

## **Exodus**

Exodus 3:1-15

Psalm 96:1–9, (10–13)

1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

Matthew 22:15–22

### **Text: Exodus 5:1**

Afterwards Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, “Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.” ’

### **Introduction**

In the movie *Sound of Freedom*, released July 4 of this year, actor Jim Caviezel portrays a former government agent Tim Ballard who founded an anti human-trafficking organization, Operation Underground Railroad. The movie exposes the scourge of human trafficking in our world today, many of them children, for the purposes of sexual exploitation. A closing title of the movie states—accurately—that there are more people enslaved now, by sex trafficking, than there were when slavery was legal.

Slavery is alive and well in our world today. The American civil rights leader the Reverend Martin Luther King found inspiration and guidance from the Biblical story of Exodus. King proclaimed “The Bible tells the thrilling story of how Moses stood in Pharaoh’s court and cried “Let my people go.” The world ever needs those who will take up the cry of freeing those who are enslaved.

In her book *Opening Israel’s Scriptures* theologian Ellen Davis writes that “the overarching theme of Exodus is how the people of Israel come to know—in the deep sense of recognition and embrace—Yahweh as their God. Foundational to their coming to know God is this experience of their liberation from slavery in Egypt. This Exodus story is retold each year in the Jewish celebration of Passover. It shapes who they are as a people. In our small group study that we are undertaking here at Central we are looking at the big overarching story of the Bible. I invite you to reflect with me on the Exodus and its place in this overarching story.

1. First, note this theme of liberation that underpins this exodus story. God said to Moses, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt: I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters.” As the story unfolds we note that their

release from captivity was so they could learn how to walk in company with God; how to be God's peculiar people. Their captivity was an impediment to their coming to know Yahweh as their God. Their release was so they could know him.

Freedom is a wonderful thing. In this story the release from captivity is not given for the sake of freedom as an end goal, as wonderful as that might be. It is freedom for something—for the sake of knowing God and in that to come to experience human flourishing or in Hebrew parlance to experience shalom. The common understanding that freedom is being able to choose whatever you want is to confuse freedom with licence. Freedom, Biblically speaking, is to live in accord with one's true nature. Enslaved as Israel was, they could not live in accord with the nature God created humans to know.

And this points forward to Jesus Christ who comes among us to liberate us from our sin; to free us from the penalty and power of that which binds us humans. The purpose of our Lord's liberation of us is so that we might walk in company with him and come to know our true nature as humans. "I tell you," said Jesus, "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ... if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:34-36) We live in a world obsessed with the satiation of appetites—human trafficking is for this very purpose and appetites are terrible tyrants. God hears the sobbing of those crying out on account of their taskmasters.

How do we know that God hears their cries? We know because of who God has shown himself to be in calling Israel to be his people. We know because of what God does. And it's a very particular God we are talking about. It's not the God who philosophy speculates might exist. It is the One who named himself to Moses. The One who said "I am that I am." And we meet him again in Jesus of Nazareth who said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

2. Dr. Andrew Ollerton, the author of The Bible course, said that on Mount Sinai God gave Israel three gifts to enable relationship with God; the law, the tabernacle and the sacrifices. The foundation of the law was the ten commandments or ten words and we find them first in Exodus 20 and again in Deuteronomy—the second giving of the law—as the new generation of Israelites are about to enter the promised land.

I want to draw your attention to the organization of the book of Exodus. The first twenty chapters are about Israel's dramatic rescue from slavery and their journey to Sinai where Moses ascends into the mountain and receives the law. The last twenty chapters contain, primarily, instructions about the building of a tabernacle

and its eventual construction. Why does the author arrange the story the way he does? Is there a message in the story's outline?

What I am hinting at here is stated in the preamble of the ten commandments. The commandments don't begin with the first commandment as important as "you shall have no other gods before me," is. The commandments begin this way. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The first nineteen chapters tell the thrilling story of what God has done to rescue his people.

