

“It is part of God’s nature to make and keep covenants with His people.”

GOD REDEEMS A PEOPLE

(EXODUS 3 & 14)

We have all begun what we thought would be “just another day,” but then something entirely unexpected occurred. That is certainly what happened to Moses in Exodus 3. Verse 1 tells us that Moses was herding his father-in-law’s sheep in the land of Midian, just as he had been doing for the past forty years, when something very unusual happened.

Moses had been born a Hebrew, one of the descendants of Abraham. This family had become a large nation, just as God had promised; but they had subsequently been enslaved to Pharaoh, king of Egypt. By God’s intervention Moses had been brought up in the house of Pharaoh (Exodus 2:1–10), but he had fled from Egypt after killing an Egyptian slave-driver for beating a Hebrew slave. (This was apparently a failed, premature attempt to deliver his people; Acts 7:25) Moses had gone to Midian, married, and concluded that his calling in life was leading sheep, not leading God’s people.

God, however, had another idea. On that unusual day, as Moses was herding sheep, he saw a bush that was on fire but was not being consumed by the fire. When he turned aside to see what this strange sight was, the Lord spoke to him, told him that he was on holy ground, and identified Himself as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (3:6). As we can imagine, this event changed not just Moses’ day, but his whole life—and, of course, the lives of the Israelite people.

Moses was told that God had a plan: He would deliver Israel from their captivity and lead them to “a good and spacious land” (Canaan). Moses was to begin the process by going to Pharaoh with a message from God: “Let My people go!” (See

5:1; 8:1; 9:1.) Moses was uncomfortable with the plan, so he offered several excuses intended to show that he was not the right man for the job. Finally, God just ordered him, in effect, “Go!” Reluctantly, Moses went. As God had predicted (4:21), Pharaoh’s heart was hardened so that he refused to listen. It was only after God had caused ten plagues to come upon Egypt that the king finally relented and allowed the people to leave (Exodus 7–11). Even after that, however, Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued the Israelites, trapping them against the Red Sea. God caused the waters to part and allowed the people to escape on dry land. When Pharaoh continued his pursuit, the waters closed in on the Egyptians, destroying their army. This series of events has ever since been known as “the exodus,” from the Greek word ἔξοδος (*exodos*), which means “the going out.” This word serves as the title of the Old Testament book which records these events.

The exodus was the greatest single event in Israelite history. It gave the people of Israel their identity as a nation. By this mighty act, God delivered them and began to mold them into a nation. From that day forward, they saw themselves as the people whom the Lord had delivered through this powerful deed. In this respect the exodus is the Old Testament equivalent of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, for it is from these two events that Christians draw their salvation and their identity as a people.

Another reason for the significance of the exodus is that it revealed to Israel the true identity of their God. After 430 years in slavery, they had somewhat lost touch with Him. They were living in a pagan environment with no word from God to guide them, no temple to serve as a reminder

of the God they worshiped, and no priesthood to instruct them. Part of Moses' reluctance in going to Egypt to deliver the people was his concern that they would not have any idea who had sent him (Exodus 3:13). From the events of the exodus, the people of Israel learned the characteristics of their God:

Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. When Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in His servant Moses (Exodus 14:30, 31).

THE GOD WHO KEEPS HIS WORD

Exodus does not contain the first reference to the bondage and release of the Israelite people. In fact, when God made His covenant with Abraham, He predicted that such a sequence of events would happen:

... Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions (Genesis 15:13, 14).

As surely as God had not forgotten that Israel would become slaves, He had not forgotten His promise to defeat their captors and bring them out of bondage.

Now it came about in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died. And the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God. So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them (Exodus 2:23–25).

Because it is part of God's nature to make and keep covenants with His people, one writer called Him "the God of continuity."¹ Israel had perhaps forgotten God, but God had not forgotten Israel. He intended to keep His promise to Abraham.

It is vitally important for us to know that God keeps His word, that He is not moody or capricious. Malachi 3:6 says, "For I, the LORD, do

not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." This is an important reminder, coming as it does at the end of the Old Testament, since there is often a tendency to think that "the God of the Old Testament" is different from "the God of the New Testament." God is the same in all parts of His written Word, so what we learn about Him in the Old Testament remains valid for those who live under the covenant of Christ. The New Testament likewise tells us that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). What this means is that we can trust Him without having to worry about whether or not what He said previously still stands, or about having no chance of pleasing Him because He is in a bad mood. God always keeps His word.

"Why, then," someone may ask, "did it take God four hundred years to act on Israel's behalf? Couldn't He have kept His word much sooner?" Of course He could have, but He did not choose to do so. God's timing and His choice of when to act are His prerogative, and we must trust His wisdom. As we wait for Him to act, we can be fully confident that He always keeps His word. Waiting is no different for Christians today than it was for Israel long ago. More than one thousand years passed after Moses' time before Jesus Christ, the ultimate Deliverer, arrived on the scene. Jesus' followers have been waiting for His return for almost two thousand years now. Why God chooses to act when He does, we are not told. We are simply told to trust Him.

