

## Moses and His Reluctant Pilgrims

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*With Moses having embraced his role as pilgrim leader, he is given the seemingly thankless task of leading the children of Israel to a freedom they're not at all sure they want. But in the end, they begin to learn for themselves the faith of their fathers, and with Abraham to long for their future home and the blessings promised by God.*

### Review

- This year's men's forum, if you'll recall, is being built around the theme of the Christian life as a life of pilgrimage, where God is bringing us out of the chaos of the world's so-called wisdom, its poor habits, and its inordinate love for this earthly life, and its absolute neglect of the life to come.
- That's the life of sin; it's tragic, because God has created us for another life, for a heavenly city, and for Himself; and by not embracing them, we fail to embrace true joy, happiness, peace, and general well-being.
- Sin has a blinding effect on us; it dulls our spiritual vision, and our ability to make sense of this world, this life. This is why life can feel so difficult; this is why family life isn't easy; why decisions in work and career are so hard to make at times. When we can't see things for what they are, in the clear light of day, when our 'vision' is instead opaque, our options are ambiguous, and wisdom is hard to come by.
- This wisdom is what God has promised to give us, if we can gather the wherewithal to exchange the perverse opinions of this world for the true wisdom of God; only with the principles and perspective provided by God are we able to safely navigate the landscape of this life; only with God's help can we be good husbands and fathers and grandfathers; only with God's help can we make the right choices about money, time, and career. Only with God's help can we make it through all the hazards this life throws our way, and make it safely through the portal of death into the new life in Christ, in the world to come.

### Patriarchs

- If you'll remember, this is what God did with Abraham; he pulled Abraham out of his familiar country and its random, destructive ways, and brought him into a foreign land where he was a stranger, with no property or earthly stability. All Abraham possessed was promises from God; and in his acceptance of those promises, that is, his faith, he trusted that God would lead his descendants to a permanent home of blessing, and that through him all the people on earth would be blessed.
- In order to whet his appetite for better things, to increase his longing for a life of true happiness, God unsettled him, so that he might reestablish him. This is what it means to be a child of Abraham, one called by God: to live this life as a sojourner, to long for a better country, an heavenly one.

- As we saw last week, this is what God was doing to Moses by taking him out of Egypt to live 40 years in the deserts of Midian; the Hebrew, raised a Prince of Egypt, is taken out to the desert to remember that he isn't in fact an Egyptian at all, but is rather a sojourner, a child of Abraham, called to be distinct from the foolishness and randomness of the rest of the nations; Moses is a true son of Abraham, and as such is called to righteousness and true wisdom; depending not on himself for wisdom, but on the wisdom and ways of God.

### **Moses the Leader of Reluctant Pilgrims**

- So it is that we have Moses, formed and molded in the desert through intimate acquaintance with the sojourning life and through an exceptionally personal encounter with the Living God.
- This same guy is now sent by God back to Egypt as His agent to remind the captive nation of Israel of their Abrahamic heritage; to remind them that they are not in fact Egyptians, or even slaves to the Egyptians, but are children of a man of faith, chosen by God to be noble sojourners en route to a Promised Land of unimaginable riches and comfort and joy. Egypt might have been the richest kingdom of its day; but it was nothing compared to the country to which the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been called.
- As we left off last week, we saw that Moses and Aaron come out of the desert and share with Israel all that had happened to Moses in the wilderness: “And the people believed: and when they heard that the Lord had visited the children of Israel, and that he had looked upon their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped.”
- Sounds like things are going according to plan... but unfortunately, this ‘honeymoon’ only lasts something like 24 hours.
- God knows that Israel has a long way to go before they're ready to receive the promises, so he begins to put them through some trials, for their education. And in their trials we see the condition of their hearts.
- The first trial comes right after Moses first approaches Pharaoh with his famous, “Let my people go!”
- Pharaoh responds, foreboding terrible things: “Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go.” To punish them for their insolence, their workload is increased, and the proper supplies are denied them. No more straw, but more bricks.
- The people quickly come to resent Moses, saying, “The Lord look upon you, and judge; because ye have made our savour to be abhorred in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to slay us.” When trials come, the people are easily put off from worship and from looking for the freedom and kingdom to come; they can't see past their pain and discomfort.
- Moses cries out to the Lord, essentially asking, “What in the world are you up to? I thought you were taking these people out of Egypt?”

