 and verse 22. Just a bit of background. Moses has delivered to Pharaoh Yahweh's demand that the Hebrews are to be allowed to go into the wilderness to celebrate a festival to Yahweh. Pharaoh responded by denouncing Yahweh's demand and then proceeded to inhumanly increase the workload of the Hebrew slaves. Now, Moses comes to Yahweh, and we begin to read at verse 22 of Exodus chapter 5.

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!"

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!"

And God continued to speak to Moses, saying, "I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shaddai (אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי) but by My name Yahweh (יְהוָה) I did not reveal Myself to them. Indeed, I set up My covenant with them, to give to them the land of Canaan, the land of their wanderings, where they lived as foreigners. Now, I have heard for Myself the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians have forced into slavery, and so I have remembered My covenant. 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 5:22-6:8).

For most folks, verse 3 of chapter 6 is somewhat puzzling: "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shaddai but by my name Yahweh I did not reveal Myself to them." First, whatever else God is saying, He cannot be saying, "In times past, the only name by which I have been known is El Shaddai, but now I want to be known by the new

name Yahweh.” The fact is, the name Yahweh appears numerous times in the stories of Genesis. Furthermore, the name Yahweh is intended to inspire the hearts and hopes of the oppressed Israelites. It seems rather far-fetched to imagine that the Israelites would find comfort and courage in a name they had never heard. Second, although the name El Shaddai is usually translated “God Almighty,” we do not know with certainty what the name means. What we do know is that, in all likelihood, El Shaddai is an ancient name for God that became obsolete with the ministry of Moses. Third, here is what I believe to be the best way to understand this verse: God is saying, “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (in limited form) as El Shaddai (who makes covenantal promises). But I was not the object of (full) covenantal knowledge to them as conveyed by My name Yahweh (who keeps covenantal promises).”² The very nature of God’s promises to the patriarchs was such that they could not be fulfilled during the lifetime of the patriarchs.

Descendants as numerous as the sands of the seashore and as numerous as the stars in the sky, and then possession of the land of Canaan by these descendants, was not something the patriarchs would live to see. The promises made to them belonged to the distant future. But now, with the calling and commissioning of Moses, the descendants of the patriarchs will know God more fully as Yahweh who makes good on His promises. At the risk of oversimplification, let me offer this generalization: *El Shaddai is the God who promises; Yahweh is the God who performs.*

If then, Yahweh is a God who performs what He has promised, it should be obvious that He is a God who purposes and plans. Let’s look again at the complete text of Exod 5:22-6:8. Moses’ speech to God consists of two parts: he asks two questions and then he files a complaint. The two questions: (1) “Why have You mistreated Your own people?” (2) “Why did You send me?” The questions, raised in a reproachful tone of voice, are followed by a forthright complaint: “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!” Putting all this together, Moses’ concern is, “God, what are You up to anyway?”

²Translation suggested by W. Randall Garr, “The Grammar and Interpretation of Exodus 6:3,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992): 385-408.

God's reply falls into two parts. First, He reassures 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!" And then, God reveals what He is up to. "Moses, you want to know what in the world I am doing. Ok. Here is My plan. But before I spell-out the details, let Me tell you who you are dealing with—I am Yahweh!" (Three times, in the space of seven verses, God uses this self-identification: "I am Yahweh" (vv. 2, 6, 8).) Now, let's examine the details of God's design. First, Yahweh's initial design for His people is deliverance: "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." Second, Yahweh's design is to form a godly community: "And I will take you to be My very own people, and I will be your God." As important as deliverance is, it is only preparatory to larger concerns. The rescued Hebrews are to stand together as a community marked as God's special possession. Third, Yahweh's intention is that there be an on-going relationship with His people: "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." Fourth, Yahweh's intention for His people is that they enjoy the good life: "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." The land, described elsewhere as a land flowing with milk and honey (Exod 3:17), comes to symbolize the abundant life. Salvation—Community—Relationship—Life . . . That's it! That's the whole story! That's God's story! That's history—His-story! Salvation—Community—Relationship—Life . . . That is what it means for God to be Yahweh. *Yahweh is the God of purpose!* Brevard Childs, an Old-Testament-scholar, sums-up what I am saying. He writes, "To know God's name is to know his purpose for all mankind from the beginning to the end."³

"What is God's will for my life?" That is a question I hear often. How *do* we discern the divine design? Please forgive me in advance for what I am about to say, because in no way do I want to sound like a know-it-all-smart-aleck. Here is what I want to say: *I*

³Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster, 1974), 119.

know what God's will for my life is. I do not struggle with doubt; I struggle with doing. My “knower” works fine; my “doer” often fails. At the risk of sounding trite, I want to appropriate the words of the Nike slogan. When it comes to the will of God, “Just Do It!” The will of God is not a deep, dark mystery that we must manipulate God into divulging. Over and over again, throughout the pages of the Bible, Yahweh has told us what He is going to do, then He has done it, and then He has told us what He did. In fact, to truly know the name “Yahweh” is to know that Yahweh is a God of purpose, and that just as He has revealed His name, He has unveiled His plan. Do not misunderstand me. I am not claiming that I have mastered the mind of God. There is much that I do not know, and much that I never will know. But this I do know—*God has spoken!* When Moses confronted and challenged Yahweh, asking Him, “What are you up to anyway?” Yahweh answered Moses, and we can read that answer.

It has been said that Christopher Columbus was “the most lost” person in all of history. When Columbus set sail, he did not know where he was going. When he arrived, he did not know where he was. When he returned, he did not know where he had been. For the most part, the gods of ancient Mesopotamia were much like Columbus. But the God of Israel, Yahweh, was different. And because He had a plan, history had a purpose.

So, what is God's will for your life? He wants to deliver you from the bondage of sin. He wants to make you a member of His covenant community. He wants an on-going and ever-growing relationship with you. He wants to give you life.

Are you saved? Have you surrendered your will to the One and only One who is able to rescue you, to redeem you, to ransom you?—Jesus Christ? He died to set us free—to set us free from the slavery of sin. Are you a member of the body of Christ, what we call the church? God did not simply lead the Israelites out of Egypt and then set them loose in the wilderness. He formed of them a covenant community. In like manner, Christ sacrificed His body to form a body; namely, the church. Are you a part of the people of God? Are you growing in your relationship with God? How often do you talk to Him in prayer? How often do you listen to Him in Scripture? How well do you know Him? When others look at you, do they give glory to God for your life? And speaking of life,

are you experiencing and enjoying the life that God gives through His Holy Spirit? Is your life flowing with the fruit of the Spirit?

One day, our lives will be “history.” I pray and I plead that you and I will have done more than just “pass the time.”

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