

Understanding the Bible #5 – Exodus 2

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

Bible Reading

¹ Then the Lord said to Moses, “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. ² You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. ³ But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, ⁴ he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites. ⁵ And the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it.”

Exodus 7:1-5

In the last session we looked at one of the main themes of Exodus, freedom, and found that the Bible’s idea of freedom is very different from the modern secular view of being free to do what we want, when we want, free to choose the way of life that suits us.

The Bible’s view is that true freedom is being able to fulfil our original purpose as God’s image-bearers, representatives of our creator, living in relationship with him and other people.

So, let’s return to the Exodus story.

The Israelites have prospered in Egypt, but the king of the Egyptians becomes concerned that they will end up joining forces with Egypt’s enemies. And so the Israelites are forced into slavery working on Pharaoh’s building projects, with no freedom to worship their God. The opposite of freedom, either by the modern secular view or the Bible’s definition.

However, the Israelites continue to prosper, and Pharaoh begins a programme of killing all the Hebrew male babies.

And so God commissions Moses and Aaron to confront Pharaoh and ask that the Israelites be freed to worship their God outside of Egypt.

Not surprisingly Pharaoh refuses, and so we see a massive power confrontation between Pharaoh (who was the mediator between Egypt's gods and humans) and Moses (who was the mediator between Israel's God and humans).

10 plagues follow. As I indicated last time, there is significance to the plagues, they are a battle between God and the Egyptian gods, and although the specifics are argued by scholars, the following list gives us a sense of how it played out.

1. Plague of water turned to blood

Hapi was the Egyptian god of the Nile, the provider of life to the Egyptian people.

2. Plague of frogs

Heket was the frog-headed goddess of fertility.

3. Plague of lice/fleas/gnats (*Hebrew, Keenim*)

Geb was the god over dust of the earth.

4. Plague of flies

Khepri has the head of a fly, and is the god of creation, movement of the sun and rebirth

5. Plague on livestock

Hathor is a goddess with the head of a cow.

6. Plague of boils

Isis is the goddess of medicine and peace.

7. Plague of hail

Nut is the goddess of the sky

8. Plague of locusts

Seth is the god of storms and disorder

9. Plague of darkness

Ra is the sun god

10. Plague of the death of the firstborn

The plagues are aimed directly at Pharaoh. Worshipped by Egyptians as the son of Ra the sun god, he had ordered the killing of the children of God's people, a people who God has described as being 'his firstborn son'. (Exodus 4:22-23). Pharaoh has repeatedly refused to heed God's warnings, so now God responds in a way that Pharaoh will not be able to ignore.

This is a face-off between the God of the Israelites and the gods of the Egyptians, and the Israelites' God wins.

And so we see another pattern emerging of the way God works with his people, and against their enemies. And once again God is the one who takes the initiative.

When God announced the tenth plague, it was to kill 'every firstborn son' in Egypt. As Pharaoh has killed the Israelites' firstborn sons, God is going to kill the firstborn sons of everyone living in Egypt.

And as in some of the other plagues, God provides a way for the Israelites to be protected from it.

He commands the Israelite families to sacrifice a lamb, and to splash the lamb's blood on the doorposts of their houses. The lamb was to be cooked and eaten in preparation for their escape from Egypt.

When the God of the Israelites delivered his promised judgment on Egypt the houses with blood daubed on the doorposts would be

‘passed over’, and that’s why the festival that is celebrated by Jews every year is called ‘Passover’.

Passover involves a shared meal served with bitter herbs and salt water, to remember the bitterness of slavery and tears of desperate sadness. Flat bread symbolises the rushed departure, with no time to allow the dough to rise. And wine anticipates the celebration of freedom.

Central to the whole thing is the slain lamb, whose blood protected the firstborn from God’s judgment.

And, many hundreds of years later, Jesus shared a Passover meal with his disciples, and to the shock of those gathered, made it about him!

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Matthew 26:26-28

And this is why communion is such an important event. Bread and wine have become vivid symbols of Christ’s death in place of ours.

As the Passover lamb’s blood protected the Israelites from God’s judgment, so Jesus’s blood protects us. As God rescued the Israelites from Egypt, Jesus rescues us from the slavery of sin. As God parted the Red Sea... oh... but I’m getting ahead of myself...

Exodus means crossing over

After the dreadful tenth plague, Pharaoh finally gives in and sets Israel free. Israel sets off towards Mount Sinai as directed by God, avoiding Philistine country via a desert road that leads to the Red Sea.

Pharaoh meanwhile once again changes his mind on letting the Israelites go. So he gathers his army and sets off to return the Israelites to Egypt.

When the Israelites realise that the Egyptian army is advancing towards them, they (understandably) panic. Moses calms the people, assuring them that their God is in control.

