

Liberated from Oppression

January 21, 2024

Exodus 5:6-9

⁶On the very same day Pharaoh commanded the people's slave masters and supervisors, ⁷"Don't supply the people with the straw they need to make bricks like you did before. Let them go out and gather the straw for themselves. ⁸But still make sure that they produce the same number of bricks as they made before. Don't reduce the number! They are weak and lazy, and that's why they cry, 'Let's go and offer sacrifices to our God.'⁹Make the men's work so hard that it's all they can do, and they can't focus on these empty lies."

Exodus 11:4-7

⁴Moses said, "This is what the LORD says: At midnight I'll go throughout Egypt. ⁵Every oldest child in the land of Egypt will die, from the oldest child of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the oldest child of the servant woman by the millstones, and all the first offspring of the animals. ⁶Then a terrible cry of agony will echo through the whole land of Egypt unlike any heard before or that ever will be again. ⁷But as for the Israelites, not even a dog will growl at them, at the people, or at their animals. By this, you will know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel."

Exodus 14:19-25

¹⁹God's messenger, who had been in front of Israel's camp, moved and went behind them. The column of cloud moved from the front and took its place behind them. ²⁰It stood between Egypt's camp and Israel's camp. The cloud remained there, and when darkness fell it lit up the night. They didn't come near each other all night."

²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD pushed the sea back by a strong east wind all night, turning the sea into dry land. The waters were split into two. ²² The Israelites walked into the sea on dry ground. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left. ²³ The Egyptians chased them and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and cavalry. ²⁴ As morning approached, the LORD looked down on the Egyptian camp from the column of lightning and cloud and threw the Egyptian camp into a panic. ²⁵ The LORD jammed their chariot wheels so that they wouldn't turn easily. The Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites, because the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt!"

Exodus 20:8

Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy.



This week our journey takes us into Exodus. The book of Exodus focuses on what it means to live as the redeemed people of God. Like Genesis, Exodus is not a book of “how”

but is a book of “who” and “what.” This second book of the Bible insists that the Hebrews’ response and that our response to salvation would be a faithful obedience to participate in God’s mission to bless all of humanity.

For our time together today in the book of Exodus, we will begin with Moses and his leading the people to freedom. From there we will wander with them during their time in the wilderness. It is during this time that they will receive the Law and will struggle with idols and sin. Lastly, Exodus will close with the construction of the tabernacle. This is the grand sweep of the book of Exodus.

We begin today with the story of Pharaoh severely oppressing the Israelites and then move to God's response – the final plague and the Passover. Once liberated, the Israelites are again liberated at the sea. To provide time to reflect on all that God has done and will do in the future, a Sabbath is mandated for the people of God. As we prepare to continue the journey, let us pray...

Since we last left Israel and Jacob in Genesis 50, roughly 350 to 400 years have elapsed. In the opening chapters of Exodus we learn that the memory of Joseph has faded. The Israelites have grown and grown, to the point that the new, un-named Pharaoh fears them. This growth is the first part of fulfilling God's covenant to make Abraham's descendants into a great nation. The Israelites were forced into hard labor and Pharaoh instructs the Hebrew midwives to kill the baby boys. The midrash, a Hebrew book that contains the ancient sayings and stories of many rabbis, reflects on the wisdom of this decision. The midrash posits that Pharaoh was not only wicked but was also stupid. It points out that if a shrewd king wanted to get rid of a whole nation, he would kill the baby girls. They are the ones who give birth to and nurture any nation.

In Exodus 1, the midwives respect God and refuse to follow Pharaoh's edict. This leads to Pharaoh's order to throw all Hebrew baby boys into the river. Moses is born, nursed as long as his mother thinks possible, and is eventually placed in the river in a basket. Discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, Moses grows up in the palace. As this week's podcast points out, Moses is a very unlikely hero. He does not belong to either the Hebrews or to the Egyptians. He is "not raised in oral or ritualistic traditions of Israelites." We do not know when he came to understand these realities. Yet at some point Moses does realize that he is a Hebrew because as an adult, Moses defends a Hebrew slave, killing the Egyptian.

His secret is out, and he flees to Midian. Moses marries, has children, and settles down. Many of us can relate to this in-between space that Moses found himself in. Not an Egyptian but not really a Hebrew either, Moses escapes to this place where he can live under the radar. At times we live in the in-between space of the world and God. We can sense where or to what God is calling us, yet we too can seek to live under the radar, so to speak, just getting by, not wanting to stand out from the crowd.

