

Thursday Morning Bible Study:

Exodus: God Forms His Holy Nation

1. The Book Of Names, The Book Of Covenant

The book of Exodus, the second book in the Pentateuch (the Greek name for the first section of the Old Testament called in Hebrew the Torah), records the events in which the promises to Abraham and the family that miraculously descends from him are fulfilled in the making of Israel into a nation, a great nation in whose life lies the future of the blessing of the whole world.

Genesis 12:2-3 “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (So also, Exodus 17:4-8; 18:17-19; 22:16-18; 26:2-5; 28:13-15; 35:11-12.)

As that promise unfolded to Abraham, the events of the book of Exodus were foretold.

Genesis 15:13-14 “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

By the end of Genesis, Israel (Jacob) and his family had travelled down to Egypt, through the strange providence of the LORD, because of the famine that had beset the land of Canaan. The LORD had sent Joseph down ahead of them, for good and not for disaster, despite the wicked way in which his brothers had sold him into slavery. At the end of Genesis, Israel lived in comfort and security in Egypt, through the wisdom and integrity of their (despised) brother, but Joseph himself never loses sight of the promises of God and instructs that his bones must be carried back to the land promised by the LORD when He finally brings Israel out of Egypt (Gen. 50:22-26.)

In Hebrew the book of Exodus is titled, “Names” (the first word of the Hebrew text of the book.) Right at the heart of the book is the revelation that all of God’s dealings with Israel are grounded in the Name of the LORD – that is, in the very nature of God Himself. The covenant promises of God are secure because they are deeply tied to the God’s own being. More of this later in the studies...

1. Israel in Egypt: Exodus 1:1-6:13

The Book of Names opens with a listing of the names of the sons of Israel who had come down to Egypt, and a brief comment about their fruitfulness and increasing greatly, multiplying and growing exceedingly strong, and filling the land – all this is language linked to the promises to the patriarchs, and, prior, the creation accounts.

It is this covenantal fulfilment that proves to be a problem for Israel. A new Pharaoh arises who has no knowledge of the history of Egypt with Joseph, and the blessing of God on Israel proves to be a threat to Pharaoh. He sees them as a “human resource”

too valuable to the economy to lose, and as a potential threat should their sympathies move towards foreign enemies. Too important to lose, too risky to keep! Shrewd dealing to limit their population growth and to keep them politically weak is called for. This involves two tactics: (1) oppression through heavy labour as slaves in a state building program; and (2) a scheme to kill male Israelites at birth.

Two Egyptian midwives (we are told their names) are called in to implement the second policy. But they “feared God” (1:17) and they let the male children live. Through their godly fear, they come under the blessing of God and were granted families (“Those who bless you, I shall bless...” Seeing that using the health system to rid Egypt of potential threat, Pharaoh then starts a public campaign, whereby Israel is presented as a communal threat, and the people are exhorted to throw any young Hebrew boy into the Nile River to drown (or be eaten by crocodiles.)

In the light of these larger political movements, the second chapter focuses in on an unnamed family of a Levite husband and his Levite wife who gives birth to a son. He was “a fine child” and she hides him in the house for as long as possible. When that is no longer possible she makes a waterproof crib for him, puts him in it, and places the crib on the river, among reeds. The boy’s older sister keeps watch over it, and sees Pharaoh’s daughter come town to the river (a sacred place for the “sacred” Egyptian royal family) to bathe. Seeing the crib and discovering the baby she is moved to pity, even recognising his ethnicity. Moses’ sister steps in and offers to find a wet nurse for the child, and the child, now part of the Egyptian royal family, is nursed by his own mother, who is paid for the work! He is named Moses (which bears a resemblance in sound to the Hebrew word “to draw out” and the Egyptian word for “son.”) (See Hos. 11:1 and Matt. 2:15.)

Moses’ life in Pharaoh’s court is interrupted through his seeing the burdens of his people under the oppressive Egyptian slavery policy. The beating of a Hebrew slave by an Egyptian causes anger to rise in him, and he strikes the Egyptian dead. His act and the hasty burial however do not go unnoticed, as he finds the next day when he tries to intervene in a quarrel between two Israelites. Moses feels threatened that his origins will be discovered and so he flees out to the land of Midian. There he meets his wife at a well (such a covenant thing to happen!) and the naming of their first son Gershom (“sojourner”) may well be a sign of Moses’ longing for the promised land.

