

Exodus: A Journey Toward Liberation
The Call of Liberation Exodus Chapters 1 – 4
Michael Barrett preaching
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Today we move from Genesis and begin our exploration of the Book of Exodus. Exodus is an epic tale which once heard is not easily forgotten. For our Jewish brothers and sisters, it is the story that defines their history. For Christians, it is a testament to God's first great act of redemption. For any of those who are held captive as well as any who would challenge injustice and oppression, Exodus bears witness to a God who rescues us from bondage and then delivers us to new freedom. Many beings, named and unnamed are encountered in this Book, but Yahweh is the hero of Exodus.

Over these next weeks we will reflect on the Journey of the Israelis from abject slavery until their crossing beyond the borders of Egypt – their journey toward liberation. This week we will focus on the Call of Liberation (c.1-4), next week upon the Challenge of Liberation (c.5-11), and then in two weeks, the God of Liberation (c.12-15).

Today's call of liberation will consider four initial elements on the journey toward liberation – 1) the presence of great suffering; 2) the introduction of Moses; 3) Yahweh's intervention; and 4) the further development of Moses's call. Along the way Exodus will provide lessons in what God expects and how god acts; what victims of oppression can expect and how best to act; and what can expect and how best to act; and what those who would challenge oppression can expect and how best to act. Today's chapters concentrate on the preparation for the journey.

Let us first turn to presence of great suffering found in chapter 1.

We learn that there has been a change of rulers and the Israeli's favored status achieved under Joseph has collapsed. The Israel's have grown to trust in a secular ruler, but now see that reliance entrusted to a human ruler can be a fickle enterprise and dangerous peril.

This new Pharaoh does not remember the wisdom, discernment, or evident presence of God witnessed in Joseph and his descendants. This pharaoh plays the race card and fans fears by blaming things on an ethnic minority. The Israelis move from prosperity to persecution. The pharaoh launches massive state building problems by instituting forced labor and we see the rise of work gangs, labor camps, and exclusion from privileges, property, and professions. Israelis are forced to enhance the oppressive power they grow to resent, fear, and hate. The building program includes massive storehouse cities used to establish a monopoly on food – surpluses are withheld, grain is used as a weapon of control as Israelis are forced to go hungry – an attempt to weaken their will as well as decrease their birthrate.

As these measures fail to control the growing number of Israelis, the pharaoh becomes increasingly ruthless – he launches two genocidal efforts – the first in secret, the second as an open directive. In secret he instructs two midwives (Shiphah and Puah), themselves probably guild leaders of many midwives, to murder newborn Israeli boys at birth. Committed by career to life and also fearing the Lord, they defy the pharaoh by ignoring his order in an act of brave civil disobedience. They even play on his fears by mentioning “vigorous” Hebrew women. The pharaoh then goes public and orders his people to drown all Hebrew boys by throwing the infants into the Nile. Paranoia has tripped an insanity of both systematically murdering those who would eventually do the most productive work and polluting the very life source of Egypt the river Nile.

The lessons of suffering abound. First, this is an instance of humans deserving the blame for suffering – the sin, evil, and iniquity of the pharaoh and those of his people, who cooperated, made the Israelis victims. Secondly, suffering is never out of God’s control. But, note the subtlety, with which God responds. The more they are oppressed, the greater the Israelis increase in number. Israelis do not blend or into assimilate by Egyptian culture – their ethnic self-identity reborn is grows. Yahweh’s promised to Abraham and Jacob are rekindled, reinforced, and reignited – there is an increasing desire for freedom, a greater desire to leave Egypt, people begin to look for a savior, a new leader, and their trust and potential gratitude moves from the wealth of Egypt back to the will of Yahweh. Thirdly, there is collective suffering because an individual estranges himself from God. The pharaoh enslaves people – people are meant for God’s glory not a ruler’s. The pharaoh incites murder, going against the life affirming nature of expressed in the creation mandate. The pharaoh travels down the path of resenting God, resisting God, and rejecting God. He takes most of Egypt with him.

Danger, brutality, a seemingly psychopathic king, abused and terrorized laborers, defiant midwives, and an increasing battle of the haves and have-nots all present. And now Moses is introduced (chapter 2: 1-22).