This week's devotional points out that Moses is really the first person liberated by God in the Exodus story. Finally stepping out of this in-between space, Moses becomes who and what God created him to be. As a young college student and into early adulthood, I had begun to live more as a person of the world than as a person of God. My identity, as it was with Moses, was pretty confused. Perhaps you too have experienced this kind of a season in your life. My first summer after starting to teach in Rapid City was filled with golfing and other not-so-Christian activities with a few fellow teachers. It was nothing terrible or incredibly sinful. Yet after that first summer, I could tell that God was calling me to something different, to something better. I knew that the hard decision to change my path was necessary, so I took that step, much as Moses did as our story continues.

In chapter 3 we find the story of the burning bush and the call of Moses. Like many others in the Bible, Moses is less than enthusiastic. "*I am who I am*" convinces Moses to return to Egypt, along with older brother Aaron, to free the Israelites from their oppression. God promises Moses that when he has accomplished this task, he will once again worship God on this mountain. After meeting with the elders of the Hebrews and informing them of God's intent to respond to their cries, Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh at the start of chapter 5.

They ask for a 3-day trip into the wilderness to worship Israel's God. We hear the Pharaoh's response as we turn to verses 6-9 in chapter 5. Please turn with me to chapter 5 as we delve into the story. *"On the very same day"* Pharaoh instructs the slave masters to now make the Hebrews find their own straw for making bricks. The quota of bricks will remain the same, forcing them to work even harder. Pharaoh says, *"They are weak and lazy, and that's why they cry, 'Let's go and offer sacrifices to our God.'"* Working this hard, he thinks, *"They can't focus on these empty lies."* Scholars believe this Pharaoh to be Ramses II. He was an extraordinary builder. His building achievements have been described by historians as "colossal, massive, breathtaking." Think of the grand pyramids and of the sphinxes of Egypt.

A pyramid, for example, would require roughly a billion bricks. Most of Ramses II's building took place in the eastern delta, the home of the Hebrews. A leather scroll from this time indicates that the daily quota for a crew of 40 men would be 2,000 bricks apiece. The log indicates that this quota was seldom met. Punishment would follow. This would commonly include a rod across the back, verbal abuse, and deprivation. You can imagine how the Hebrews felt when they heard Pharaoh's reaction to Moses and Aaron's request for a break to worship God.

The reaction from the Israelite supervisors is this: *"Let the Lord see and judge what you've done! You've made us stink in the opinion of Pharaoh and his servants. You've given*



"Let the Lord see and judge what you've done! You've made us stink in the opinion of Pharaoh and his servants. You've given them a reason to kill us."

-Exodus 5:21

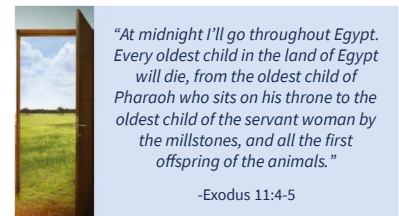
them a reason to kill us." This is not a good start to Moses' tenure as the leader of God's people. Moses turns to God, questioning how things have started off. God assures Moses of God's intent to rescue the people from slavery with *"great power and with momentous events of justice"* (Exodus 6:6.)



Their liberation from oppression begins as the plagues start to unfold. Pharaoh is stubborn. Even though the water turns to blood and frogs, lice, and insects swarm all over the land, Pharaoh remains stubborn. In the next plagues, the focus

shifts. Only the Egyptians are affected by the animal sickness and death, by the skin sores and blisters, and by the hail and lightning that pounds their crops. This week's podcasts describes this second set of plagues as "smart bombs" because of their specific impact only on the Egyptians. Pharaoh shows signs of giving in, but still he remains stubborn. Next comes the plague of locusts and then the plague of darkness. After meeting with Moses this time, Pharaoh issues this threat: *"Make sure you never see my face again, because the next time you see my face you will die"* (Exodus 11:28.)

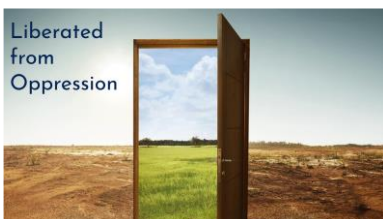
In chapter 11 the final plague comes. God makes this judgment: *"At midnight I'll go throughout Egypt. Every oldest child in the land of Egypt will die, from the oldest child of*



"At midnight I'll go throughout Egypt. Every oldest child in the land of Egypt will die, from the oldest child of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the oldest child of the servant woman by the millstones, and all the first offspring of the animals."

