

How did it come to this?

Exodus 1-2

Readings Exodus 1-2; Hebrews 11:23-26; John 6:35, 41-51:

SERIES INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EXODUS

Without doubt for the Christian there is nothing more important than understanding the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our services, our prayers, our iconography and even our very building are shaped by these history-changing events.

So also are our scriptures. Our four gospels spend around 25-25% of their narrative describing the events surrounding Jesus death. Paul's ministry is focused on Christ and him crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:2).

It is so central that it is impossible as a Christian to think of God apart from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who loved the world so much that he gave his Son.

For the Jew of Jesus time all this is true of the Exodus. The escape of the Israelites from Egypt is the defining act of God in the Old Testament. Around 15-20% of the Old Testament is given over to describing the events that surround the Exodus, the expressions of faith in the Psalms continually look back to the Exodus as the great saving event where God came down and his saving power.

God would be known throughout the generations as the God who brought them out of Egypt. As this event was of such importance to our spiritual forbears then it should be of interest to us.

The Exodus also shapes Jesus ministry and thinking, much of his ministry like his description of himself as "The Bread of Life" makes more sense against the backdrop of God working to save his people from Egypt.

Jesus saving work is even described as an "exodus" in the accounts of the Transfiguration. To understand the Exodus will not only help us understand our spiritual heritage but our God and what he has done for us in Jesus.

READ EXODUS 1-2

Can I encourage you to read Exodus, it is a good read and it will help especially understand the early chapters. To get us in the swing we are going to hear most of Exodus 1-2.

Exodus starts with a short genealogy which ties the narrative into the ongoing family history from Genesis, which we preached on a couple of years ago. (Sermons still available on the website if you want to go back to the beginning.) This family had been promised by God the land of Canaan, yet due to a terrible famine God had said to Jacob also known as Israel "I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again." (Genesis 36:3-4)

So Jacob and family went to Egypt to join Joseph who had risen to second in charge in Egypt and saved the nation from utter ruin.

With that background let us hear Exodus 1 and 2.

HOW DID IT END UP LIKE THIS?

It strikes me that as we read the early chapters of Exodus that the participants in the narrative may well be thinking "How did it end up like this."

The Israelites

The Israelites started in a privileged position. They had a great location in Egypt, they were very friendly with the power structures. They had it made.

But suddenly there is a change, most likely not just a new King but a new dynasty, one that has no loyalty to these foreigners in the land, and for whom Joseph and all he did means nothing. Suddenly the privileged guests are the oppressed foreigners.

As so often still in our world a portion of the population are oppressed due to the fear of others. This starts with physical oppression and hard labour but it moves inexorably to genocide (1:15), something we have seen all too often in modern times.

At the end of Exodus 2 the people of Israel may be thinking "This started so well, how did it end up like this? What is God doing?"

For Moses

Moses would have similar feelings. He was miraculously saved as a baby when presumably so many of his generation drowned. He had a privileged upbringing both being cared for by his mother and learning the Hebrew traditions as well as a court education as an Egyptian. He had the best of both worlds.

He does not seem to have experienced the suffering of his people, for he is in a position to watch his fellow country men suffer, rather than having to participate in it. Yet he responds to the injustice he sees both against his own people and within his own people. This admirable sense of justice leads to violence and rejection and he ends up having to flee the country.

As with so many Biblical figures he finds a wife at a well where he again shows commendable desire for justice. He settles down has a family but the way he names his son (Gershom) suggests that he is not exactly happy with his life, he is an alien in a strange land.

How did it get like this, what is God doing.

For Us as a Church and Individuals

We as a church may wonder the same. We may look back to the days of huge attendances, overflowing Sunday Schools and now there can seem so few of us. How did it get like this? What is God doing?

The issue may be far more personal, the tragedies of life may bring us down, the flush of vibrant faith seems long gone. Struggle and despair may be our experience and we wonder how did it get like this and what is God doing?

GOD IS NOT ABSENT

Whilst the main players may be asking what God is up to, he is not absent. Exodus 2:23-25 shows that while he may not be centre stage God is there. And in these verses we learn some very important lessons about God and his dealings with his people.

