

FREEDOM FROM/TO

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Exodus 1:1-4:31

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## Introduction

Some of the greatest cinematic stories of our time have been stories about freedom, particularly the fight or quest for it. Think about the 1995 Best Picture winner, *Braveheart*, which tells a highly dramatized version of Scotland's fight for freedom in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. When that movie came out I can remember watching it over and over again after school. Now, of course, it wasn't just the battle scenes or the castles or blue war paint that made the film so endearing. It was the underdog story; it was the total commitment to an ideal called freedom that truly captivated you as you watched it.

Or another example, going back a couple of decades before, *Star Wars*. The whole original trilogy is about the fight for freedom from the evil and oppressive Galactic Empire. I mean from the very first scene of the movies we watch these armored clad soldiers overtake a ship, while the main villain dressing in black, chokes a rebel to death. Over the course of three films, these overmatched, undersized rebels face down the odds to bring freedom to the galaxy.

And, spoiler alert, in all these cases the movies end happily with the rebels finding freedom and the oppressors defeated and dead. Cue the credits.

The thing is, there's never much thought or attention to what comes after. You just assume everything is great now and happily ever after, but is that ever the case? In Scotland's case, they would, a few hundred years later, become tied to England again, where they remain in union as Great Britain today. We all thought that the galaxy far, far away was settled in peace until a few years ago when Disney decided they wanted to make more money and reopened the *Star Wars* story, telling us that, essentially, none of the first trilogy really mattered. As our students learn in school today, America went through many challenges after the British surrender at Yorktown before a permanent and lasting solution could be established in the U.S.

Constitution. My point is that freedom from the oppressor is only half the story. In fact, it's a story that is often soured or made vain when a lasting peace cannot be found.

True freedom isn't just *from* something; true freedom must also include *to* something else and better.

And that, in many ways, is exactly the story which the Bible tells. Think about this last year where I would say our theme was the City of God and the City of Man. In every book we studied and passage we read over the course of 2019 we saw this journey from the City of Man to the City of God. Biblical freedom is never just from something, but it always includes to something else.

But, sadly, that "to" aspect is not always something that has been stressed in Christian belief and practice. And this isn't just a modern issue, going back into the Middle Ages we find a distinct emphasis on Christian salvation as escaping punishment, escaping hell. Maybe at best the hope of gaining heaven, but even that isn't a biblical idea. Again, as we saw last year, the *telos*, or the goal, of the Christian life isn't 'heaven' or even a place but, rather, God Himself! My point is that any view of salvation, or of the entire Christian life for that matter, any view that lacks a proper and proportionate emphasis on to what and whom we are delivered is simply out of touch with the Bible. Thus, our new Sunday morning series will be framed around this very idea of "Freedom From & Freedom To". We will see from the beginning to the end of the Bible how God frees us *from* sin, death, and bondage *to* Himself, to peace and to life.

That study begins this morning in the book of Exodus. No doubt, the story of the Exodus is one of the most well-known stories in culture today, not just in the church but outside of it. Whether it be Charlton Heston and *The Ten Commandments* or to a more recent re-telling in Ridley Scott's *Exodus* featuring Christian Bale, many of us are familiar with the story of Israel

escaping slavery in Egypt. We know about Moses, the plagues, the parting of the sea. But that's only fourteen of the forty chapters in the book of Exodus; that's just a third of the whole book! Clearly, the exodus is more a story of what Israel is freed *to* than what it is freed *from*.

Thus, there are three layers in which to read and understand the book of Exodus. First, (1) There is historical significance of the exodus. While the book of Genesis recounts God's choosing of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it is the book of Exodus which recounts how the formal nation of Israel comes into existence. It is in this book where this nation itself is chosen by God to be His people. The book of the Exodus is, thus, foundational to the very nature and being of the Jewish people. The Old Testament quotes this book or scenes from it heavily; the New Testament does as well. So, we have to consider the book of Exodus for its historical significance in the way that it defined the Jewish religion and the early Christian faith.