Exodus presents us now with three episodes of Moses’s early life. We see first, a miracle of childhood survival; we then witness young adult Moses go violate God’s sanction, and then we watch as Moses flee Egypt and live in exile.

Although the pharaoh decrees death; birth happens anyway. Even though the pharaoh abuses God’s gift of the Nile, through the construction of a Teba (an ark) the Nile is used to protect life. And notice the saving role of women.

When Moses can no longer be hidden (too big, too active, too noisy?) his mother takes protective action.

Moses’ sister acts first as lookout and then negotiator enabling Moses to be raised by his real mother in disguise.

The pharaoh’s daughter – perhaps the most remarkable of all -- while, using the Nile for a purpose properly intended, she rescues a Hebrew child – she knows what

Moses is. She feels compassion. She pities a Hebrew. She defies her father. She protects the child. She adopts an Israeli. She hires and pays an Israeli slave to be a nursemaid. Note the power of the lowly to serve God, especially when they refuse to live out the assigned and expected hatred and hostility demanded of them.

Next, we see Moses as a young adult go to extremes, violating of God's sanction. Moses heart is in the right place – he hates injustice, opposes slavery, sympathizes with suffering, and has a deep affection for God's people. It is his method of expressing those sentiments that is unacceptable to Yahweh. Moses murders a brutal overseer. Moses makes himself the man's judge, jury, and executioner. God has not instructed Moses to go out and kill anyone. Moses lets his anger carry his actions. Moses knows his deed is wrong; he hides the body.

Hatred is not the way of Yahweh, the cross, or Jesus. God is responsible for salvation. Salvation is not something we take into our own hands to do ourselves. God may fine-tune us and use us as His instruments, but is God who saves.

And so, Moses flees. In trying to stop two Israelis from engaging in horizontal violence (when one cannot get at the oppressor, then take out anger on a fellow comrade), Moses learns that the secret of his crime is out. The pharaoh seeks to kill Moses because Moses has sided with the slaves. Moses flees to Midian beyond the eastern side of the Sinai Peninsula, far from the reach of pharaoh.

Moses' fine-tuning will take God forty years. But Moses begins to realize by faith that the best thing to do with mistakes is to learn from them.

He stands up to the shepherds at the well – but does not kill them any of them.

He sides with the victims at the well by further making a meaningful contribution – he helps water the flocks (women's work). He stoops to serve.

He learns to rely on God and survive on the bare necessities. He learns wilderness survival. 40 years now for 40 years later.

He enters a family community.

He engages in sheep herding. Shepherding is excellent training for leadership. Sheep are not bright, they need to be led to food and water, sheep are easy targets, sheep need protection, sheep are prone to wander, sheep are stubborn, sheep do not handle illness well, and sheep are easily scattered.

And now, forty years later, Yahweh intervenes (chapter 2:23 – 3:10).

Yahweh hears the groaning of the Israelis, as a new pharaoh comes to power yet things worsen. Rage, resentment, insistence can be stifled only so long. Human beings can only take so much before their pain becomes public and audible. This cry evokes God's care. This cry mobilizes God. God is driven by this voice of pain. Yahweh hears and remembers and sees and knows. Even when the cry is not directed to Him specifically.

So Yahweh entices Moses up Mount Horeb, which we may be calling Mt. Sinai, (the Hebrew word for bush is 'seneh'). Initially all goes well in their encounter.

As usual, Moses is going about his daily shepherding tasks, when sparked by his curiosity; he is drawn to investigate that fiery scrub.

The bush is burning – Moses finds it aflame, not charring, not being consumed, seems to have infinite fuel, as well as all the oxygen it needs. There are many metaphors for god here – God is in control of earth, fire, wind, and water. God brings light and warmth. God is eternal. God is self-sufficient.

BUT, what Yahweh says is much more important than that blazing bush.

“Moses” –‘I am here.’

Immediately, “do not come any closer” -- Yahweh voices limits on accessing the awesome. There is a distance to be maintained, a separation to recognize. The ground is holy because Yahweh is there. Submission is mandated. Moses hides his face – looking at Yahweh impugns Yahweh’s sovereignty. Yahweh has made himself visible on earth.

