

“Slavery and Deliverance” (Exodus 1-17)

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Exodus 2:23–25 (ESV)

²³ 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. ²⁴ And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵ God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.¹

Recently, I have been talking more about the need to know and share the gospel, the good news of Christianity. When we tell people about Jesus, sometimes we use terms that non-Christians don't really understand. One of those terms is “saved.” We say, “I was saved when I was such-and-such years old.” Or, “He got saved when he attended that Bible study.” Or we pray that people we love would “be saved.” I can imagine that a number of people who aren't Christians would ask, “What do I need to be saved from?” If you're here today and you're not a Christian, you may have the same question. And that's a legitimate question to have. People who have good relationships, good families, good jobs, and good health may not think they need to be saved from anything. Sure, the drug addict, the alcoholic, and the criminal need to be saved from self-destructive behaviors. But it's not clear to a typical suburbanite or a cosmopolitan, well-educated, professional urbanite what they need to be saved from.

Fortunately, God, in his infinite wisdom, has given us a picture of salvation in the Bible. The exodus story—when God delivered his people out of slavery in Egypt—is the model for salvation throughout the Old Testament. It's the clearest picture of what salvation looks like: being rescued out of slavery to evil, oppressive forces. And this story is really a picture of what salvation from sin looks like: we're delivered from a destructive, evil, oppressive force that holds us captive and leads us to death.

Today, we'll reconsider this picture of salvation. Along the way, we'll see why God saves his people, and how we should—and shouldn't—respond to God's grace.

Over the last few weeks, we've been looking at some passages from the book of Genesis. Though we're leaving Genesis today, we need to consider one important element of the story told in that book. One of Abraham's descendants, Jacob, who is also known as Israel, had a son

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

named Joseph. Joseph went to Egypt, where he became second-in-command to the king of Egypt, the Pharaoh. God directed Joseph to the superpower of the world so that he could help his family—as well as all the people of that region of the world—survive a famine. But I believe God also directed Abraham’s family to Egypt so that he could make himself known to the world. He did that so he could show off his power, so that he could display that he is greater than any nation or king.

At the beginning of the book of Exodus, we see Abraham’s family has grown from about seventy people to a nation of hundreds of thousands of people. This is what it says in Exodus 1:5-7:

⁵ All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt. ⁶ Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. ⁷ But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

This is over four hundred years after Joseph, his brothers, and his father Jacob arrived in Egypt. You may remember that God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28). And God told Abraham that he would multiply his descendents (Gen. 17:2; 22:17; 26:4; 28:3; 25:11). So the number of Abraham’s descendents grew, just as God said. That’s a good thing.

But there’s also a bad thing that happens. The Israelites grew in number, but they also became slaves. We read about this in Exodus 1:8-14:

⁸ Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹ And he said to his people, “Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. ¹⁰ 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 the land.” ¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. ¹³ So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves ¹⁴ and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.

The Israelites were now slaves, and their lives were bitter. The king of Egypt was so afraid of the Israelites that he told the Hebrew midwives, “When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live” (v. 16). Apparently the king of Egypt, or the Pharaoh, was afraid that if there were too

many Israelite men, they would rise up and rebel against the Egyptians. So the Pharaoh wanted to make a preemptive strike. He wanted to kill all the Israelite boys.

A few weeks ago, when we were looking at Genesis 3, I talked about the offspring of the serpent and the offspring of the woman. God promised that there would be a battle between these two lines of people. And this theme runs through the Bible. There are people who are influenced by a supernatural evil, Satan, who is represented by the serpent. Those people are opposed to God's people. It seems that Pharaoh is part of the offspring of the serpent. In fact, the kings of Egypt wore a crown that had a serpent on it.² In Egypt, the serpent represented the goddess Wadjet, a protector of the land of the pharaohs. But in the Bible, the serpent is a symbol of Satan, of great evil. Satan is a murderer; he destroys life. Whenever we see the slaughter of children or genocides, we see the influence of Satan in our world today.

This is a very dire situation. How will God's people survive? Once again, God acts through very unlikely means. In chapter 2, we read of a baby named Moses, who is born to a Hebrew couple. When he was three months old, his mother places him in a basket and sets the basket on the river, to hide him from the Egyptians. The Hebrew word that is translated as "basket" really means "ark." It's the same word used for the ark that Noah and his family lived in.³ Just as God saved Noah and his family in the ark, God saved Moses in an "ark." Moses was found by the Pharaoh's daughter. She adopted him and he grew up in the Pharaoh's court.