### **Purposes in the Trials: Establishing the Reputation of God and Setting Apart Israel**

- The Lord, however, has a greater purpose than merely getting them moved from one locale to another... he doesn't just want their bodies out of Egypt, but he wants their hearts and minds to get out of Egypt as well, and to heighten the distinction between His ways and the ways of the nations
- So it is that the Lord responds to Moses' cry, saying ominously,

- “*Now shalt thou see what I will do to Pharaoh... I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments: And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning the which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for an heritage: I am the Lord.*” (Ex 6.6-9)
- “Now shalt thou see what I will do to Pharaoh...”
- “and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God...”
- God’s work is to put forward himself as the opposer of Pharaoh, the opposer of the ways of the world, and he seems to want to put Israel through a trial and an experience not only to remind them of the promises to their ancestors, but what’s more, to begin articulating and giving real shape to what the promises mean and what he hopes to accomplish in Israel through the process of redemption: “I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments: And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: *and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning the which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for an heritage: I am the Lord.*” (6.6-9) He’s creating a history for Israel, a most memorable experience, which will convey his purposes in selecting Abraham and Israel from the nations, and continuing to bring wisdom and order to the chaos of creation. This process is more than a practical necessity borne out of particular circumstances, as if their slavery was an inconvenience and their rescue merely a problem to be resolved... no, God in his providence is establishing a narrative, a story for Israel; a way of understanding what it looks like for them to be children of Abraham, heirs of the promise; and for us, we learn what it looks like to join Israel in the Promises, to come out of personal chaos and into the light and glory of God
- So, God tells Moses, “Go in, speak unto Pharaoh king of Egypt, that he let the children of Israel go out of his land.” It’s not at all a request to free the people, but rather a setting of the stage for a powerful demonstration, as we see in Ch 7, “But Pharaoh shall not hearken unto you, that I may lay my hand upon Egypt, and bring forth mine armies, and my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch forth mine hand upon Egypt, and bring out the children of Israel from among them.”
- And so the great judgments, the overwhelming plagues, begin after the great sign of Aaron’s staff turning into a snake, and devouring the snakes produced by Pharaoh’s magicians. Then the Nile turned to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, death to Egyptian cattle, boils, overwhelming hail interspersed with fire, locusts, darkness, and finally, the Passover and the death of all Egyptian firstborn sons.
- Again and again, Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; the greatest king on the earth is a mere pawn in the hands of God. “Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh...”
- Even Pharaoh’s magicians give up trying to imitate the plagues after a while, and are forced to confess the one true God and exhort Pharaoh to give in: “This is the finger of God!” At one point his servants abandon all protocol and exhort their king, “How long shall this man

be a snare unto us? let the men go, that they may serve the Lord their God: knowest thou not yet that Egypt is destroyed?” (10.7)