When we think we have waited a long time for the fulfillment of God's promises, we can remember the words of Joshua 1:5. Following the death of Moses, God commissioned Joshua to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. Conquering the land would be a hard-fought campaign. God knew that leading the people through this conquest would be a daunting task and that following in the footsteps of Moses would be somewhat intimidating to the younger man. He promised, "No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you."

Part of what God had said He would do for Abraham's descendants was about to be fulfilled. He had made Abraham's family into a great nation, and He had delivered them from Egyptian

¹Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 92.

bondage. Next, He would enable the Israelites to conquer the land He had promised to their forefather. God always keeps His word.

THE GOD WHO IS GREATER THAN ALL OTHER GODS

Centuries later, in writing to the Christians in Corinth about the question of eating or abstaining from food that had been offered in sacrifice to idols, Paul prefaced his instructions with this statement:

Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him (1 Corinthians 8:4–6).

Certainly, there is only one true God, but a “god” is anything that is worshiped; so there are always competing “gods” (and “goddesses”). From ancient texts we know the names of about forty different gods that were worshiped by the Egyptians, and there may have been many more. However, the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt proved Israel’s God to be greater than all of them.

When Moses was still trying to excuse himself from God’s service, he asked this question: “Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ Now they may say to me, ‘What is His name?’ What shall I say to them?” (Exodus 3:13). Moses obviously realized that the Israelites would want a specific designation for the God whom they were supposed to be worshiping. After all, the various gods of the Egyptians had names, and the Israelites needed to know the name of their God. Here is the Lord’s reply:

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God, furthermore, said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations (Exodus 3:14, 15).

“I AM” is an approximate translation of a Hebrew term which may also be translated as “I

Am What I Am,” or “I Will Be What I Will Be.” The Hebrew verb is יהוה (“YHWH”; often called the “tetragrammaton”). Like all ancient Hebrew words, it was originally written without vowels. This means that it is impossible for us to know exactly how it was pronounced. A good guess is “Yahweh” (sometimes spelled “Jahveh” but pronounced the same way).²

What does “YHWH” mean? Why did God name Himself with a verb? Although the possibilities are numerous, it seems most likely that the name means something like “the God who truly is God, who is and always has been.” It denotes that God is self-authenticating and self-sustaining. This pointed out a sharp contrast between Him and the false gods of the Egyptians (and all other idols). Idols are always dependent on their worshipers to form them, move them, speak for them, and care for them. (Read Isaiah’s stinging critique of the folly of idolatry in Isaiah 44:9–20.) The God who was Israel’s God is the one true and living God. His creatures are dependent on Him for their existence, maintenance, and care. God was announcing Himself as the only God who is even worthy of the name.

The ten plagues which God brought against Egypt because of Pharaoh’s stubbornness were designed to show God’s power over the various gods of Egypt. The Nile River itself was regarded as a god because it annually overflowed its banks and brought life-sustaining moisture and enriched soil to the Egyptians’ farmland. Because frogs were often seen emerging from the mud along the river, the Egyptians concluded that they were manifestations of the divine, as were the flies that mysteriously appeared from decaying matter. Even Pharaoh himself was believed to be a god and was worshiped by his people. When the plagues brought Egypt low, therefore, they were not just a series of “natural disasters,” but were actually judgments upon the false gods worshiped in Egypt.

When Moses first went in to see Pharaoh and demand that he let Israel go, Pharaoh arrogantly responded, “Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and besides, I will not let Israel go” (Exodus 5:2).

²The name “Jehovah” is a German invention that combines “YHWH” with vowels adapted from the word for “Lord” (*Adonay*).

By the time the plagues ended, Pharaoh and all Egypt had learned just who God really is: the One who is supreme over all other “gods,” and to whom even Pharaoh himself must bow. The death of Pharaoh’s firstborn son made that fact obvious.

When the Lord instructed Moses, “Tell Israel that I AM has sent you” (see 3:14), He was calling on him to believe in the one true God and to reject the claims of all other “gods,” who were really “no gods” (see 2 Chronicles 13:9; Acts 19:26; Galatians 4:8). Because there are so many competing “gods” in our own world (such as wealth, pleasure, technology, military and political power), we are called on to do the same. There is still only one God who has acted to redeem His people and who provides the solution to our problem of sin.

THE GOD WHO IS HOLY

As Moses approached the burning bush, God called to him and said, “Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). Because of God’s presence, even the ground upon which Moses stood was holy. To speak of God’s “holiness” is to speak of His “otherness.” He is in a category by Himself; He

is not like us, and we may approach Him only by His invitation and in the manner He directs. After their long captivity and isolation from their God, Israel had to learn to take God seriously. They needed to seek His will and approach Him only as He directed.

The last fifteen chapters of Exodus are all about holiness. In these chapters God instructed Moses concerning the building of the tabernacle (a portable building for worship), the sacrifices which were to be offered there, the priesthood (including how the priests were to dress), and the furnishings for the tabernacle. Even the materials from which all the items associated with the worship of God had to be made were specified, as well as who was to carry the ark of the covenant and how they were to do it. All of what might look like “unnecessary details” to us were vital to Israel’s understanding of God’s nature. These specifications taught that God must be approached reverently.