Second, (2) There is Theological significance of the exodus. The primary theme of this whole book is God's work to make Himself known to His people and to all the nations. Each week we will heavily emphasize how everything that God says and does is directed toward revealing Himself, His name and character, if you will. My point is that while history is important, more than that the book of Exodus teaches us, what we call, Theology proper; the doctrine of God.

Third, accordingly, (3) There is soteriological significance of the exodus. Soteriology is simply the doctrine of salvation. The exodus provides the defining paradigm for a biblical understanding of salvation in that it shows us both what God saves His people from as well as what He saves them to. Principally, to build off the Theological theme of the book, God saves Israel from Pharaoh that they may know and serve Him, that then through them God made be known to all the nations of the earth. It is this very paradigm which the New Testament holds

and maintains. God saves people from bondage to sin that they may know and serve Him, that then through them God made be known to all the nations of the earth. Simply put, the book of Exodus shows us what the purpose of our salvation is.

In all, our study of this book will show us that God is most known and worshiped through His people's redemption from the powers of this world to Himself.

**1. We must be *freed from slavery***

**Exodus 1 & 2**

And so, like we did last winter in the book of Genesis, I have to warn you we will be moving quite quickly through this massive narrative. That's not because the details are unimportant, but because I want us in our limited time together to be sure that we see the big picture and the big themes that are vital to the way we view God, ourselves, and the world around us. We'll be encouraging you, therefore, to take note of the passages coming up and diving deeper into them in your Gospel Communities. Of course, as many of you have come to learn about me, I really do enjoy going deeper one-on-one, and so if you've got questions, come ask them!

But, this morning, as we look at the opening four chapters, we see these two central themes on full display. First, that In order to fulfill God's purposes for our lives and the world we must be freed from slavery. You see, our book opens exactly where Genesis left off. We're immediately reminded of Jacob and his twelve sons, and then particularly about Joseph. In other words, here is the people whom God had elected and sworn Himself to. These people are the children of Abraham. And not just are they recipients of God's covenant with Abraham, but through them God is fulfilling His purposes for the whole world. Look at this, verse 7, "[T]he Israelites were fruitful, increased rapidly, multiplied, and became extremely numerous so that the land was filled with them," (Exodus 1:7). Fruitful and multiply. Where have you heard that

before? Genesis 1, “God said to [the first man and woman], ‘Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it,’” (Genesis 1:28).

You see, Exodus opens by immediately picking up on all the themes from Genesis. The point of this is to, more than anything else, show God’s faithfulness to His purposes. God created all things for His glory, that His glory may fill the earth. God swore to Abraham to bless all the nations through him and his family and, look here, God has not swayed at all from that purpose.

But, there is a threat. Think back to a year ago, there were Adam and Eve, called and equipped by God to follow Him in His mission, but then in Genesis 3:1 a serpent appears and attempts to subvert those plans. He wants to attack God by killing God’s children and enslaving God’s world. Enter in Exodus the Pharaoh, “A new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. He said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and powerful than we are. Come, let’s deal shrewdly with them;’” (Exodus 1:8-10a).

Keep reading and in everything this king does he attempts to stop the multiplication of the seed of Eve, of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He wants not just to stop God’s *people*, but seemingly God’s *purposes* for the world through His people.<sup>1</sup> The serpent is described in Genesis 3 as crafty and shrewd; the Pharaoh here as shrewd. Now, the terms are slightly different in Hebrew, but the connection between the two can’t be denied.<sup>2</sup> The Pharaoh’s resistance to the work of God builds and builds until he calls for the execution of first-born of the women of Israel. Again, just picture this. This serpent-like king wants to kill the first-born of the women of God. I think Stephen Dempster says it perfectly when he writes, “The series of events

<sup>1</sup> Ross Blackburn observes that here is Israel fulfilling the mandate of Genesis 1:27-28. This is what Pharaoh is fighting against, “... that life on the earth would witness to the character of God, as God’s image spread and governed according to his likeness and character,” (W. Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus*, NSBT [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012], 29).