“I have seen, heard, noticed . . .” “So I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land into a good and spacious land . . .” God has come down! Yahweh both rescues from and brings up to. Yahweh both disentangles and emancipates and Yahweh improves and enhances.

So far so good. Moses is probably thinking ‘Yes, God, yes!’ ‘Go, God, go!’

But then like a bolt of lightning Yahweh says (3:10) “So now go. I am sending you to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” Yahweh’s intention is that liberation is shared and is also a human responsibility, a human obligation, and a human vocation. We have to run the risks and face the dangers. God intends to use us to act in His place to save people in His name.

Well, Moses pretty much freaks out. Moses resists. Yahweh insists. Moses looks to the past. Yahweh looks to the future. Yahweh uses the opportunity to further develop Moses’ call. Moses raises five questions and concerns (chapter 3:11-4:17):

1. Who am I? This is a concern of not being important enough. Note that Yahweh doesn’t answer, “you’re the right man at the right place,” or “you have the inside track being most familiar with the Egyptians and their culture and autocracy,” or even “you scored a 4.0 GPA on your wilderness courses. Yahweh answer “I am with you.” Don’t worry about being insignificant – I am with you.
2. Who are you? What is your name? Do you have a warrant or similar document I can present? “I AM WHO I AM” “I AM has sent you.” The power of righteousness and presence. The power to cause to be. The power of persistence in faithful ways. The power of newness. The power of life. I AM mysterious. I AM eternal and unchangeable. I AM self-existent. What more could one expect of a God? Yahweh’s name is Yahweh’s essence. And next

- Yahweh gives Moses his specific marching orders a) recruit and mobilize the elders of Israel and say exactly this to them . . . they will listen to you. B) Then go up with the elders and confront the pharaoh and ask for permission for a three-day journey to worship me. C) Know that my hand will be at work. I will strike the Egyptians with wonders.
3. What if they don't believe me or listen to me? Fear of rejection probably. Remember back in 3:18, Yahweh has already told Moses that the elders will believe him. But God provides Moses with three signs. a) A Staff that turns in to snake and back to a staff (a snake, a cobra is the national symbol of ancient Egypt (dominance). b) a healthy hand that turns into a leprous appendage (or what is left of it) and then back into healthy hand (healing). c) A Promise that the Nile waters will be turned to blood (control). In the call to liberation God will provide potent means.
 4. I am slow of speech and tongue. I am not a convincing public speaker (shy? lisps, stutters? stammers? Forgot his Hebrew or Egyptian?). "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes deaf or mute or blind?" Again, Yahweh has previously told Moses exactly what to say – word for word. God makes us the way he wants us. God endows us each with gifts specific to ourselves. God wants us to serve Him in the best way we by using the gifts he has given individually and not worry about or covet or decline to serve due to gifts with which we are not blessed.
 5. Send someone else to do it. This is no longer about personal importance (Moses has it) or about God's name (Moses know it) or about being rejected (Moses knows he won't be) or about ineloquent speaking skills (Moses knows exactly what God has told him to say). This is about lack of trust and disobedience. God is merciful and gracious and slow to anger and abounds in steadfast love. But, God can get angry. At this point Yahweh's anger burns! Moses has kindled Yahweh's ire. Yet, God adapts and authorizes Moses' brother Aaron to assist. There is a time to stop arguing, stop procrastinating, and stop rationalizing with. There is a time to start acting.

Moses does and begins his return to Egypt (chapter 4:18 – 4:31). He takes leave at Midian, has a frightening encounter along the way at a lodging place, meets up with Aaron, and gathers with the elders, who believe what is said, and finally Israeli people who bow down and worship Yahweh.

Next week we will move on to the challenge of liberation. Please read c5 – 11.

Remember that in the quest for liberation and justice, Yahweh calls each of us to use, just as we are, the gifts he has already given us; that Yahweh calls each of us to trust and obey even in the unexpected and subtle nature of His ways; and that Yahweh calls each of us to know that we are intended by design to serve His will He will refine us into better instruments for that purpose.

Go forth realizing that at all times, God's resolve to transform lives for the better invites our vocation as agents of His liberation. Amen.

