

# The Beginning of an Exodus

By Brad Allison on 6/8/2003

Scripture Reference *Exodus 1*

We are beginning today a series of sermons on the book of Exodus. This is a book that is both familiar and strange. It contains some of the most well-known stories in the Bible, including the story of Moses' birth and being cast onto the Nile, only to be rescued by Pharaoh's daughter. It contains the story of the first Passover and the parting of the Red Sea. But it also contains some parts that modern readers find odd. For example, why is it that almost half of the book is devoted to arcane details about how to construct the tabernacle and what the priests who serve there are supposed to wear? And what are we to think of the passages where God's judgment is so severe, destroying all the first-born sons of Egypt and then the best of Egypt's army? And then we see the first of the many judgments on the nations who oppose Israel when God says that he is going to blot out the Amalekites (17:8-16).

Christopher J. H. Wright expresses what many have felt about this book and about the entire Old Testament.

The trouble with the Bible... is that so much of it is Old Testament. And the trouble with the Old Testament is just that. It is old. Now, of course, for some things, oldness speaks of permanence and lasting, even increasing, value. For other things, oldness spells outmoded, obsolete and irrelevant. Which category does the Old Testament belong to? (*An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today*, p. 12.)

A key to understanding this book lies in knowing how to approach it. Often, it is approached only as a book that provides some attention-getting stories for children's Sunday School classes, or perhaps even a good Hollywood movie. Another approach, usually referred to as liberation theology, has developed over the last fifty years through a Marxist reading of the book, and it approaches Exodus as a pattern for revolution against different forms of economic and social injustice. The question for us, though, concerns how the Bible itself views this book. The answer to that is pretty clear. Exodus is seen as the story of salvation, in a direct way for the Israelites living during this time, but also as a pattern for the spiritual salvation of God's people throughout the ages. Three great events in the history of Israel are seen as a pattern of the three great stages in the redemption of all God's people. The exodus is seen as a pattern of our salvation. The wilderness wanderings of Israel for forty years is seen as parallel to our current Christian lives, and the entrance of Israel into the Promised Land is seen as analogous to our entry into heaven at death.

So the book of Exodus is intended by God to help us to understand what our salvation is all about and to restore the emotional impact of this salvation. To say it differently, in order to understand and feel what the word "salvation" means, it is important that we see the story behind it. It is when we remember the story that we are able to resist the tendency to make the word "saved" a common and trite expression. Let me give you an illustration, with apologies beforehand to the Alabama fans among us for the pain this may bring to you. If I say the words, "Punt, Bama, Punt!", the effect of these words is completely dependent on your ability to remember the story behind them. If you don't know the story, you can understand all three words, but miss what they are really saying. You may think that a football team named Alabama is being told to employ a common football play usually done on fourth down, whereby one team kicks the ball to the other team in order to maximize their own team's field position. But those who know the story will remember that the Alabama football team was very strong that year, and the Auburn offense was ineffective for most of the game. As it turned out, their most effective play of the game occurred when Alabama went back to punt. Twice in the fourth quarter, that play resulted in a blocked punt that was run in for an Auburn

touchdown, leading to Auburn's upset victory that day. Knowing that story will lead you to understand that the words "Punt, Bama, Punt!" are laced with sarcasm. They are meant not to instruct a football team on the appropriate play, but to taunt.

In the same way, you can't really understand and feel the emotional impact of the word "salvation" without remembering the story behind it. Exodus is the story behind the word salvation, not only Israel's salvation, but ours as well. So our goal during this study is both to understand and thrill at our salvation.

Illustration: Bryan Chapell tells the story about a mother of grade school children who faced a problem common to all mothers of grade school children in the summertime: what to do when the children get bored. On this particular day she decided to pack up the kids and head to the park near her house. While she was there, watching her children play, she saw a young woman pull up in the parking lot, get out of her car and head toward a remote area of the park. She noticed that the woman had a spring in her step and wondered if she was going to meet someone. Had she recently fallen in love, and was she going there to meet her boyfriend? Or was she going to meet her husband for a quick lunch in the middle of the day? Or might it perhaps be an illicit relationship, and she was going to meet her lover? The needs of her own children soon forced her to abandon all these musings, until about half an hour later when the mother and her children decided to go on a hike through the park. Shortly after starting, they came upon this same woman, and what the mother saw sent a pain straight to her heart. This young woman who had so eagerly sought a remote place in the park was sitting on top of a picnic table reading her Bible. The reason this sight caused such pain in the mother is that she too was a Christian, but she had lost her delight in the Lord. She had lost the joy of her salvation, and seeing the presence of such joy in another was a painful reminder to her of her loss.