<sup>2</sup> In Genesis 3:1, the serpent is described as אַרְוֵם, arum – crafty, shrewd. Compare with Exodus 1:10 where the Pharaoh calls for חָכָם, chakam – shrewdness.

leading up to Hebrew genocide is seen to work out the struggle between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman mentioned in Genesis 3,” (Stephen Dempster).<sup>3</sup>

And so, here we are. We see the conflict facing Israel, but a conflict that is not new at all but rather goes back to very beginning of all things.<sup>4</sup> Israel suffers and serves someone other than God in great affliction. Enter Moses in chapter two. But Moses is not our hero. No, he, himself, is immediately shown as one in dire need of rescue. He, himself, faces death, and his rescue comes only in the form of, verse 3, an ark. Now in English we see it translated as basket, but the word used here is the exact same word, תִּבָּה (tebah) – ark, used to Genesis 6 to describe what God has commanded Noah to build. Clearly, God’s purposes to save His people are unchanging. What He did before, He will do again. And what He does now, He will do also in the future.<sup>5</sup>

The baby is found and he is named Moses. Here we have a play on words, in that in Egyptian the name Moses just means ‘child of’ with no attachment of parentage. In other words, the true and ultimate Father of Moses, God, He is unknown. God is not known, yet, but will make Himself known. For you see, in Hebrew, Moses (מֹשֶׁה, *Mosheh*) sounds like the Hebrew verb, מָשַׁח (mashaw), meaning to draw out. This alludes, already, to the fact that Israel will be drawn out of Egypt that she may come to know the God who is not fully known yet, that in this drawing out that the rest of the world may come to know God as well.

I mean, this, right here, this is what is going to happen. The nations do not know God. But even Israel, herself, does not fully know God. And so, what will happen, from chapter 1 to

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 94.

<sup>4</sup> As Desmond Alexander writes, “When the wider canvas is taken into consideration, God’s action in coming to dwell among the Israelites has every appearance of reversing, at least in part, the tragic consequences of Adam and Eve’s betrayal of God in the Garden of Eden,” (T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, TTCS [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016], 3).

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Dempster writes, “Moses’ salvation from the water echoes backwards and forwards in the text; backwards to the salvation of humanity from the judgment of the flood by Noah (Gen. 6-8), and forwards to the Israelites’ future escape from the waters of the Reed Sea (Exod. 14),” (Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 94).

chapter 40 of this book, will be God making Himself known, both to Israel and to Egypt, so that through them and through these events He will become known to the whole world! Right, I mean let's just try to get our minds around what's happening here. Israel has this tradition, but they don't fully know their God. Egypt and the nations don't know God at all. And so, just here, at the very beginning of Exodus we're shown this problem. No one knows God fully as He wants to be known. Thus, God is going to make Himself known! As Ross Blackburn observes, "God is clearly at work among Israel, and yet Israel, like the rest of the world, appears to be ignorant of her God," (W. Ross Blackburn).<sup>6</sup>

## **2. We must be freed to the LORD**

## **Exodus 3 & 4**

Thus, at the very outset of this book we see it is very much about God making Himself known and dwelling among His people. And, again, it's vital that we see what God is doing not just in terms of these specific people in this specific place during this specific time in history. This purpose of God is timeless and universal. What God does here in the Exodus is what He set out to do in Genesis and what He is set to do for all time. Desmond Alexander argues, "[The Exodus] marks a partial restoration of the broken relationship between God and humanity that results from Adam and Eve's actions in the Garden of Eden, and it anticipates future developments whereby God's presence will fill a world inhabited by those who are holy as God is holy," (T. Desmond Alexander).<sup>7</sup> Stephen Dempster adds, "Israel is not just a national and ethnic entity. It represents in itself humanity – a new humanity – with its seventy members, which is destined to restore creation blessing to the world. ... Israel is a firstborn son, a new