Exodus 14:13-14 reads:

Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

Exodus 14:13-14

(remember the ‘do not be afraid’ thing, over 300 times in the Bible)

I like what God says in the next verses:

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground.”

Exodus 14:15-16

God takes the initiative, but he wants us to be involved. I think God is saying to Moses, “You’re right about not needing to be afraid. You’re right that I will fight for you. And if by saying, ‘you need only be still’ you mean, ‘don’t panic!’, that’s good, but remember that you and the Israelites also have an active part to play in this.”

As Christians we have to balance these two things. God is working in the world, but he wants us to be involved in that process. And through reading the Bible, talking with and listening to God and sharing our thoughts with other Christians, we need to be seeking out how we can be a part of his work.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

Exodus 14:21-22

Moses does what he is told, and God does the rest. As the Israelites reach the other side of the Red Sea, God closes the waters over the approaching Egyptian army. God keeps his promise. We need to learn from this. God is in control. We simply need to do our part. Do not be afraid.

The covenant at Mount Sinai

And as the Israelites look back over the Red Sea, they shout, cheer and sing their thanks to God. But what next?

God has freed Israel so that they will be free to live the way God wants them to live, not in slavery, but in relationship with their creator and sustainer. True freedom is found living within God's lovingly created boundaries. As God told Moses, freedom from Pharaoh was not just about escaping from Egypt, it was freedom to worship the true God.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and say to him, "This is what the LORD says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me".

Exodus 8:1

In the New Testament, the Exodus is seen as a precursor to the freedom we can experience through faith in Jesus Christ, living the way we were designed to live, leaving behind regrets, addictions, anxiety and fear.

So now Israel begin their journey to Mount Sinai, the place where Moses had first received his calling from God from within the burning

bush. The first time Moses had been alone. Now he is leading an entire nation. I can only imagine how overwhelmed Moses felt, both with gratitude for God's faithfulness, and with anticipation for what would come next.

And the people he is leading are a damaged bunch of people. They have been slaves for 400 years. Like people who have been in prison for a long time, they are not used to freedom. They are emotionally fragile, used to being dependent on a tyrannical master.

And like many people in their position, there is a tendency to long for the 'safety' of what they are used to. Only 3 days after leaving Egypt, many of them are looking back to the 'good old days' when everything was provided for them!

In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

Exodus 16:2-3

And yet God continues to provide for them, sometimes supernaturally. And eventually the Israelites reach the Desert of Sinai, and set up camp around the mountain. Moses climbs Mount Sinai, where God says to him:

"...tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

Exodus 19:3b-6a

These are the opening words to God's 'terms and conditions', his covenant, an agreement that will allow a proper relationship to exist with himself and Israel. And the foundation of it is God's desire that Israel will be his representatives on earth. God has taken the initiative in rescuing Israel from Egypt, and he is expecting them to enter into a relationship with him that will mean God's reality, through their living example of what it means to live God's way, to be properly human, will be made known to the whole earth.

1 Peter and Revelation both use the language of Exodus 19 to talk about how Christians are a chosen people, the 1 Peter version reads...

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

1 Peter 2:9

And every time we take communion, we are reaffirming the covenant the Jesus made with us, his free offer of removing the barrier between us and God, being restored to right relationship with our creator so that we can be 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' to the world.

The Ten Commandments

Proper boundaries are essential to a good life. As we have already discussed, true freedom requires them. Whether it be observing the highway code, or basic good manners, society thrives where people keep to rules that enhance our well-being and protect us from harm.

So, as part of his covenant with Israel, God reveals ten basic rules for human flourishing, which I've summarised as:

1. Don't worship other gods
2. Don't make images of God
3. Don't misrepresent God's character
4. Honour the Sabbath day

5. Honour your parents
6. Don't murder
7. Don't be sexually unfaithful
8. Don't steal
9. Don't lie
10. Don't envy other people's stuff

The 10 commandments are often held up as 'common sense' rules for living. And it is true that if everyone followed them, the world would be a much better place to live in.

But they are far more than common sense behaviour guidelines.

The first three commandments are all about making sure God is the priority in our lives. We are to allow nothing to take the place of God, we are not to try and make God fit into our way of seeing things, and we are to make sure we are clear in our understanding of who God is.

And how we visualise God is very important. The Bible gives us two truths about God that need to be kept in proper tension. God is pure love, and God is pure holiness. The Bible talks a lot about the 'fear of the Lord', and this is an appropriate emotion.

Proverbs 9:10 reads:

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*

My dad was a loving father to me, I had no doubt that he wanted what was best for me. But when he caught me doing something that he didn't approve of, I was always terrified of what the consequences would be.