In an attempt to recapture the meaning and emotion of the word "salvation" in our own hearts, we want to look today at Exodus 1. Salvation is always a rescue from something, and this passage tells something about the helpless plight from which we are rescued and about the rescuer.

## I. The Helpless Plight from which We Are Rescued

If our hearts are going to thrill again at our salvation, we must remember that from which we have been saved. Our helpless plight is not unlike that of the Israelites, who found themselves the victims of two different situations: enslavement to a harsh master and seeming abandonment by God. The Israelites had come to Egypt almost 400 years before, when Joseph had ascended to the highest position in the land. And God had been good to them there, fulfilling his promise to Abraham that his descendents would multiply and become a great nation. But now there was a new Pharaoh in Egypt who became alarmed at the rapid growth of these immigrants. He was afraid that they might ally themselves with one of the invading forces and defeat Egypt. So he came up with a plan that seemed to be so clever. He would diminish their numbers through hard work at the same time that he would profit from their hard labor. So he set taskmasters over them and forced them to work, building two cities for Pharaoh. But his plan backfired, and it resulted not in diminished numbers of Israelites, but in even greater numbers. So he ordered that they be treated cruelly, probably hoping that the combination of hard work and despair due to this cruelty would work to his desired end of reducing their numbers. The bitter bondage described in verses 13-14 becomes an important theme of this book. Though it is somewhat hidden in most translations, there is one word that is repeated five times in these two verses. Let me read them more literally, and it will be obvious to you what that word is. "And the Egyptians cause the sons of Israel to serve with

harshness, and make their lives bitter in hard service, in clay, and in brick, and in every kind of service in the field; all their service in which they have served is with harshness.”

Throughout this book, Israel’s deliverance is from a harsh service to Pharaoh, to that of service of the Lord. The book begins with serving Pharaoh and ends with serving the Lord. That’s why nearly half of this book is concerned with instructions about the tabernacle. Whenever Moses goes to Pharaoh, he delivers God’s message, saying, “Let my people go, that they may serve me.” It’s the same word as the one in verse 14 (*abad* in the original), consistently translated in the ESV as “serve.” Israel is not liberated from Egypt in order to do whatever it pleases, but rather to worship the Lord. Salvation is being freed from the bondage of worshipping anything or anyone other than God. Each of our lives is a replay of Exodus, as God has delivered us from the harsh servitude of worshipping false gods and into the worship of the true God. Mankind can’t help but worship. We become enslaved to whatever it is we think we have to have in order to be happy. We are not truly free until we come to the tabernacle at the end of this book, until we come to see that the real purpose of our lives is to live for God and worship him.

This invites an important application. Who or what are you serving? What is it you think you simply have to have in order to be happy? Is it beauty? Is it being part of the right group at school? Is it just wanting your life to work well, or others to like you? Anything you think you have to have other than God will become a harsh taskmaster in your life. You may serve the god of wanting to be beautiful, but it will not serve you. It will use you and then destroy you. To use an image I read in someone’s testimony this week, it will be like using a dishwasher to cut your grass and a lawnmower to wash your dishes. They were not designed for those purposes, and you were not designed to serve anything other than the Lord. The attempt to do so will result in a life that doesn’t work, and you will be left wondering why your dishes keep getting broken as you attempt to wash them in the lawnmower and why your grass is looking like it’s never been cut. God delivers us from the futility of worshipping anything other than himself.