Jewish rabbis posed the question, why don't the ten commandments appear at the beginning of Torah? Rabbis told this parable to explain. "A king who entered a province said to the people: may I be your king? But the people said to him: have you done anything good for us that you should rule over us? What did he do to them? He built the city wall for them, he brought in the water supply for them, and he fought their battles. Then when he said to them: may I be your king? They said to him: yes, yes. Likewise, God. He brought the Israelites out of Egypt, divided the sea for them, sent down the manna for them, brought up the well for them, brought the quails for them. He fought for them the battle with Amalek. Then he said to them: I am to be your king. And they said to him: yes, yes."<sup>1</sup>

We often miss the grace of God enacted in this story. Graciously, without being asked, God rescued them from slavery. He claimed them as his own. The law was never given as a pathway for how one becomes acceptable to God. It was given so Israel would know how to walk in company with God; so they would know what gives rise to shalom in life. The first 19 chapters of Exodus tell the story summarized in the opening sentence of the law. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

I remind you of the personal and relational fundamentals of this story. I am the Lord (YHWH) your God. Notice the relationship implied in 'I' and 'you.' God is speaking to them personally. Each of the ten commandments begin with 'you shall.' It is God's personal address. In the giving of the law God says to Israel, I care about you.

Christians tell a similar story of rescue that the Exodus story anticipates. Throughout the year we read the stories of Jesus' life and ministry—the stories of the one who came to liberate us from slavery to sin. Each Easter we have that

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures*, Oxford University Press, 2019. p.40.

special week, Holy week, where we rehearse the story of his life given for us. The story of what Christ has done for us on the cross precedes the event of what Christ does in us to awaken faith. Jesus said, if you love me you will obey my commandments. Again we note that God's act of rescue goes before we ever come to believe in him. Obedience to him is in response to what he has done just as it was for Israel. This is gospel then in Israel's exodus and now in our rescue at the cross of Christ.

In the transfiguration story when the Apostles Peter, James and John are with Jesus they suddenly become aware that two others have joined them, Moses and Elijah. They overhear Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah. Luke tells us that they "were speaking about Jesus' departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem." (Luke 9:31) The Greek word translated 'departure' is 'exodus.' As far as the Apostles are concerned, Jesus' death on the cross was another exodus—a rescue from that which enslaves people.

3. The second gift God gave Israel was the tabernacle. In the wilderness the people of Israel were living in tents and God instructs them to create a tent for God to dwell among them. Its primary function was the place where the people would come to meet with God and take part in the rituals of worship. You can imagine each morning when you woke up and exited your tent you could see the tabernacle. The message God conveyed is, I am with you. I am camping here in the wilderness with you.

To modern ears the details of the construction of the tabernacle seem boring. However, when we consider that the rescue from slavery section of Exodus is almost exactly the same length as the section on the plans and construction of the tabernacle the author is clearly indicating a contrast we ought to notice. These two accounts correspond to each other. Israel's enslavement was a labor system contrary to God's intentions for creation; it led to dehumanizing practices. The building of the tabernacle is seen as godly and humane; it leads to worship of God which is fully consonant with God's creation and covenant intentions.

In the prologue of John's gospel he says this of Jesus; And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. The Greek word translated 'lived' in the phrase "lived among us" is a word that means to fix one's tabernacle, have one's tabernacle, abide (or live) in a tabernacle (or tent). John, steeped in the Hebrew scriptures as he was, has the Exodus story of the tabernacle as the sign that God is with us in his

mind as he writes of Jesus. Maybe you are feeling like you are in a wilderness today as Israel was then. John wants us to know that Jesus is 'tenting' among us.

4. The third gift that God gave Israel was the ritual sacrifices. Most of us have not lived in societies where animal sacrifice is part of religious practise so we may wonder about this being a gift. I do point out to you, however, that in our society animals are constantly sacrificed for our dining habits. The system of sacrifices witnessed to Israel that sin was a serious matter and the comforting sign that God forgives. In the annual celebration of Passover a lamb is eaten signifying that the Exodus came at the price of loss of life. The same is true of the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement.

Come with me in your imagination to that moment when Pilate finally brings Jesus outside and takes his place on the judge's bench where he will hand Jesus over to be crucified. The Apostle John tells us that it was the day of Preparation for the Passover. Passover began that day at sundown for the Jews in Jerusalem. The preparation for Passover included the ritual slaughter of the lambs for the meal that evening. John wants us to understand that the moment when the lambs are being slaughtered—a sign to Israel that their freedom cost life—Jesus is being crucified. The lamb of God slain for the sins of the world.

The great story of the Bible asserts that all of us need an exodus, a rescue. Through Moses God said to Pharaoh, "let my people go." At the cross of Jesus Christ, God called for another release; this time to the powers of death, the devil and sin he said to let his people go. In faith in Jesus Christ we can experience this release.