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 1.

humanity among the nations, one in whom the image of God is transmitted,” (Stephen Dempster).<sup>8</sup>

All this to say, as Ross Blackburn writes, “The LORD’S missionary commitment to make himself known to the nations is the central theological concern of Exodus,” (W. Ross Blackburn).<sup>9</sup> God aims to move His people from ignorance to relationship with Him, but He does so for the sake of the world. He elects this people for the sake of the nations. God has a purpose for His people, for them to serve Him in His mission. But they must first be freed from Pharaoh before they can belong to Him.

And only God can do this! We saw in chapter two Moses attempt to help his people when he sees them suffering, and yet he fails. He murders an Egyptian and not only that but the Israelites reject his efforts to help. Already Israel complains against Moses, (Exodus 2:14). You see, it’s obvious. We must be freed from slavery, but the thing is only God can accomplish that redemption.

And so, part of the Exodus will be freeing them from slavery to evil. Chapters 3 and 4, however, begin to hint at, though, what God will be freeing them to: Himself, the LORD. We read that after Moses flees Egypt and takes refuge in Midian, he becomes a shepherd and marries. Out one day with his flocks he comes to, “Horeb, the mountain of God,” (Exodus 3:1). This is the same site he will later return to with Israel, also known as Mount Sinai. And here, God appears as “... a flame of fire within a bush,” (Exodus 3:2). This appearance ought to remind you of Genesis 15 when God appeared to Abraham as a burning torch.

And just as God had done with Adam, Noah, and Abraham, again here He takes the initiative and comes to Moses. Right? Moses isn’t seeking God; he isn’t looking for anything.

<sup>8</sup> Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 94, 98.

<sup>9</sup> Blackburn, *The God who Makes Himself Known*, 15.

He's just kind of doing his thing, doing his job, doing the family thing, but God has other plans. We read this exchange earlier, God first reveals Himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and it's in this context of the covenant He had made with the patriarchs that God next reveals His plans to Moses. In other words, 'Because I swore myself to your forefathers, I will now rescue My people. But, oh yeah, I'm going to use you, Moses, to do so.'

Moses immediately resists this plan. Like, 'Hey that's awesome God, and you go for it, but how about you leave me out of it.' I mean, like in addition to be the most human response ever, again we're seeing this fundamental issue that even God's people do not really know Him. Right, I mean Moses' first response to God is 'No.' God doesn't smite him, however. God promises to be with Moses. But Moses still says 'No.' You see, verse 13, isn't just some innocent question from Moses; it is a part of his resistance to obedience. He's coming up with every excuse and objection he can. Here he's saying, 'Well they don't know who you are and I don't really know who you are.' And so, God answers. God reveals His name in three ways, verses 14 and 15: (1) I AM WHO I AM, (2) I AM, and (3) the LORD, the God of your fathers.

"I AM WHO I AM" – אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה; *'ehyeh-yahweh*. Another way to translate this would be, "I am who I will be." In other words, this is a statement of promise, not just to deliver but to further reveal Himself. God tells Moses, 'You will learn My Name. You will watch Me reveal Myself. You will learn it as I move.'<sup>10</sup> The meaning of this name, therefore, is that God is only known by His own revelation. There is no other way to know Him.

And, friends, this is of critical importance for us to grasp. This is as much an issue today as it was to Moses. God isn't known through human reason or human experience or human emotion. God isn't "in" all things and we come to know Him through harmony with the earth.

<sup>10</sup> Brevard Childs writes, "God announced that his intentions will be revealed in his future acts, which he now refuses to explain," (Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, OTL [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004], 76).

