

Exodus: A Journey Toward Liberation
The God of Liberation

Exodus 12:1 – 15:21 August 13, 2017

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Over the past two weeks we have reflected on the journey of the Israelites out of Egypt and the tremendous importance those Scriptures have for our understanding of the Lord God, Yahweh. In the call of liberation we consider how Yahweh is ever ready to prepare us for deliverance. In the challenge of liberation we witness the complete commitment of Yahweh to freeing His people. Today we see, in Exodus 12:1 – 15:21, the God of liberation. This is a Lord who will reign. This is a God who will remind us also that no matter where we are on our life journey, He is with us every step of the way.

Today's journey will take us out from Goshen, across Egypt, and then through the Sea of Reeds. We will experience a God whose presence is visible and constantly manifest. We will experience a God who freely intermingles the narrative action of His signs and wonders with the demands of His commands and expectations. We will experience a God that both liberates from oppression and then uses that liberation as entry into happiness and joy.

In his famed work, Dallas Willard explores the many ways of Hearing God. In this final segment of our liberation journey, we hear the voice of Yahweh speaking loudly to us in conversation and command, in ceremony and circumstance, in song and symbol, and especially, in this first climax of the Book of Exodus, in presence and power.

Passover Initiated

In the first part of today's Word, Yahweh suspends the action narrative and institutes and provides instruction for the festival celebrations of Passover and the Unleavened Bread. Note the very detailed and specific regulations in terms of materials, rituals, food preparation, meal consumption, authorized participation, educational exercise, and even the designation of appropriate attire.

It is impossible to begin to understand much of our Christian heritage without reflecting on the Judaic foundation from which it arises. Beyond the

symbology of requisite lamb sacrifice, the meal of unleavened bread, and the repeated telling of a storied account, there are several important reflections embedded in the Passover that effect not only Jewish worship, but the spiritual lives of most Christians as well. We are built upon that from where God has led us.

Reflect on these several elements of Passover:

The liturgical or worship service precedes the saving event. The Passover comes before the actual exodus out of Egypt. In the same way, The Last Supper comes before Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Worship is crucial to Yahweh, but worship must be done with an ordered continuity in honor, praise and recognition of Him. *How* we worship is as important as *why* or *what* we worship.

The Passover instituted is a fellowship meal using common objects and foods and is inclusive of men, women, and children.

Passover, as our worship, bears repetition and revisiting on a regular basis.

Included in Passover, and again in our worship, are elements serving an education purpose to communicate religious knowledge.

Passover attests that even in times of great danger or calamity, there is a place for ritual. God expects us gather and to come to Him in times of distress.

Later in this service we will celebrate the sacred meal of our own Holy Communion. Note its Passover root. Holy Communion is also about our emancipation, our feeding, our healing, our safety, and it is a testament to our own vigil of patiently watching and waiting for God's good action. My friends we are also children of the stained doorposts – for Jesus has marked us for safety. My friends we are also the children of the hurried bread. Jesus has marked us for a journey destined to freedom and happiness.

The Death of the First Born

At this point the action sequence resumes. We witness now the unfolding plague of death of Egyptian firstborn, the forced release of the Israelites, and

the onset of their journey. Just as was predicted, this final plague is the most extreme and intense of them all. Death sweeps from highest throne to deepest dungeon. All forms of Egyptian human and animal life, experience the loss of their firstborn. The cry goes up from pharaoh himself, ‘arise,’ ‘go out,’ ‘serve another master,’ and ‘leave.’ Even ironically, concluding with ‘bless me.’ Power has shifted from the mightiest to the meekest. The masters are stationary. The slaves are mobile. And a mixed crowd, a conglomeration of lower class, marginalized people head east from Rameses. They are great in number – 600 eleph. Since an eleph can mean 1000 or a clan or a military unit, the number could range anywhere from 60000 to 2.5 million. Back payment in the form of gold and silver is exacted from the Egyptians.

Then, Yahweh once again interrupts the action with instructions about special observances. Yahweh reemphasizes restrictions related to Passover, especially in terms of participation and handling of Passover foods. Yahweh details how the firstborn are to be consecrated to Him – what is proper, what is improper, what may be substituted, and what is appropriate as redemption.

Pillars of Cloud and Fire

Pillars of cloud and fire now emerge as the narrative of the journey resumes. Yahweh takes direct action. Yahweh assumes the leadership role. Yahweh is in command. Yahweh is directing the Exodus.

Perhaps Yahweh is wisely concerned that the Israelites may desert their leaders and that they may change their minds – repent of their decision to seek freedom, abandon their journey toward liberation, and return to the addiction of bondage. Slavery does not require thought or risk-taking or independent decision-making. Slavery’s fears are known. Freedom’s dangers are not so apparent. Yahweh knows what his people can bear and not bear. Both for Jews and for each of us. Yahweh knows that this departure is just the first step on a long, long journey.

Yahweh becomes present in cloud and fire. Yahweh is visible. Yahweh is stable – He is there both day and night. Yahweh shields them from the sun in the day and from darkness at night.

Yahweh's leadership is thoughtful, prudent, and reliable. Yahweh is the best planner. Note the roundabout route He uses. What if say, Michael Barrett, had been in charge. *As a historian, I have to say, let's go back just the way we came down 430 years ago. Besides the coastal route is so beautiful this time of year. Lots of grazing land for our herds and those Gaza B and B's are scrumptious. It will take us a mere 14 days – that southern route could take 40 years or more.* Of course Michael would have marched the Israelites right into a collection of Egyptian forts guarding that northwest corridor and even if the Israelites had managed to survive that gauntlet, they would have then been met by Philistine armies ready to kill anything coming from the southwest.