-Exodus 11:4-5

Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the oldest child of the servant woman by the millstones, and all the first offspring of the animals." The death and loss will be catastrophic. The Hebrews will mark their homes with the blood of the lamb, allowing the angel of death to pass over their homes, families, and livestock. There was a degree of obedience required by God in order for the Hebrews to experience this miracle. As cries of agony rung out, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron, saying, *"Get up! Get away from my people!"* (Exodus 12:31)



Moses leads the people out of Egypt, ending their time in oppression and slavery. But soon Pharaoh changes his mind and sets out to bring the Hebrews back.

Pharaoh and his army catch up to the Israelites as they are camped by the sea. As fear rises up in the Hebrew camp, God assures Moses, *“The Lord will fight for you”* (Exodus 14:14.) God’s messenger, the cloud of lightning or fire, takes up a position between Pharaoh’s army and the Hebrews. Moses then stretches out his hand and the Lord pushes back the water. In verse 22 we read, *“The Israelites walked into the sea on dry ground. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left.”* The Egyptians pursued the Hebrews, but God causes them to get stuck in the middle of the sea. Moses lowers his hand, and the sea swallows up the Egyptians. The Hebrews witnessed *“great power and with momentous events of justice”* promised in Exodus 6:6.

As powerful as the plagues and the crossing of the sea undoubtedly were, soon enough the people are out of water and then are out of food. Everything is new out in the wilderness – the scenery, the lifestyle, the forced dependance on God and on Moses. In Egypt, life was bad, but it was predictable. Each time a new challenge arises, the people complain and grumble – a frequent refrain in the book of Exodus. This is a pattern we will see over and over again: the people complain to Moses, then Moses complains to God, then God meets their needs. This is a familiar pattern in my life too. Maybe you recognize this in your life too: my human self complains to the part of me connected to God. That part seeks God’s guidance or help. God responds to my needs. Do you recognize this pattern in your own life?

In our passages for this week, the pattern plays out as God turns the bitter water sweet and then provides manna and quail for the people. After a lack of water again prompts grumbling and arguing and once again God’s generous response, the people arrive at Mount Sinai. Here God fulfills the promise to again meet Moses on this mountain where God had spoken from the burning bush.

Just as last week the wilderness was a common place for people to be prepared for what God has planned, the mountaintop also holds significance in the story of God's people. The mountaintop is where one meets God, where one encounters the divine nature of God.

God descends on the mountain in fire and in cloud and Moses heads up the mountain. On the mountaintop God speaks to Moses, giving him the Ten Commandments. This is the beginning of the Law, the compilation of many scriptures that will serve as “guardrails” for the people. The first four cover our relationship with God: put God first, praise and worship God only, keep God's name holy, and keep the Lord's day special. In today's passage it was put this way: *“Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy.”* These commandments can and will prove difficult to keep. The people will violate the second one even before Moses comes down off the mountain. We will delve into that next week as we read about the golden calf in Exodus 21.



The command to honor the sabbath connects back to the creation story. The Lord God rests after the six days of creation. By resting, God wove this day of rest into the fabric of humanity. This day of rest is a day of equality – all are to rest. Sons and daughters, servants, animals, and the immigrant living with you. The sabbath is a day of freedom and justice. Imagine for a moment how those who used to endure oppressive slavery would receive this command to rest, to take time to praise God. Then, the commandments shift to our relationships with each other: obey your parents, do not harm anyone, love the one you marry, don't take anything that is not yours, tell the truth, and don't be jealous of what others have.

While these rules are presented today in an almost child-like fashion, in reality they are quite simple. God is establishing some basic boundaries for humanity to live by. The human or earthly part of us, that part needs limitations to counter the selfish, greedy, prideful, jealous part of us that can so easily rise up and lead us to be less than what God created us to be.

In closing today, let's focus on the term "guardrails." As the story continues through Exodus and into Leviticus and beyond, the Law will be fleshed out and further detailed. For the most part, though, they can be traced back to these original Ten Commandments. All of the Law deals with our relationship with God and with our relationships with one another. These "guardrails" keep us between the lines, walking the path that God intends us to walk as we strive to live out our faith in this world. When we stray outside of the lines that God has established for holy and devout living, we encounter oppression in one form or another. Sin always has consequences. As we seek for God to liberate us from the constraints of this world, may we seek to live in right relationship with God and with one another. May it be so for you and for me this week. Alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. How does your faith journey relate to the early part of Exodus? What events in your life lead to a growth in your relationship with God?
- 2) *Pray*. Do you sense God calling you to help someone caught in bondage? Or, where in the world do you see oppression? As always, take it to God in prayer.
- 3) *Study*. Re-read Moses' victory song (Exodus 15:1-19.) When and how has God acted in similar ways in your life in times of trial or struggle or hardship?