God Hears (2:24)

Firstly, we learn that God hears the cries of his people. It does not say he hears the prayers, but the cries, the inarticulate groans, he hears the suffering of his people whether they pray or not.

It is vitally important as believers that we know that we can groan and cry to God and know that he hears. The Psalmists learnt this lesson well. Psalms are full of cries and moans. We can bring the depth of our feelings to God. When we are down he hears our cries.

In the New Testament we are encouraged to cast our anxieties on God because he cares for us. (1Peter 5:7) We are also reminded in Romans that we have someone who interprets our cries, “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.” (Romans 8:26, NIV).

God Remembers (2:24)

Next we are told that God remembers. This may sound odd. Does that mean that he had forgotten? Not at all. We can see that God has already been involved in the story in the blessing of the resourceful and plucky midwives who feared the Lord rather than Pharaoh, great unsung heroes of the faith Shiphrah and Puah.

As an aside is a worth noting that they are named when Pharaoh isn't which shows who is more important from a biblical point of view. We should also note the place that women play in this story. Pharaoh wants to kill the boys but it is the daughters who start the liberation ball rolling, the resisting midwives, the courage, ingenuity and hopeful cunning of Moses mother, the pluck of his sister and the compassion of Pharaoh's daughter all play their part in saving the infant Moses. In all of these things God is at work and we are reminded that the enemies of God's people ignore the daughter to their peril.

So it is not that God would say “Oh sorry I got distracted running the universe for a few hundred years.” It is not his people that he remembers but his covenant with his people. God remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He remembers his promises and he will act because of them. He had promised many descendants, that has been fulfilled, in fact that is part of the problem! Now he needs to bring them to their own land. He will act because of his promises, promises that ultimately will bring blessing to the world. When God remembers, he acts.

Like wise we can be sure that God will keep his promises to us, promises of the blessings of being with us, of forgiveness, of eternal life.

His promise not our worthiness

But as we consider how it got like this we cannot ignore the issue of sin or evil. Pharaoh is the worse character in the Bible so far and has so twisted the value of human life that the killing of children is seen as a good thing.

God will act against such sin and bring salvation, but we also see a hint of what will be forcibly taught again and again. It is not because of anything good in the Israelites that causes God to act, it is purely from his grace and his love.

We see this in the story of Moses. Moses is an alien because he is a murderer, because of his own violence. The Israelites he tries to help show a rather nasty streak. They reject the one who could help them. This is a theme that will reappear in Exodus. Part of the reason why things are as they are is because of the sins of those involved.

In our society is all too easy to blame others for our situations when it may be that part of the problem is us and our sin. We need to take our confession seriously. Humorist Garrison Keillor in a piece on remorse satirically rewrote the confession “Lord, we approach Thy Throne of Grace, having committed acts which, we do heartily acknowledge, must be very difficult for Thee to understand. Nevertheless, we do beseech Thee to postpone judgement and to give Thy servants the benefit of the doubt until such time as we are able to answer all Thy questions fully and clear our reputations in Heaven.” (We are still Married, p.24)

Exodus will often cause us to wonder about our own relationship with God and our own rebellion against Him. Our weekly confession reminds us of our human frailties, that we are exposed before God, he not only hears our cries but all our heart is open before him and all our desires are known. God will not act because we are worthy but on the basis of his gracious promises and we should never cease to thank God for that.

God Cares (2:25)

Lastly reminded God cares. This is something we should never lose sight of, for the start of Exodus reminds us that God's timetable is not the same as ours. Just because God does not act as and when we want him to does not mean he does not care.

Israel is in Egypt for 400 years and persecuted for much of it. Moses spends 40 years as an alien and is 80 before God appears to him. God may not act to remove us from our unpleasant situation when we want him to. But this does not mean that he doesn't care. We know he does, his word tells us so, we see it in Jesus, we may be able to look back and see the way that he has worked, but we can trust that he cares for us despite what we are going through.

We should be encouraged and comforted God hears our cries, God remembers and act on his promises and he looks on us and cares for us.

May these truths help us in all the difficult periods of our lives.