

The Story: Delivered
By Jason Huff
Psalm 3, Hebrews 11:23-29, Exodus 14:9-18

Today's final Scripture reading is from Exodus 14:9-18. Listen now to God's Word. "The Egyptians – all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, horsemen and troops – pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, opposite Baal Zephon. As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!" Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still." Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen.""

There are defining moments in every person's life, moments that shape who you are. This weekend, we celebrated the marriage of Loan Portlance and Shawn Gallagher here in the church...that's a defining moment. We remember other special occasions in our lives – births, baptisms, funerals, great victories and profound losses. As a nation, we think of key events in our collective history – 1776, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitutional Congress, the Civil War. Today's chapter in *The Story* is special because it details *the* pivotal event in Jewish history. No other event in the entire Old Testament is as definitional for Israel as the exodus from Egypt. It is the point when God boldly and directly intervenes in human history in a way the whole nation can see and understand. The rest of Israel's history is seen through its lens.

We need to set the stage. God has been fulfilling His promise to Abraham to make His descendents into a great nation. Last week, Abraham's entire family wound up in Egypt as honored guests of the Pharaoh because of Joseph. This week, we leap forward a few hundred years. Joseph has faded into history, and new Pharaohs come into power. They are scared the Israelites – the descendents of Jacob – are too numerous and might overtake Egypt. The Pharaohs try to solve the problem by enslaving them, but the Israelites thrive anyway. Eventually, one Pharaoh proposes the final solution: a physical and spiritual genocide. The male Israelite children will be killed at birth. The girl children were allowed to live, but the phrasing in Hebrew has been interpreted by rabbis to mean that they would have been assimilated into Egyptian society. It was nothing less than the destruction of the Israelites as a people.

In the midst of this disaster comes the birth of Moses. Thankfully, there were God-fearing Egyptians and Israelites who refused to carry out Pharaoh's orders. Through God's providence, Moses is not only spared but grows up in the Pharaoh's household as Pharaoh's adopted grandson. Still, Moses is aware of his heritage as an Israelite. Their plight bothers him so much that he decides to do something about it – and kills an Egyptian taskmaster. Word spreads of the murder, and Moses flees Pharaoh's wrath.

Moses disappears off the scene for 40 years. He escapes to Midian out to the west of Egypt, marrying and living the life of a herdsman. It's light years away both from the Pharaoh's palace and the suffering Israelites. The next time we see Moses, he's 80, probably expecting to retire after a couple more years of peaceful shepherding. But God has different plans. God speaks to him from within a burning bush and God tells Moses that he will lead God's people out of Egypt. Moses is incredibly reluctant and finally asks God to send somebody else. God offers to let Moses' brother Aaron speak for Moses, but God commands Moses to go.

Moses might be unenthusiastic, but he comes through. He tells Pharaoh to let the Israelites go so they may worship the LORD. Not only does Pharaoh refuse, he takes away the workers' straw they need to make bricks. The Israelites start grumbling, but God hasn't gotten started yet. Over the course of ten plagues, God shows His power to the Egyptians. The court magicians create a facsimile of the first two plagues, but eventually even they are stumped. But Pharaoh's heart keeps hardening. He asks Moses for relief and gives his word that he will let the Israelites go. But once each plague has ended, he forgets his promise.

The last plague finally breaks Pharaoh...the death of the firstborn. Pharaoh is warned that it is coming, yet he does not change his mind. Moses tells the Israelites that they must mark their houses with the blood of a lamb or goat. When the LORD sees the marking on the doorposts, he will "pass over" their homes and families. They are told to eat a meal of lamb and bitter herbs and bread without yeast, and to do it in haste, for they are about to be freed. God does just as was promised, and death visits every Egyptian home. Pharaoh finally relents.

But just as quickly as the Israelites leave, Pharaoh changes his mind about losing a million plus slaves. By the command of God, Moses parts the Red Sea so the Israelites can pass through. Pharaoh's army pursues them, but they drown as the waters return. The Israelites are liberated. Though they worry about how they will survive out in the wilderness, God provides food for them so that they do not turn around and head back for Egypt.

So what is happening behind the scenes this week – who does God reveal Himself to be in the exodus from Egypt? God shows us three things. He wields ultimate power, He shows surprising mercy, and He authors the salvation and deliverance of His people. Let's look at each one and what it all means for us.

First, God is supremely powerful. God frees an entire nation from captivity. The means that God uses are far beyond our understanding, but there is no doubt that it's God who is behind it. The Egyptian magicians say during the third plague that "this is the finger of God." God does what He does to show the world who He is. There's no doubt in any mind in Egypt or in Israel that God has the power to follow through on His promises.

So what is God doing with all these plagues? A surface reading makes it look like God is mean or vindictive, but that's not the case. God is systematically undermining Egyptian theology. Egypt's belief system was highly structured, and the conflict between Moses and Pharaoh was a religious one...Pharaoh would not let the Israelites leave Egypt to worship. Pharaoh didn't believe in Moses' God, so God proves Himself.

Each plague is an attack on an Egyptian deity. Hapi was the god of the Nile, which was turned to blood. Frogs were sacred animals represented by the goddess Heka, who had a frog's head. No less than four Egyptians gods were gods of livestock. Isis was the goddess who protected against locusts. Ra was the sun god. By the time the plagues were finished, the Egyptian pantheon had been proven worthless.