- But “Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as the Lord had said.” (8.19)
- Here God is plainly going for the greatest amount of destruction possible. Egypt is begging to get away from God’s judgment, to rid themselves of this curse; but God has them on a leash, and continues to pummel them, and keeps them alive for further judgment and display. To what end?
- Through Moses and Aaron the Lord says to Pharaoh, to his pawn: “For I will at this time send all my plagues upon thine heart, and upon thy servants, and upon thy people; that thou mayest know that there is none like me in all the earth. For now I will stretch out my hand, that I may smite thee and thy people with pestilence; and thou shalt be cut off from the earth. And in very deed for this cause have I raised thee up, for to shew in thee my power; and that my name may be declared throughout all the earth.” (9.14-16)
- While God most definitely is interested in demonstrating his power and becoming famous throughout all the world, there is an even greater purpose in these judgments, as we see in the following chapter. There we see that the God’s purpose in the plagues is expounded in a very important way:
- “And the Lord said unto Moses, Go in unto Pharaoh: for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants, that I might shew these my signs before him: And that thou mayest tell in the ears of thy son, and of thy son's son, what things I have wrought in Egypt, and my signs which I have done among them; that ye may know how that I am the Lord.” (10.1-2)
- God is doing this to proclaim himself throughout all the earth, yes; but even more importantly, he’s putting on a spectacular display *so that Israel might know who God is, his power and might, and his love for his people and his faithfulness to the promises given to Abraham: “I am the Lord.”* כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה
- This is the name of God which hadn’t been given to Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob; this is the name given to Moses through the burning bush, and is further disclosure of his purposes, his intentions for mankind
- And once again, we see that everyone, Hebrew and non-Hebrew, is to know a very important point: God is doing this “that ye may know how that the Lord doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel.” (11.7) He does this to make a distinction between his people and the rest of the world, his ways and theirs. And he does this for the education of both the world and for the children of Abraham. You are different; you have been chosen and set apart; act like your father Abraham, act like you are my children.

### Set Free by Blood...

- Thus far we have a display of great power, and a people set free from slavery. But freedom *from* slavery isn’t the goal: throughout, Moses is telling Pharaoh to “let my people go” so that they might be able to worship their God in the desert. Freedom *from* slavery, freedom *to* worship.
- Their eventual destination is the Promised Land and all its blessings; but as we’ll see, they can’t go there just yet.
- First, we need to note the foundation of their freedom, and the life they are being lead to live
- The final deliverance of the people out of Egypt is in the terrible plague of the slaying of all the first-born in Egypt

- If you'll remember, the Israelites escape this plague by smearing the blood of a lamb on their doorposts. So here we have the poignant image of a people being both saved and set apart by the blood of a sacrificial lamb. Sound familiar?
- And what are they doing inside their homes, while the blood of the lamb saves them and their whole household, and the angel of death passes by to claim Egyptian victims?
- They're eating a hasty meal inside. They have to consume the entire lamb they had slain, but they had to make their bread in a hurry, and eat some bitter herbs along with the meal. They're preparing to make a quick exit out of Egypt, out of slavery. The time is so urgent, they weren't given time to prepare the dough properly; they were forced to eat their bread unleavened, so that they could eat the meal quickly and get on the road.
- This experience was meant to stick: leaving slavery, a bitter taste in their mouth, a hasty exit and hitting the road; It was described as "A night of watching." In fact, the Lord made it the beginning of the year for them; this was the beginning of their liturgical calendar, and was the foundation of Israelite life and identity. "This month shall be unto you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year to you... ye shall observe the feast of unleavened bread; for in this selfsame day have I brought your armies out of the land of Egypt: therefore shall ye observe this day in your generations by an ordinance for ever. And ye shall observe this thing for an ordinance to thee and to thy sons for ever... And it shall come to pass, when ye be come to the land which the Lord will give you, according as he hath promised, that ye shall keep this service. And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? That ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord's passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses." (12.2-27, with omissions for reasons of space)
- Israelite identity is being formed. They are a people of faith, with great promises given; they have been set free from slavery by the blood of a lamb, they are to remember their slavery as bitter and repugnant, and they are to set out quickly on the road that they might be free to worship the one true God. That's not a bad narrative for their and our instruction! They are set apart from the ways of the world, its so-called wisdom, that they might be free to make their way to the Promised Land.