Surprisingly, Christians sometimes have the idea that because “we don’t live under the Old Testament,” we need not be so concerned about matters of holiness, such as our reverent approach to God in worship. This is a strange concept, since nothing in the Scriptures leads us to believe this. The cross of Christ did not change God’s holy

The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart

Bible readers are sometimes troubled by the statements in Exodus that God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart” and that He specifically predicted this hardening. To the casual reader, it may sound as if Pharaoh was “predestined” by God, deliberately made to defy Him so that God could show His power over him. (See Exodus 4:21.) No one can resist God, so what chance did Pharaoh have? It almost sounds as if God caused him to disobey and then punished him for doing so. (See Exodus 9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10 for references to God’s role in Pharaoh’s hardening. Other texts simply say, “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened,” without specifying who was responsible [7:13, 22; 8:19; see 9:7].)

The text also says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart; in other words, he was not simply a helpless pawn in the entire process (Exodus 8:15, 32; 9:34; 14:5). From the very beginning, Pharaoh had an arrogant, defiant attitude toward the Lord, and he suffered the consequences. God knew well the kind of man he was dealing with, and He used Pharaoh’s stubbornness to teach—not only to the Egyptians, but to the Israelites as well—a lesson in holiness.

God’s “hardening,” we may say, does not turn sheep into donkeys; it merely ensures that donkeys do their kicking at a divine cue. As a result, a kick on cue can be attributed with equal propriety to the willfulness of the beast or the wisdom of the Cue-giver. And Pharaoh remains responsible for the sin of his hardened heart (Exodus 9:34).¹

¹Stephen Westerholm, *Preface to the Study of Paul* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 105, n.13.

nature. Rather, the cross was required *because of* God's holiness. Sin had to be atoned for; it could not simply be ignored. Certainly, we do not follow the same worship forms as ancient Israel, but our worshipful attitude should be the same.

The Exodus narrative also shows that, because He is holy, we cannot defy God without incurring destruction. Pharaoh asked Moses a dismissive question during their first meeting: "Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice to let Israel go?" (Exodus 5:2). That is actually the central question addressed throughout the exodus event and the Book of Exodus: Who, indeed, is the Lord? Pharaoh learned the hard way because he defied God by "hardening his heart" (see Exodus 8:15, 32). God had predicted this very response. When Pharaoh had hardened his heart for the last time and Israel was penned against the sea, God said to Moses,

I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. Then the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD, when I am honored through Pharaoh, through his chariots and his horsemen (Exodus 14:17, 18).

The Egyptians learned the vital lesson that God is God by witnessing the power of His judgment. God did not want Israel to make the same mistake of having to learn through punishment, so He gave them ample warning and instruction concerning His holiness. He gives similar warning and instruction to the church through the pages of the New Testament. Christians are urged to respect the holiness of God and to reflect that holiness in our own lives and conduct by avoiding sin. (See, for example, 2 Corinthians 7:1; Hebrews 10:26–31; 12:25–29; 1 Peter 1:15.)

THE GOD WHO CALLS AND EMPOWERS HIS PEOPLE

When God called Moses to be Israel's deliverer, He not only gave him the assignment but also gave him the ability to carry it out. When Moses objected that the people would not believe him when he went to them, God gave him signs to use as proof: the rod which turned to a snake, the ability to make his hand leprous and then clean again, and the power to turn water into blood (4:1–9). When he pleaded further that he was not

eloquent enough to be God's spokesman, God reminded him that He had made man's mouth and could surely make someone as eloquent as He wanted that person to be. In addition, he sent Moses' brother Aaron with him to be his "mouthpiece" (4:10–17).

Later, when the Israelites were trapped with their backs against the sea, unable to escape the superior force of Egyptian chariots, God provided a spectacular way of escape. Then He made it possible for the large multitude to survive in a barren wilderness during their forty years of wandering there.

God is still calling and empowering His people. Through Jesus Christ He calls the church to be a holy people who are to tell the story of Jesus to the entire world and share God's love and compassion. The task is often difficult, but God always gives us whatever we need in order to get the job done. This is why the church began with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Until God furnished the power, even the apostles were helpless. Once the Spirit came, everything changed. That same Spirit resides today within all baptized believers in Christ, to empower us for service (Acts 2:1–38). We should never try to excuse ourselves from serving the Lord. Whatever He calls us to do, He enables us to do.

CONCLUSION

The challenge to Moses and the Israelites was to believe in and trust the God who was calling them out of bondage and into His marvelous freedom. He is the God who keeps His word, who is greater than all other "gods," who is entirely holy, and who calls and empowers His people for service. Just as God remains the same today, so does the challenge to believe and obey Him.

Tommy South

Versions of the Bible Used in This Study

ESV — English Standard Version
NASB — New American Standard Bible,
updated edition
NIV — New International Version
RSV — Revised Standard Version