But why does God finish off the plagues with the death of the firstborn? The other plagues are devastating, but the last one seems brutal and unnecessary. Every family loses someone. But even this is a show of force against the theology of Egypt. Egyptians worshipped the firstborn of humans and animals alike. The Pharaoh was the incarnation of the creator of all life, the sun god Ra, and so was his firstborn son. In the death of the firstborn, Egypt sees their gods destroyed. It shows that only the LORD has power over life and death. As God states, His name is "I AM that I AM." He is the only God; His name itself means life and existence.

It might surprise you, but all links into the second revelation in this passage: God's astounding mercy. The death of the firstborn doesn't sound merciful, and God *is* exercising justice and punishment through this plague. But remember for a second exactly what was going on in Egypt. By the Pharaoh's decree, the Israelites were being systematically annihilated, either through murder or through assimilation into the culture. Had Pharaoh succeeded in his plans, the Hebrew people would have ceased to exist. God's judgment on Egypt is difficult, but God does not wipe out Egypt as Egypt would have wiped out Israel. God isn't interested in obliterating them. God shows His power to the world, but He does so without bringing total judgment upon Egypt. God spares them from the wrath He could have rightfully brought upon them. God even shows mercy on Pharaoh for a time. He's given ten separate chances to repent before the final plague occurs. God's patience is not without bounds, but He gives Pharaoh every opportunity.

God also shows incredible mercy to the Israelites themselves. The Israelites are not loyal followers patiently waiting for their rescue. Whenever there's trouble, they freak out and blame God and Moses. When Pharaoh increases the workload...blame God. When Pharaoh pursues them...blame God. Can't find food and water...blame God. Yet God protects their livestock and their firstborn from the plagues. God gives them provisions through the Egyptians who supply them for their journey. God makes a way for them through the sea. God leads them as a pillar of fire and a pillar of wind, a visual reminder of His presence with them. God gives them manna to eat and water to drink. They aren't grateful, but God provides anyway.

God also demonstrates His mercy at a very personal level. Moses is an eighty-year-old failure. He had it all. He grew up in two worlds – raised in the Pharaoh’s family but deeply aware of his heritage. He could have wielded huge amount of power. He makes a good decision in deciding to side with his own people, but the result of his rage kicks his ambitions and plans to the curb. He’s a murderer who fled from justice. From a worldly point of view, Moses is nothing more than a nearly dead, washed-up felon. But God chooses this man and makes him into Israel’s greatest earthly leader. God doesn’t condemn Moses for what he has done; instead, God transforms Moses into a man He can use.

This mercy transitions us into the final truth of the passage: God is the author of salvation and deliverance. It happens on countless levels. God delivers Moses first from the death sentence of the Pharaoh and then from the mistakes of his past. God releases the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt and stops the plan of the Pharaoh. God rescues them from plagues and armies and hunger and thirst. The Passover is the ultimate example of deliverance. God saves the Israelites from the plague on the firstborn. And just as we saw in the case of Adam and Eve, we see where a sacrifice creates a covering over sin and death. Through the shedding of blood, God makes a way for the Israelites to be in relationship with Him, loosed from their chains so they can be with Him in a new place, free to worship Him. The Jewish people still celebrate Passover to commemorate their deliverance.

It is not by accident that Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples before His death. The meal we call the Last Supper was a Passover meal. Jesus was pointing to Himself as the ultimate fulfillment of Passover. John the Baptist called Jesus “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” The book of Revelation talks of the Lamb who was slain who now reigns on the throne of God. Jesus is our Passover lamb. The blood of the lambs at the original Passover marked the Israelites for that night; their deliverance was from earthly slavery. But the blood of Jesus marks us for all eternity. The sacrifices made in the Old Testament only covered sin and had to be repeated over and over again; the blood of Jesus forgives and erases the sin of His people once and for all. God gave an incredible gift of freedom to the Israelites in Egypt, but He gives us an even greater gift in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

The word “gospel” means good news, and it starts here, early on in the Bible. We have the good news that God is powerful. He is a God who intervenes in human history and individual lives. God is not sitting on the sidelines. He is actively engaged with His creation. That means that you can count on Him. You do not need to pray hoping that God might be able to do what you ask; He can do it. God is powerful enough to know whether fulfilling our requests would bring us blessings or harm and answers our prayers accordingly. God is merciful. As Psalm 103 says, “He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” God will have mercy on us when we come to Him. He forgave a murderer and not only made him into a leader of millions, He talked to him face to face. He can forgive you and show mercy to you. And God is a deliverer. Whatever problems or temptations or addictions you face, God can deliver you. Most importantly, God will deliver you from sin and death and hell if you come to Him in repentance and faith.

There's one final thought I want to share... the Israelites marked their homes in the blood of the Passover lamb. God did not pass over them simply because they were descendents of Abraham, even though God knew every last one of them by name. God tells them, "Mark your doorposts." It was a sign of faith that God would do what He promised to do. Sometimes, we go to church and hear about Jesus; we might even believe in our minds that He died and rose again. But are you marked with His blood, the blood of the Passover lamb sacrificed for us? Have you asked God to mark you as His own? Do those outside the church see the marks of Jesus on your life? If you've never asked God to save you, if you've never approached Jesus and asked for His redemption to apply to your life, do it today. He doesn't want to just be in your life; He wants to *be* your life. He wants to change you and restore you just as He did Moses. He wants to claim you as His own. But He will not violate your will to do it. Give yourself to Him today and ask to be washed clean from your sin and marked with Jesus' blood as one of His own.

God saved the Israelites with a mighty hand and outstretched arm, proving His power, His mercy, and deliverance. Thanks be to God, whose salvation extends even to today through the gift of His Son. Amen.