

Understanding the Bible #4 – Exodus 1

Based on *The Bible: A Story That Makes Sense of Life* by Andrew Ollerton

Bible Reading

7 The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. 8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. 9 And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. 10 So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

Exodus 3:7-10

Today’s talk is titled ‘Exodus’, but before we move to the book, let’s give it some context by looking at one of its main themes, freedom.

Freedom is an experience that many of us take for granted. We live in a country with laws that make slavery illegal, give equal rights to men and women, and many benefits and opportunities which ancient civilisations would have been astounded by and that are not experienced in many parts of the world to this day.

And yet despite this, most of us have areas of our lives where we do not feel ‘free’. A job we hate, a difficult relationship, a nagging health problem, financial issues. Along with these, and sometimes caused by them, things like anxiety, anger and self-destructive habits can make us feel trapped.

We dream of ways we can escape from these things, from winning the lottery to joining a gym, hoping that more money or a fitter body might release us.

But even when people win the lottery, or find themselves in a situation where they are financially secure, physically fit and socially active, the feeling of being trapped often remains, a nagging consciousness that there must be more than this.

One of the ways the Bible addresses this is with the story of Exodus. The word means 'exit' or 'way out'. When Israel was enslaved by Pharaoh, God intervened and brought them out of Egypt and took them (often reluctantly) into a new place where they could be free.

When we read the Bible, we need to keep in mind that slavery has been a fact of life on this planet for thousands of years. It is only over the past few hundred years that the idea of slavery has been seriously challenged, and the people who challenged it were often Christians, inspired by the Bible's message that all humans are equal and precious to God.

This message was so powerful that a version of the Bible was produced in the early 19th century called 'Select Parts of the Holy Bible for the use of the Negro Slaves in the British West-India Islands'.

The publishers of the slave bible were concerned that Exodus, the Book of Psalms, and the Book of Revelation, 'could instil in slaves a dangerous hope for freedom and dreams of equality'.

It had references to freedom and escape from slavery removed. The editors included only a tenth of the Old Testament and half of the New Testament. Among the excluded passages are Galatians 3:28

'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'

And the message of Exodus has continued to inspire a wide range of leaders and movements, from Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement to Christine Caine's A21 anti-trafficking campaign.

So far, so good. But let's look at what the word 'freedom' means.

Over the past 200 years, western culture has defined freedom as being an individual's right to decide what is best for them, free from political, social and religious pressures.

Many Disney films express this kind of thinking. You need to do whatever you need to do to be 'yourself'. Follow your heart! This is the way to meaning and fulfilment. This is true freedom.

And this freedom has resulted in significant changes in the way that people live their lives, including a huge increase in global travel, greater career options and openness about sexuality.

It makes 'me' the centre of every story.

And the invention and growth of the internet means we are free to view or order just about anything we want wherever we are, whenever we want.

The problem is, this type of freedom comes without direction or ultimate meaning.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote:

"The twenty-first century has provided us with a maximum of choice and a minimum of meaning."

Freedom without meaning and structure has led to soaring levels of stress and anxiety. 'Choice anxiety' and the pressure to perform, to live lives that will satisfy and impress other people, has become a problem. There is now too much choice, too much freedom!

The Bible sees freedom in a very different way from this. The Bible acknowledges that each person is important. But we do not flourish when we are focussed on ourselves. The Bible sees each person as being a part of a larger story, part of a community of people, helping and being helped, learning and teaching.

In the book of Exodus, God frees his people from Egypt so that they can move to a place where they will be able to fulfil their original

purpose as God's image-bearers. Where individuals can thrive, as part of a community.

And, as this series is all about understanding the whole Bible, here's a spoiler for you. The ultimate Exodus story had to wait until Jesus, the 'new Moses' came into the world, he broke the chains of sin, dismantling the barrier between humans and God. As the Gospel of John says:

If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

John 8:36

The Road to Freedom

But, we're moving ahead of ourselves. Let's go back to the beginning. The Bible starts with God creating humans as his image-bearers, free to live, learn and create in joyful relationship with him.

But when humans disobeyed God, that relationship was broken, and with it went both the relationship and the joy.