There’s something else in this passage that describes another bondage from which God delivers us. He rescues us from a fear of being abandoned by God. As things go from bad to worse for the Israelites, their tendency is to think that God has abandoned them. Commentators point out how the author masterfully avoids mentioning the name of God in the first couple of chapters of the book, with only a couple of exceptions. This absence of God reflects the common feeling we all have when things seem to be falling apart. And things certainly did seem to be falling apart for the descendents of Jacob. The most powerful man in the world had determined to bring harm upon them. His attacks all seemed to be directed against the men of Israel, first through hard labor and then through killing the male babies. His plan was probably to reduce the men to such a significant extent that there would be insufficient numbers of men for marriage, with the result that the Israelite women would begin to be assimilated into the life of Egypt as they married into Egyptian families. But the truth is that God has not at all abandoned them. As a matter of fact, he controls everything in a quiet way, behind the scenes. The result of God’s work here is that everything Pharaoh does to harm Israel not only doesn’t work, but ends up having the opposite effect. The people of Israel only grow stronger and more numerous because of his efforts. His cruelty undoubtedly served to harden them, as well as to motivate them to want to leave Egypt. His command that the Egyptians kill all the male children was the indirect cause of Moses’ unique qualifications to be the deliverer. It was only because of that decree that Moses ended up being raised both by his Hebrew mother for the first few years of his life, and then by Pharaoh’s daughter for the rest of his life.

The application of this is liberating. It means that when God seems most absent, he’s not.

He is quietly working behind the scenes to accomplish his good plan for those who believe in him. Many times, this good plan is not something we see for years, and sometimes not even in this life. None of the Israelites who were suffering under Pharaoh saw the big picture that we see. But just because we don't know what God is doing doesn't mean that he's not doing anything. By faith, we believe that God is at work even in the tragedies of life. So God rescues us from the helpless plight of feeling that no one is at the controls of the universe, and the tragedies of our lives are meaningless accidents.

## II. The Rescuer

The first group of rescuers here are these two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. It is part of God's glory that he uses such weak instruments to fight the powerful Pharaoh. Midwives were toward the low end of the social structure in Israel. Not only were they women, but they were barren women in a society that commonly viewed barrenness as a judgment from God. True to his common pattern, God uses outsiders for the greatest of his purposes. Someone asked me a couple of weeks ago why the book of Genesis makes such a big deal out of Jacob crossing his hands when blessing the two sons of Joseph. He placed his right hand on the head of the youngest, Ephraim, indicating the greater blessing to him. When Joseph called his attention to that in an attempt to get him to correct it, Jacob refused. That is the pattern throughout Genesis, where God uses the unexpected, the least, to accomplish his purposes.

There is a wonderful contrast here between these women and Pharaoh. They have only a fear of God, and that fear delivers them from a fear of Pharaoh, who is himself filled with a fear of the Israelites. The weak ones have no fear and the strong one is ruled by his fears. Moreover, the names of these two women are preserved for all time, while the name of Pharaoh is never given. Here is the lesson for us. If you have always felt yourself to be mostly a nobody, or perhaps if others have told you that you are a nobody, take heart. God uses nobodies. He uses nobodies who fear him and just go about their everyday activities.

These midwives in our text serve mostly to prepare the way for the real deliverer, Moses. We are going to get to his story next time, but I want to point something else out as we close. Does this story remind you of anything? A powerful Gentile king starts killing Jewish male babies. Everything in this story is designed to point to the real deliverer, Jesus. Moses delivered the Jews from their slavery in Egypt, but Jesus redeems from the greater slavery of sin. There's a place in the New Testament that describes a time in Jesus' life when he is on a mountain and is transfigured to reveal his true glory. Moses and Elijah appear to him on that mountain, and Luke tells us that they speak with Jesus about his departure. The word for departure in the Greek is the word *exodos*. Jesus is the great deliverer.

## CONCLUSION:

My hope for our time this summer is that God would use this study both to inform our minds about our salvation and to thrill our hearts with this salvation. The young mother I introduced earlier also needed to have her heart thrill at this salvation. The day after her experience in the park, she took her children to the Vacation Bible School program at a local church. As she waited on them to conclude, she had her car window rolled down and could hear their singing and laughter. It filled her all over again with a deep melancholy as she considered the joylessness of her own heart. But then she heard them sing a song she remembered from her childhood. "I will sing of the mercies of the Lord, I will sing, I will sing." As she heard that song, all of a sudden she remembered. "That's it," she thought. "I have forgotten the mercies of the Lord." She began singing along with them, and joy returned to

her aching heart. May God return the joy to us this summer as we learn more of the greatness of our salvation!