However, when he was 40, he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew man, "one of his people" (Exod. 2:11). So Moses killed the Egyptian and buried his body in the sand. Some other Hebrews saw what Moses did, but they didn't trust Moses. They said to him, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" (v. 14).⁴ Moses was afraid that someone in Egypt would find out what he did, so he ran away. He went to Midian, a country to the east.⁵ For the next forty years, Moses was a shepherd.

It's at this point in the story that we come to the words that were read before the sermon. Exodus 2:23-25 says:

²³ 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

² Barbara S. Lesko, *The Great Goddesses of Egypt* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 72.

³ The Hebrew word is תִּבְיָהּ.

⁴ Acts 7:25 says, "He [Moses] supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand."

⁵ Interestingly, Midian was a son of Abraham and a half-brother of Isaac (Gen. 25:1, 4).

slavery came up to God. ²⁴ And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵ God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

God didn't forget his covenant with Abraham. God knows everything. But as he saw the people in slavery crying out for help, God knew it was time to act. God was going to rescue his people because of the covenant he made with their forefather, Abraham.

So God appeared to Moses, now 80 years old, in the form of a burning bush. Let's read a bit of what God says to Moses. This is Exodus 3:7-14:

⁷ Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" ¹² He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."

¹³ Then Moses said to God, "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?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.' "

God tells Moses that he will bring the Israelites out of Egypt and into a land that sounds a bit like the garden of Eden, a land flowing with milk and honey. God tells Moses that he will send him to Pharaoh. Moses is a bit apprehensive. That's understandable. Going to Pharaoh would be like going to the President of the United States. Actually, it would be like going to Josef Stalin, or some other dictator. But God tells Moses he will be with him. God tells Moses that when he brings the Israelites out of Egypt, he will bring them back to the same mountain, which is known as Horeb and also Sinai. This is where God will give the Israelites the Ten Commandments and the rest of the law. God also reveals his name to Moses. God is often referred to as "the LORD." When you see "LORD" in capital letters, that is a translation of a Hebrew word that we pronounce as "Yahweh." But God tells Moses that he has another name: "I AM WHO I AM." This could be

translated as “I CAUSE TO BE because I cause to be.”⁶ It means that God is the Creator of all things. He sustains all things. He causes all things to be. God wants Moses to know that he is in control of the whole situation.

God tells Moses to God to the Pharaoh and ask for him to let the Israelites go. But God knows Pharaoh won't respond to that request. So God says: “So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go” (3:20). Pharaoh may be the most powerful man on earth, but he's a speck of dust compared to God. God will display his power over everyone when he rescues his people.

Even though God shows Moses his power (4:1-9), Moses still doesn't think he's well-suited for this job. Moses says to God (in 4:10): “Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.” We don't know if Moses had a speech impediment, such as a stutter, or if he simply wasn't a great speaker. I love God's response (v. 11): “Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?” But Moses still doesn't feel qualified for the job. He asks God to send someone else (v. 13). God is gracious, and he provides for Moses. God tells Moses that his brother, Aaron, will be his mouthpiece. Aaron will speak whatever Moses tells him to (vv. 14-16).

So Moses is given this commission, which we find in Exodus 4:21-23:

²¹ And the LORD said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. ²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, ²³ and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.” If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.’ ”

God will harden Pharaoh's heart. God will make sure that Pharaoh resists him. Why? We'll see the answer to that question later. What's also interesting is that Israel is referred to as God's “firstborn son.” Adam is referred to as the “son of God” (Luke 3:38). It seems like Israel has taken on the role of Adam, representing God in the world he has made. We also see in that passage an ominous note: If Pharaoh doesn't let God's “firstborn son” go, God will kill Pharaoh's firstborn son.

⁶ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 121.

So Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh and say to him: “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness’” (5:1). Does Pharaoh say, “Sure, that sounds like a good idea. I don’t mind losing thousands of slaves”? No, he says, “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” (v. 2). Pharaoh doesn’t recognize God’s authority. He doesn’t even recognize God’s existence. And then he makes the work harder for the Israelite slaves (5:6-19).

The situation seems impossible. Pharaoh has rejected Moses’s plea and he has put the screws to the Israelite slaves. The Israelites tell Moses, “you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us” (5:21). Still, God reassures Moses. He tells Moses that he is the God who made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants (6:2-4). He tells Moses to go to the Israelites with this message (6:6-8):

⁶ Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. ⁷ I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. ⁸ 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. I am the LORD.’ ”

He will be their God, and they will be his people. There’s that covenant language that I mentioned last week. God’s people have a very special relationship with God. God has given them his promise. He will redeem them. That means he will buy them out of slavery. He will purchase their freedom. Their freedom will come at a cost. God will make sure that price is paid.