Following Adam and Eve's disobedience, the book of Genesis recounts many stories that show humans living lives that are not in proper relationship with God, resulting in tribal societies that revolved around murder, revenge and sexual immorality.

And then we have the Flood, God's judgement on a world that has rejected his ways, with only Noah and his family rescued, along with enough animals to populate a very large zoo.

Sadly, the new societies that emerged after the flood were no more righteous than the ones before it. By Genesis 11, we see humans trying to build a tower (Babel) that will 'reach the heavens', with disastrous consequences.

And then we get one of those very long genealogies (Adam was the father of Seth, Seth was the father of Enosh...) that takes us from Noah's first son Shem, to Abram, son of a pagan man called Terah

who lived in Ur (near what is now Baghdad in Iraq) in what we now call the Bronze Age, around 1800BC.

Terah moved his family from Ur, intending to travel to Canaan (what is now Israel/Palestine). But he settles in Harran, in what is now southern Turkey.

Abram is settled in Ur when God speaks to him.

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Genesis 12:1-3

God tells Abram to leave his country, people and family, that he will make Abram into a great nation, and that ‘all peoples on earth will be blessed through you’.

Now that’s a big promise. And we are a part of the fulfilment of that promise. Abram, later renamed Abraham, becomes a part of God’s plan to destroy evil and enable humans to experience real freedom.

Abraham became the founding father of the nation of Israel. And from Israel came Jesus, the Messiah, who began a new humanity, and a new creation.

Abraham obeys God’s command, and takes his wife, his nephew Lot, his workers and their possessions on a 900 mile journey from Haran to Canaan, what today is known as Israel and Palestine. Some theologians see it as foreshadowing the future Exodus from Egypt into this same part of the world.

Genesis 12-50 takes us through Abram and Sarai receiving a miracle child, Isaac, who fathers twins, Jacob & Esau. Jacob has 12 sons who form the basis of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Jacob (also named Israel) is not your typical hero, he is sneaky and scheming, and his family turns out to be what we would now call 'dysfunctional', or to use the technical term, 'a complete nightmare'.

Jacob's favourite son Joseph is sold as a slave by his own brothers (to be fair, Joseph was an annoying kid) and taken to Egypt, where he eventually becomes second-in-charge to Pharaoh himself.

Genesis ends with the family being reunited, and relocating to Egypt.

And so we see the story of the Bible beginning to take shape. From Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob/Israel and his family, God is shaping history in preparation for Jesus the Messiah, who will reverse the curse of Eden, opening up the possibility of freedom for all humanity.

And so we get to the book of Exodus, the second book of the Bible. It has been four hundred years since Joseph arrived in Egypt, and his descendants have prospered to the point where the latest Pharaoh considers them a threat.

Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.

Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country."

Exodus 1:6-10

And so Pharaoh enslaves the nation of Israel and puts them to work on various building projects. But, as this morning's reading tells us, God 'sees' the misery of his people and promises to rescue them.

And so we are introduced to the main human character in the book of Exodus, Moses. Most of us will know how the story goes. Pharaoh has started a program of genocide, ordering the killing of all male, Israelite babies. Moses' mother puts him in a basket (the word used is the same as that used for Noah's ark) and floats him onto the Nile.

As the ark saved the human race from extinction, so the basket saves Israel from being destroyed. And Moses ends up being brought up in Pharaoh's household, oh the irony!

Forty years later, things are not going well for Moses. He has killed an Egyptian who he saw beating a Hebrew slave, and has fled Pharaoh's wrath to live as a shepherd to the north of Egypt. It is at this time, while working as a shepherd for his father-in-law that Moses is commissioned by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

Moses learns a lot about God on this day (I did a talk on it a while back), but two significant things are that God knows Moses personally, and that God is an all-powerful, relational God who is going to help Moses liberate the Israelites from Egypt.

Once again we see God taking the initiative, choosing and enabling someone to do the work he has planned for them. Moses would never have guessed that this was going to be his role in life, and wasn't that happy when he found out that it was! But God works with and through him to make sure that his plans are fulfilled.