God is only known as He initiates that revelation of Himself. Now, of course, does God reveal things about Himself through nature? Absolutely. But only parts of Himself, as Paul says in Romans 1, "... his eternal power and divine nature," (Romans 1:20). But nothing really of His character. And that's why His name is so significant. The name of God tells us not just what He is, in part, but more importantly who He is.<sup>11</sup> And so, that's the point here in this first name, it is that God will reveal this, He will make it known, through what He is about to do. We'll really focus on this next week in Exodus 6:2, but God will show that He is Redeemer, He who rescues from bondage.

That's what these second and third expressions point to as well. "I AM", the God who was, and is, and is to come. The God who makes promises and keeps them, the God who will bring Israel not only *out* of bondage but *into* an abundant land with Him. When all is said and done Israel will know their God, they will understand His character and His purposes, and they will be empowered by Him to join with Him in those purposes.

## **Conclusion**

Or will they? I mean I hate to spoil the whole book for you at the very beginning, but the reality is that by the end of this book, yes, Israel will have been freed from physical bondage, but spiritually they will not know God, because their issue is far deeper than just the flesh. I mean, again, look at Moses. At beginning of chapter four, despite a burning bush, despite hearing the

<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth argues, "The biblical witness to God sees His transcendence of all that is distinct from Himself, not only in the distinction as such, which is supremely and decisively characterized as His freedom from all conditioning by that which is distinct from Himself, but furthermore and supremely in the fact that without sacrificing His distinction and freedom, but in the exercise of them, He enters into and faithfully maintains communion with this reality other than Himself in His activity as Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer," (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.1 [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010], 303). Childs adds, "The major witness of Exodus 3 lies in the revelation by God of himself to Moses as that divine reality who had already made himself known in the past to the Father and who promised to execute his redemptive will toward Israel in the future. The New Testament witness is an attempt to understand this same revelation of the divine reality in relation to the eschatological event of Jesus Christ. Both testaments reflect on the nature of God whose reality has not been discovered by revealed, and whose revelation of himself defines his being in terms of his redemptive work," (Childs, *Exodus*, 87).

voice of God Himself, despite having received the name of God, he still has doubts and objections, “What if they won’t believe me and will not obey me but say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you?’” (Exodus 4:1).

And yet, God graciously gives Moses signs and wonders. Moses still doubts and God grows angry with Moses. Moreover, God’s anger continues to over the fact that Moses has not circumcised his son, as God had commanded to Abraham in Genesis 17. Again, the simple point here is that the people do not know God, and signs and wonders will not be enough.

Jesus makes this same point in Matthew 16 when He say, “An evil and adulterous generation demands a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah,” (Matthew 16:4). You see, miracles and signs and wonders are not enough. We saw in the Gospel of John Jesus perform six distinct signs, yet none of these brought true transformation and a new heart. No, what it actually took for humanity to fully know God and be reconciled with Him was the final sign, the sign of Jonah, that after three days in darkness and death, that Jesus emerged victorious from the grave.

You see, as wonderful as the Exodus from Egypt and to Canaan will be, what this book will show us that a true and better exodus is needed. Humanity needs to be redeemed from bondage to sin and death and redeemed to the living God. And the only way for that to happen is for I AM Himself to bring redemption. You see, just as God promises to Moses here to reveal Himself through the work of redemption in Egypt, God would ultimately reveal Himself through the work of redemption on the cross.

In John 8, Jesus tells us that, “... before Abraham was, I am,” (John 8:58). Jesus is the perfect revelation of God; He is the image of the invisible God. He is Redeemer and Reconciler. For you see this “I AM”, this Redeemer, Himself travelled down to Egypt, entered into our

oppression and our slavery, so that He may set us free. Just as the good news that Jesus is Lord and Savior leaps off every page of the Gospel, so, too, does that good news about Jesus leap off the pages of the Exodus. And as we'll see throughout this book, Jesus doesn't save us from this earthly existence, but rather He transforms this earthly existence into something heavenly. What we see throughout this book is that only in Jesus is there true freedom, not just freedom from something, but freedom to life, freedom to God.