Sometimes, the thoughtful, prudent, reliable thing to do is to trust in God to do the planning. Especially, when nothing seems clear. Turn it over and trust God.

Robert Burns – the best laid schemes o mice an men go oft awry. Sometimes God wants us to leave the planning to him. Can you imagine what would have happened if the Israelites know they were marching toward an uncrossable sea? That they were being followed by huge technologically advance army? That the trip might take 40 years?

Now Yahweh has Moses circle the Israelites back northward, positioning their camp with its back to an impassible sea and its front facing an unconquerable army of deadly enemies.

Crossing the Sea

Here our story comes to that one last greatest confrontation between Yahweh and the pharaoh. This is about so much more than waters rushing back and forth. This is the best verses the worse. This is good verses evil. This is life verses death. This is about a clear exhibition of Yahweh's power and glory. Pharaoh will finally come to truly know that Yahweh is God.

As the Egyptian ruling class realizes the full pride-filled economic impact of the loss of a free source of slave labor, the pharaoh launches a massive military excursion to recapture and force the Israelites back into servitude. Of course as perhaps one expects, at the first sight of the Egyptian cavalry. The Israelites cry out to Yahweh in protest, complaint, demand, and despair; and lash out in accusation at Moses. They seem bent on precipitating a crisis among their own leadership. In derogatory thrusts we hear – 'was it because

there were no graves,’ ‘what have you done to us,’ and ‘didn’t we say to leave us alone.’ Egypt or Egyptians are mentioned five times: Yahweh is not mentioned once.

But, then Moses thunders that famed revolutionary statement – ‘do not be afraid. Stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today.’ You have no right to be afraid. You have no reason to be afraid. Yes, you have lost all the supposed comforts and benefits of the old system before receiving the benefits of what freedom and liberation promise. But fear not! Do not fear but stand and see! Yahweh is alive, active, absolute, and assured.

And my friends, sometimes when we find ourselves trapped between the desert and the sea in our own lives; the best response may not be despair or anger. The best response may be to put our faith in our Father, our trust in Jesus, and our Hope in the Spirit, stand still, fear not, and see how God handles things.

Even at this point a seemingly irritated Yahweh says to Moses, ‘Why are you crying out to me. Tell the Israelites to move on. Yes, there is a time for prayers, for help for forgiveness or for appreciation. There is also a time then to get up and get going.

Now Yahweh keeps His Word and His Covenant. Yahweh reposition angel and cloud into protective positions. As commanded, Moses raises his staff and stretches forth his hand and Yahweh divides and drives the sea back. A path of dry land is exposed and the Israelites rush through to the other side of the sea.

The Egyptian army pursues, entering the pathway. Yahweh clogs the wheels of their war machines. Moses, as commanded, stretches his hand over the sea and the waters rushed back. Israel stands on life affirming dry land. Egypt is cast into the deadly chaos of the sea. But, both the Israelites and Egyptians now know that Yahweh is Lord and that He will reign. The slave driver will be seen no more, the oppressor who forced others into inescapable bondage cannot break away, and those who murdered infants in the Nile are drown themselves.

The Triumph of Yahweh is overwhelming manifest, physically tangible, and astoundingly complete.

The Songs of Moses and Miriam

And now on the safe dry banks of the Reed Sea, the first act of the Israelites is to break into music, to sing songs, and to join in dancing. There are two songs listed in this passage – that of Moses and that of his sister Miriam. Many scholars feel that Miriam’s Song was probably the first, even though it appears second. Her song seems to have served as prologue for the song of Moses. These songs, particularly the longer song of Moses, are commonly believed to be the oldest, more revolutionary, and most important poems in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Song of Moses provides a form and sequence to the Jewish faith. Yahweh is first a warrior, then Yahweh is a Lord of Cosmic power, then Yahweh is a leader, and finally Yahweh emerges as the object of worship to be realized in the eventual construction of a temple sanctuary.

The Israelites sang in joy and victory and thanksgiving all those centuries ago. That action still resonates today – we are still making music and singing songs.

James Boice captures well the impact and importance of worship in music when he writes, ‘music is a gift from God that allows us to express our deepest heart responses to God and his truth in meaningful and memorable ways. It is a case of our hearts joining with our minds to say YES, YES, YES to the truths we are embracing.

That day the Israelites were saying YES, YES, YES to the power and glory of Yahweh. We do the same and also say YES, YES, YES to the power and glory of God and YES, YES, YES for the opportunity to honor Jesus, to grow in Jesus, and to serve Jesus.

Yahweh is Lord and He will reign.

We are saying YES, YES, YES to the truths we have learned and come to know of Yahweh along the Exodus for our own journey of liberation.

Know that our God is:

A God who sees and hears and notices suffering,

A God of freedom and liberation and will use all of creation, stopping at nothing to secure for us those gifts,

A God whose resolution to transform lives for the better invites each of us into vocation to use our gifts as agents of His liberation and justice,

A God who will interrupt the flow of our lives to refine our behavior with lessons for the betterment of ourselves,

A God who wants us to know that He is God and calls us to trust and obey Him for He is of great faithfulness to those who seek Him,

A God whose power permeates all worldly dimensions – political, social, economic, scientific, artistic, as well as the spiritual,

A God who will both liberate us from oppression, evil, and death; but then use that liberation to lead us into joy, happiness, and life,

And that our God is a God who does this all for His own glory. Amen