Many of us know what happens after this. God sends Moses to Pharaoh many times. Each time, the message is essentially the same: “Let my people go, that they may serve me” (8:1). And each time, Pharaoh rejects this message. He refuses to let the Israelites go. And then God sends a plague on the land of Egypt. The plagues include turning the water of the Nile into blood; filling the land with frogs, gnats, and flies; killing the livestock of the Egyptians; sending boils upon the Egyptians; raining down hail; sending locusts that devour crops; and causing darkness to cover the land for three days. Why does God do this? Well, for one reason, he’s doing this to bring judgment upon the Egyptians. God also uses the plagues to rescue his people. So he is both saving his people and judging those who are opposed to him.

Earlier, I asked why God would harden Pharaoh's heart, so that the king of Egypt would reject God.⁷ God gives us the answer in 9:16: "But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." So God did this to create a situation in which he would show off his power to the most powerful man in the world. But Pharaoh is also said to harden his heart.⁸ After the seventh plague, in Exodus 9:34, it says, "But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again and hardened his own heart, he and his servants." We see that God is in control of the whole situation, yet Pharaoh is responsible for his own sin. Those two ideas may seem to contradict each other, but they don't. They are two truths that we must hold in balance.

What's important to see is that God saves his people and judges those who are opposed to him so that he would be known. Exodus 7:5 says, "The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them" (7:5). Here are some other verses throughout Exodus that say the same thing:

Exodus 6:7: "I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and *you shall know* that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians."

Exodus 7:17: Thus says the LORD, "By this you shall know that I am the LORD: behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood."

Exodus 8:22: "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, that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth."

Exodus 9:14: "For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth."

Exodus 14:18: "And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen."⁹

Over and over again, God does what he does so that he would be known. He brought his people into Egypt, the super power of the day, and he humiliated Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the world, to reveal his power and glory.

⁷ See Exod. 4:21; 7:3, 13; 8:15; 19; 9:7, 12, 35; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8.

⁸ See Exod. 7:14, 22; 8:32; 9:34.

⁹ See also Exod. 8:10 9:29; 10:2; 11:7; 14:4.

That's why God saves people today. He still wants to be known through delivering his people and bringing down his enemies. When God saves the weak, the unlikely, and the poor, it shows off his power. When he transforms lives, it shows off his power. I think that's why God is in the business of transforming addicts and misfits—and people like you and me.

Throughout the Bible, God saves people for the sake of his name, for his reputation. So 1 John 2:12 says,

I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven *for his name's sake*.

Why are we forgiven? For the sake of God's name. For the fame of his name. For his reputation.¹⁰

God also saves so that his people will serve him. We see that phrase a number of times: “Let my people go, that they may serve me” (Exod. 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13). God didn't just save his people so they could have an easy life. He didn't rescue them from Egypt so that they would live for themselves. He saved them so they would live for him.

We see both of these ideas—that God saves so that he would be known, and he saves so his people would serve him—in 1 Peter 2:9. In this passage in the New Testament, Peter applies terms used of Israel (Exod. 19:5-6) to Christians.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

If you are a Christian, you are a royal priest—you're a priest of the King. That means you exist to serve God, to offer up spiritual sacrifices of praise (Heb. 13:15). Your life should be offered up to God (Rom. 12:1). And you should proclaim God's excellencies. He brought you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Now let's go back to the story in Exodus. You may wonder why Pharaoh's heart was still hardened after he saw these plagues, after he saw how great God is. He saw firsthand God's power. At one point, after the seventh plague (of hail), Pharaoh says to Moses and Aaron: “This time I have sinned; the LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong” (Exod. 9:27). Yet Pharaoh really didn't change his mind. He still didn't let God's people go (9:34-35).

¹⁰ See also Ezek. 36:22, 32, for the same concept: God will make a new covenant with his people (something that includes God giving a new heart and the Holy Spirit, as well as forgiveness of sins) for the sake of his name.

Perhaps Pharaoh didn't submit to God because the issue wasn't the amount of evidence he had. The plagues clearly demonstrated that God is more powerful than Egypt and the Pharaoh, as well as Egypt's false gods. The Egyptians had several gods that were supposedly in control of parts of creation. For example, Hapi was the god of the Nile, and Ra was the sun god. But God made the Nile turn into blood, and he brought darkness to the sky for three days. Pharaoh should have known that the true God was superior to these false gods. This shows us that for people who are opposed to God, no amount of miracles will suffice. No amount of evidence will change their minds. After all, Satan knows a lot about God. He probably knows more facts about God than we do. But he doesn't trust God. He doesn't love God. He's not willing to obey God.