And this is a pattern that is repeated again and again in the Bible, and continues to be how he works with his people to this day. God does not always remove us from difficult situations, sometimes he asks us to help solve them. And he enables us to confront our fears and beat them. The most frequently used phrase in the Bible is 'Do not be

afraid', occurring over 300 times throughout the Old and New Testament.

Feeling fear is part of being a human being, even in a comparatively peaceful place like England. Being a Christian does not rid us of that tendency, but it does give us access to a God who can help us overcome our fears, and sets us free to live the way we were meant to live, being people who make a positive difference in the places God has put us.

Confronting idols

Moses begins his journey back to Egypt with his family. Meanwhile God speaks to his brother Aaron (who is one of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt). Aaron goes out to meet Moses, and they have a meeting with the Israelite elders, who are delighted that God has responded to their prayers for liberation from Pharaoh.

And so begins one of the most famous stories in history, with Moses and Aaron demanding that Pharaoh 'Let my people go'.

Unsurprisingly, Pharaoh is reluctant to lose one of his main workforces, and so a battle begins between Moses and Aaron and their God and Pharaoh and his many gods.

Like most of the ancient world, the Egyptians believed in a large group of gods, many of whom were associated with the natural world. For example, the sun was a god called Ra, who provided the world with light.

Understanding this helps us understand the plagues that God sent on Egypt. When he causes darkness over the whole land, it is God showing the Egyptians that he, and not Ra, is in charge of the sun. We'll look at that more in the next session.

Pharaoh's main job was to maintain order and peace. The Egyptians were a civilisation that believed that the less things changed the better, with a population that were brought up to 'know their place'

Being a country where rain is scarce, the River Nile was their source of life. So when God turns the Nile into blood, and causes an infestation of frogs, it shows that Pharaoh, or his gods, are not the ones in control of Egypt.

And even in the 21st century, there are many powerful forces in this world that oppose God's rule. The Bible calls them 'idols'. An idol is anything or anyone that promises to meet our deepest needs for security and fulfilment in exchange for our loyalty.

Or, as Timothy Keller puts it:

“Anything so central and essential to your life that should you lose it, your life would hardly feel worth living.”

So, even if you don't have a shrine devoted to Ra in your house, it is very possible that the message of Exodus is relevant to you. And don't think this is just a God of the Old Testament thing. Jesus, the most loving man ever to live on earth, insisted that anything that gets between us and complete loyalty to God must be got rid of, even if that thing is family loyalty, or financial security.

Idols are often good things that we turn into ultimate things. Children, relationships, jobs, money, our house and possessions, even sports, exercise and eating.

These things are all good things, God-given gifts. But when we make them our reason for living, our lives are thrown out of balance. God gets pushed out of his proper place, and things begin to go wrong.

With God at the centre of our lives, everything else is put into proper perspective and proportion. Without God in control, good things like money end up consuming us. I remember talking with someone a few years ago who had a friend who worked as a stockbroker in the City of London. The stockbroker was very rich, owned a huge house in Gerrard's Cross, and had a Lamborghini in his garage. But he was

bemoaning the fact that even if he worked 24 hours a day, he would probably never be able to afford a super-yacht.

Building our lives on things like money, popularity, career or appearance will not ultimately satisfy us, because we were designed for something more.

If you remember the talks on Origins, humans only flourish when God is at the centre of their lives. When he gets ignored, or pushed away, things have a habit of going terribly wrong.

Pharaoh is powerful. But he is not God. And only the true God can offer true freedom to the ones he created. The book of Exodus is about how God rescues his people from slavery so that they can freely live in relationship with him.

As Moses was chosen to set Israel free, so Jesus became a human so that he could provide us with the true Exodus. And it is trusting in him, not our jobs or even our family, that will keep us free.

If you take one thought away with you today, let it be this:

Is there anything in my life that is so important to me that I would not be prepared to get rid of it if I knew God wanted me to?

God is a generous God who loves giving us good things. But everything we have is 'on loan' from God, a gift to be enjoyed, not a god to be worshipped.

In the next session we're going to look at the next phase in God's big plan of allowing humans to live in a proper relationship with him.