God is a perfect father. And as such, he loves us enough to want us to be the best people we can be. In my Christian life I have known what it

feels like to know both God's approval, and his condemnation. And I know which one I prefer!

When we become Christians we are adopted into God's family. We gain a father who is perfectly loving, perfectly good and infinitely powerful. And yes, he is scary. He is the creator and sustainer of the universe after all. But, and this is the important bit, he is on our side!

As the Psalmist wrote:

The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid.

What can mere mortals do to me?

Psalm 118:6

And the Apostle Paul, in the Epistle to the Romans, says that those who are 'in Christ' have been set free from the law of sin and death, as if we've been accused of something in a court of law, but then the prosecution decides to drop the case.

If God is for us, who can be against us?

Romans 8:31b

So, returning to the commandments, having insisted on the supremacy of God in the first 3 commandments, the fourth commandment, 'Honour the Sabbath day' takes us back to the creation of the universe, when having completed his work over 6 days, God blesses the seventh as a special day. Sabbath comes from the Hebrew 'Shabbat', meaning 'rest' or 'cease'. It is a day set aside each week for humans to stop working, to spend special time in the presence of God and family.

It tells us that God is in control. That our value is not measured by our productivity. For this group of ex-slaves it would have let them know that they were no longer Pharaoh's property, but God's people.

And the rest of the commandments are about honourable relationships between humans.

Treaties from other nations of this time are always focussed on property rights. And while subsequent Israelite laws include these, the primary commandments are all about people's rights.

Honouring your parents, treating human life as sacred, sexual faithfulness, honesty and contentment with what you have were not just common-sense rules for life, they were the way God wanted them to show the other nations that they were different, to be his representatives on this planet, in both their attitude to life, and the way they put that into practice.

The ten commandments were a gift from God outlining basic boundaries of behaviour for the Israelite people to live by. And they remain remarkably fresh and relevant to this day.

And in providing them, God is telling Israel that the Exodus is not just escaping from Egypt, it is their chance to embrace a new way of living, God's way of living.

Exodus is a journey

And so, having been given their marching orders, Israel sets off for Canaan...

When they are close to their destination, they send twelve spies to check out the territory. After 40 days they return with good and bad news... Canaan is a beautiful, fertile country, but the inhabitants are intimidating, and their cities are heavily fortified.

Two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, are confident that Israel can take possession of Canaan. But the other ten are not convinced, and soon the whole Israelite community is exhibiting Stockholm syndrome, wishing they had never left Egypt, and even saying they should choose another leader who will take them back to Egypt!

Numbers 14:5-9 reads:

Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there. Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite assembly, “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them.”

Bonus points for those who noticed the two instances of ‘Do not be afraid’!

Moses and Aaron, distraught, fall facedown in prayer.

Joshua and Caleb do their best to persuade the Israelites to trust God.

And the Israelites suggest stoning the four of them!

And God steps in and says he will wipe out the Israelites and start a new nation based on the people who have remained faithful to him.

And, incredibly, Moses talks back to God and pleads the case for the Israelite nation. And God listens. And God forgives. But he does not forget, and the Israelite nation is sent back into the wilderness for 40 years (one year for each day the spies were in Canaan) until all of the current generation (apart from Caleb and Joshua) have died.

And, eventually, a new generation of Israelites, led by Moses’ successor Joshua, crossed the Jordan River and entered the land of Canaan. Joshua is the same name as Jesus (Yeshua), the one who was the ultimate fulfilment of God’s promise to take us out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

When everything seemed lost, Moses and Aaron turned to God. In our lives, when things seem hopeless, this should be our first response. In fact, it should be our continual attitude, whether things are going well,

or things are going badly, living life in relationship with God, through prayer, reading the Bible, and sharing our life experiences with other Christians.

The apostle Paul, in a situation where Christians were being tempted to revert to Jewish customs that had been fulfilled by Jesus's life, death and resurrection writes:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Galatians 5:1

God set the Israelites free from Pharaoh. But they found themselves wishing they were slaves again.

Jesus set all of humanity free from the consequences of our rebellion against God, from anxiety, addiction, guilt and shame. But many people find it easier to live life without that freedom, in fact, it is the default position of 'fallen' humanity.

God's freedom comes with a 'cost'. It involves entering into a relationship with him. Doing things his way. Living a life that is centred around him. And it is a sign of just how far away we have moved from God that we consider this a cost rather than a privilege!

God always takes the first step. He may be doing it with you right now. What will your response be?

To stay in Egypt?

To return to Egypt?

Or walk with him in his strength into the place he wants you to be?

Plague images: <https://www.bibleinfo.com/en/questions/what-are-10-plagues-egypt>