To see who God truly is and to love him requires something supernatural. We need God to give us new hearts. We need God to transform us.

Pharaoh wouldn't relent until the tenth plague, the Passover, which is described in Exodus 12. God told the Israelites to take a lamb without blemish, one for each household, and sacrifice them. He told the Israelites to take some of the blood of the lamb and put it on their doorposts and the lintel above the doors. The Israelites were then to roast the meat of the lamb on a fire and make unleavened bread and eat bitter herbs with the lamb and the bread. God gave them instructions as to how to eat this meal. We read this in Exodus 12:11-13:

¹¹ In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD's Passover. ¹² For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. ¹³ The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.

God was going to kill all the firstborn in the land of Egypt. Any home that didn't have blood on its door would have its firstborn die. This included the Israelites. The only people who were safe would be the ones "covered" by the blood of the lambs.

This seems very harsh. But as I said last week, the fact is that all of us deserve to die for our sins. This is true whether you are an Egyptian, an Israelite, or an American. The fact that God doesn't kill us all immediately when we sin is mercy. This is a foreign concept to Americans today, but if we don't understand this point, we won't see how great God's grace is. God graciously allowed his people to offer up a substitute, one that could be sacrificed in their place. Still, sin demands death, a fitting penalty for rebellion against God.

When this awful tenth plague arrived, Pharaoh finally let the people of Israel go (Exod. 12:29-32). Israel left Egypt, and God's presence was with them, symbolized by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exod. 13:17-22). God led his people to Red Sea, again to show off his power. When the Israelites left the land, Pharaoh changed his mind (Exod. 14:5). He decided he didn't want to lose all those slaves. So he chased them with his chariots and his army. The Israelites had their backs against a wall—on one side was the Red Sea, and on the other side was Pharaoh's army. It looked hopeless. But God would show off his powers once again.

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

God separates the waters, just as he did in Genesis 1, and his people pass through safely on dry land.¹¹ By rescuing his people, God is creating something new—a people for his own possession. But when Pharaoh's army tried to pass through the waters, God brought the waters back together and his enemies drowned, just as the people drowned in the flood during the days of Noah. God saves and God judges at the same time.

On the other side of this miracle, the people of Israel sing a great song of praise (Exod. 15:1-21). They sing of his salvation and his glorious deeds. But it's not long before they start complaining. They grumble against Moses when there is no water to drink (Exod. 15:22-25; 17:1-3). They say they had better food in Egypt (Exod. 16:2-3). God continued to provide for these people, who were ungrateful and who had short memories.

So, what does this mean for us?

Do we realize that Jesus is the true Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7)? He is the one who is our substitute. He died in our place. All who trust in him, who have a relationship with him, are "covered" by his blood. They will not be destroyed in judgment. The New Testament shows us in many ways that Jesus is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Jesus is the only one who can protect us from God's righteous wrath. He is the only shelter from the storm. He is our only hope of being reconciled to God. God's judgment came down on Jesus, who willingly took it, so that we wouldn't have to be judged.

¹¹ Compare Gen. 1:6-10 with Exod. 14:21.

If you are not a Christian, I would ask you this: what would it take for you to change your mind? Do you need more evidence? Are you waiting for the right time to put your trust in God and love him and obey him? Or, do you not understand the message of Christianity? If you don't understand the message of Christianity, I would love to help you with that. I do believe there are many people who have never heard the gospel explained to them. But the Bible says that we have enough evidence to know that God exists. We have enough evidence not to have an excuse on the day when God calls us to account for everything we've ever done. There is no better time than today to put your trust in God. He gave his Son so that we could be reconciled to him. There is no one else who will do that for you.

This is a question for us all: Do we realize that our sin—our disordered desires for the things that are contrary to God's will and our wrong actions—is oppressive? Do we realize that it's worse than Pharaoh? It's a slave master that wants to own us and destroy us. Sin is like an addiction: it looks good, it gives us a false promise of enjoyment and hope and freedom, but it makes us miserable in the end. The people of Israel knew that Pharaoh was a harsh master, yet when they were freed from him, they wanted to go back. They thought life was better under Pharaoh than it was in the wilderness, when they had to rely on God. What about us? Do we want to go back to our sin? Do we grumble in the wilderness instead of trusting in God's goodness and provision?

Let us not look back to our days of slavery. Let's not grumble against God. Let us rejoice in God's salvation. We should be thankful for his glorious deed of giving us Jesus, the God-man, who entered into his own creation to rescue his people from their true slavery: their slavery to sin.