Chapter two ends with news that the Pharaoh died, but that Israel is still suffering under slavery. They “cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel – and God knew.” Note that the name of Israel’s covenant God has not yet been mentioned. The covenant name, the LORD, is directly introduced only with the direct introduction of God’s saving plan in the next chapter.

In the wilderness as shepherd, Moses is surprised by the sight of a bush burning but not being consumed – it is the angel of the LORD (3:2.) And here God called to him out of the bush. He introduces Himself to Moses as “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” This is the covenant making and keeping God through whose faithfulness the world will be blessed. The LORD speaks: He has seen the affliction of His people in Egypt, knows (always a deeply relational word in Hebrew) their afflictions, and has come down to deliver them and to bring them up to the land of promise. The deeply troubling aspect for Moses is that the LORD is sending *him* to be the one who goes to Pharaoh to demand the release of

God's people. He questions the LORD's choice, but the LORD is unrelenting, promising to be with him, and to grant him success, by bringing the people of Egypt to serve God "on this mountain" (quite possibly Sinai.)

Here's the crucial thing in Moses' mind – what if the people demand to know the name of this God of the fathers who has sent Moses to win release for them? "I AM WHO I AM" (Heb. 'ehyeh). This name indicates the utter freedom of God in His grace and mercy in choosing Israel. He acts in faithfulness to His covenant promises. This is the name by which Israel is to know God (though they speaking of Him are to say Yahweh (He is who He is) – for no human being can say "I am who I am", but rather "I am who the LORD has made me." Human beings are contingent beings, getting their identity from their creator and saviour, not from themselves. This is most important in our "identity"-mad age, where, supposedly, "No one can tell me who I am.")

The liberation will not proceed without troubles. God's salvation is always opposed – and the king of Egypt will not easily let his slave force go. But the LORD will act with a strong hand to rescue his people, and in the end Israel will be led out with plunder!

Moses continues his questioning – wondering just how it is that the people will listen to him. (Perhaps he has in memory the response to him by the quarrelling Israelites. And he will find this will be a continuing issue throughout the days ahead – Israel is its own worst enemy, constantly doubting and disobeying the word of the LORD.) The LORD gives him signs to perform to win the authority he needs – i.e to show that the LORD, the covenant God has appeared to and sent him. The signs are of serpent, leprosy, and blood that come and go by the hand of the LORD.

Moses' last attempt to evade this commission relates to his ineloquence. But who made Moses? Who made his mouth? Who makes anyone mute, deaf, seeing or blind? It is the LORD and so His call transcends the difficulties. Finally Moses asks for someone else to go – and this final open statement of reluctance spurs the LORD to anger. His answer is to say that Aaron, Moses' older brother can be his spokesman, but go Moses must!

On his return the people initially believe his message, and worship the LORD for He had seen their affliction and was about to act in mercy. And so Moses and Aaron go to see Pharaoh. His response is to dishonour the name of God. "Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover I will not let Israel go." Despite their pleas, Pharaoh refuses to let the people go, and instead instructs the taskmasters to make the work harder – withdrawing the supply of straw for brick making, and requiring the Israelites to gather straw themselves. The Israelite foremen are told to make the new requirements known, and, when production falls behind, they are beaten. So they plead with Pharaoh directly, but meet his intransigence, and are given no relief in the demands of production rates. So, the foremen and the people are angry with Moses and Aaron: "The LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us."

Moses turned to the LORD with a complaint about this. He sees that things are not now working salvation. "O LORD, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all."

But this is just the start of the saving action of God. “Now you shall see what I shall do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand he will send them, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land.” Chapter 6:2-8 is a thorough and unambiguous statement by the LORD of his covenant purposes:

God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord.’”

This section ends then with the promises hanging in the balance. A summary records the resolve of the LORD, the reluctance of Moses, and then the charge of the LORD to them to bring Israel out of Egypt.