### ...to be Homeless, Worshipping Wanderers

- But they don't get taken to the Promised Land straightaway. Why? If you've ever looked at a map, it's not a terribly long distance from Egypt to Palestine; Google Earth calculates it to be about 6 hours by car, if you can get through the Egyptian/Israeli border. There really aren't significant mountains or bodies of water in the way across the Sinai, just desert. Shouldn't be much of a problem for a people who have enough provisions to get them from point A to point B.
- But as I said earlier, God is delivering his people in a way that actually brings them *with* him; he doesn't just get their bodies out of Egypt, he gets their hearts and minds out of Egypt as well. He can't take them to the Promised Land until they *want* to be there.
- At first, they really don't have a desire for the Promised Land. They're happy enough to leave their oppressors, they know what they're fleeing *from*; but they have yet to get a hunger and longing for their new homeland. They simply don't want it bad enough yet.
- "And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, Lest

peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt: But God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red Sea: and the children of Israel went up harnessed out of the land of Egypt.” (13.17-18)

- God knew they didn't want it bad enough; they'd rather return to slavery in Egypt rather than claim a land for themselves in the face of war. They had no stomach for the fight.
- So, to work them over, God had them instead go round about in the desert, and pinned them against the Red Sea.
- God is with them in the pillar of cloud by day, fire by night, but soon hard-hearted Pharaoh and the entire Egyptian army have them surrounded on the beach, kept at bay only by the angel of the Lord.
- I'd rather be between a rock and a hard place than between a hostile army and the ocean; what a tight spot! Now, it's Israel being tested. God knew they didn't want the Promised Land, and he knew their faith was weak; so he squeezes them until they exhibit the character he knew was in their hearts all along.
- “And when Pharaoh drew nigh, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and, behold, the Egyptians marched after them; and they were sore afraid: and the children of Israel cried out unto the Lord. And they said unto Moses, Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to carry us forth out of Egypt? Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness.” (14.10-12)
- My, aren't we dense! Moses' response is profoundly pastoral; He demonstrates the Lord's patience with his people, and reveals that God is still putting on a show; in fact, the greatest act was yet to come; a grand-finale, if you will:
- “And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace.” (14.13-14) And with that, Moses leads his people through the sea, and they all watch as Pharaoh's entire army is wiped out before their eyes. The only remnant of the army is a bunch of bodies and gear washed up on the beach.

### **They Begin to Get It**

- And finally, with that mind-blowing demonstration of power and love, the children of Abraham finally begin to get it. When they see their deliverance, “that great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians: and the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and his servant Moses.” (14.31)
- Finally, they believe! Finally, they are children of Abraham.
- But God isn't through with them yet. He's given them their story as the foundation, of the slavery and chaos from which they'd been freed, and the Promised Land is set before them. But the narrative ends with Moses leading them out into the wilderness... they are children of Abraham, you know...
- After a beautiful celebration, whose theme song is, “I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation: he is my God, and I will prepare him an habitation; my father's God, and I will exalt him!”

- After their offering of praise, the story continues with a somber tone: “So Moses brought Israel from the Red sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur...” The lessons are to continue, and Israel has a long way to go before they're ready for the Promised Land. We all do.

**Concluding remarks:**

- Like Israel, our salvation is accomplished by the blood of the Lamb; like Israel, we've been set free from a cruel tyrant and slavery to sin; like Israel, we're being lead through the wilderness, where God is patiently building up our wisdom, so that through our devotion to Christ we might, through him, begin to long for our own homeland, the city whose builder is God. And as the Epistle to the Hebrews assures us, for those who “desire a better country, that is, an heavenly... God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.”
- It is our longing for the heavenly Jerusalem that will save us, and it is this longing that God is instilling in us even today through the Holy Spirit and the work of Christ in his Body, the Church.
- salvation through Joseph and Egypt is a nice image of how God uses this world to sustain us and grow us, but how such things are ultimately oppressive and enslaving; and we need to be taken out, saved not merely to *exist*, but to share in the glory of God... which is the sort of existence for which we were created. Anything else is perverse.