

November 4/5, 2023

Looking Back to Move Forward

Exodus: The God Who Delivers Series

Exodus 13:1-21

Pastor Bryan Clark

So, which generation do you think is most likely to take what they've been given for granted, and to miss the blessings God has for them? Answer: the generation that inherits the land flowing with milk and honey, that didn't have to do anything to pay the price for it. That's what we're talking about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Exodus Chapter 13. If you're visiting with us, we're working our way through the Old Testament book of Exodus. We find ourselves in a part of the story that is reaching the climax of this great moment of the exodus out of Egypt. It is a moment that is so spectacular, that it will be referred to over and over and over again in the Old Testament.

Yet right in the middle of this critical moment, the writer interrupts the storyline with three chapters of lengthy, tedious details about Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. We would refer to this in a Hebrew narrative as a structural element, and the purpose is to slow everything down and identify a point of concern before we move on with the story. Now we have limited time this morning, so I don't want to get into all the details, but just try to stay true to the main point the writer is trying to make. We pick it up in chapter 13, verse 1:

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the first offspring of every womb among the sons of Israel, both of man and beast; it belongs to Me.”

Moses said to the people, “Remember this day in which you went out from Egypt, from the house of slavery; for by a powerful hand the LORD brought you out from this place. And nothing leavened shall be eaten. On this day in the month of Abib, you are about to go forth. It shall be when the LORD brings you to the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, which He swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, that you shall observe this rite in this month. For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the LORD. Unleavened bread shall be eaten throughout the seven days; and nothing leavened shall be seen among you, nor shall any leaven be seen among you in all your borders. You shall tell your son on that day, saying, ‘It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ And it shall serve as a sign to you on your hand, and as a reminder on your forehead, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth; for with a powerful hand the LORD brought you out of Egypt. Therefore, you shall keep this ordinance at its appointed time from year to year.

(*NASB, Exodus 13:1-10)

So with the reference to **this day**, this is likely the same day as they are exiting Egypt, and there's continuous repetition of the **firstborn**. If you go back and read through chapters 11 and 12 that Jeff talked about last week, and now chapter 13, there's a lot of repetition around this theme. This takes us back to Exodus chapter 4, when God identified Israel as His firstborn. In other words, the Hebrew people belong to God. They are God's firstborn son. This is the basis by which, then, God makes the argument to Pharaoh, "These people don't belong to you. They're not yours. They're Mine. They're My firstborn children. Therefore, you can't keep them. You must let them go."

So the idea of the firstborn—both with their sons and with their animals—was just symbolic, a reminder that together they were the firstborn people of God. They're the people of God, and this practice with the firstborn was just a way to remind them of that, as a regular rhythm, as the people of God.

Verse 3 identifies the significance to remember. ***Remember the day that the LORD led them out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. It was by His powerful hand.*** This has been repeated over and over again through the book of Exodus. The nation of Israel was not delivered from Egypt by the hand of Moses, but by the powerful hand of God. And the concern is that they will forget this.

When they enter the land, when the next generation comes on the scene—who didn't have to fight for it, who didn't go through the wilderness, who just inherited a land flowing with milk and honey—the concern is they will forget. They will forget who God is; they will forget what God has done. You see it again in verse 8...***When your son asks you, "Why do we do this?"*** So, there was to be a right, a ritual, a celebration during the month of Abib, which would be our late March, early April—every year on this particular week—and they would go through the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And when your son asks you, "Why do we do this? I mean, what's the deal?" then the dad would say, "Because this is who God is. This is what God did for us, and we can never forget that!"

The idea of leavened and unleavened bread has two parts to it. One carries the idea of the haste with which the Hebrew people had to leave Egypt. They didn't have time to sit around and wait for the bread to rise. They had to grab their stuff, and they had to get out. But more commonly, throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament, leaven carries this idea of something that permeates the whole lump of dough. It's like an infection; it spreads and covers the whole lump. Also the idea is leaven represents sin; it represents the idolatry of the nations around them. The idea of *unleavened* carried the idea that we must remember who God is, what God has done for us, who we are as the people of God, that there would be no sin and idolatry among us like exists in the nations around us. So, it's just a very creative way to continually remind them of this truth.

It says in verse 9 that they were to remember this like symbols on the back of their hand and on their forehead. Literally, the Hebrew is not on their forehead. Literally what it says is more the idea of *right between the eyes* or in their mouth. Clearly this is symbolic language; it's metaphoric. When you read Proverbs, it says things like, ***"Take these truths and wear them like a necklace around your neck,"*** or, ***"Inscribe them; write them on the tablet of your heart."*** So they weren't

to do this literally. It was just a way of saying, “This has got to be ever before you. This is the air you breathe; this is the DNA; this is the water you drink. This has to be who we are as the people of God.” Verse 11:

“Now when the LORD brings you to the land of the Canaanite, as He swore to you and to your fathers, and gives it to you, you shall devote to the LORD the first offspring of every womb, and the first offspring of every beast that you own; the males belong to the LORD. But every first offspring of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, but if you do not redeem *it*, then you shall break its neck; and every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. And it shall be when your son asks you in the time to come, saying, ‘What is this?’ then you shall say to him, ‘With a powerful hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. It came about, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the LORD killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of beast. Therefore, I sacrifice to the LORD the males, the first offspring of every womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.’ So it shall serve as a sign on your hand and as phylacteries on your forehead, for with a powerful hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.” (Vs. 11-16)

You can hear the high level of repetition over and over in these details, with the great concern that when future generations enter the land, they will forget who God is. They will forget what God has done for them. There would only be one generation who would live the exodus. Future generations were to relive the exodus through the practice of these feasts.

But one unique feature in this paragraph is the new addition of the donkeys. A donkey would have been a very valuable creature to these people, but donkeys were considered to be unclean animals. Therefore, a donkey could not be sacrificed on behalf of the donkeys. Rather, it required a substitutionary lamb that would shed its blood to redeem the unclean donkeys. So, you start to hear the message of the gospel. We're the unclean donkeys. We can't die for ourselves. Therefore, it will require the substitutionary death of the Lamb who will shed His blood to cover our sins.

Peter taps into this in 1Peter chapter 1, ***“You were not redeemed with imperishable things like gold and silver, but rather with the precious blood of the Lamb, Christ Himself.”*** The male sons were not sacrificed; but they were redeemed. Later the Law will go into detail about exactly how that is to be done. I don't want to really get caught up in all that this morning. Again, you have the repetition of this idea of when your son says to you, “Hey, why do we do all this?” then you will say to him, “Because this is who God is. This is what God has done for us. This is what it means to be the people of God.”

A reminder at the end of that paragraph then, ***“...that it should serve as a symbol or a sign on the back of your hand and as phylacteries on your forehead.”*** It's probably not the best translation. Literally, the Hebrew is a *leather band*. The Egyptians wore leather bands around their forehead with something that dangled literally right between the eyes. But hundreds of years later, there

were religious Jews that took these passages ultra literally, and they wore what are called phylacteries. It's a leather box, and they would wear them on their forehead and on the back of their left hand. Those boxes contained part of this scripture in Exodus 13, and two scriptures in the book of Deuteronomy.

I've been to Israel three times. If you go to Jerusalem and you go down to the Wailing Wall, there is a sect of religious Jews today that still wear the phylacteries. They have the leather boxes on their foreheads. They have leather containers on the back of their hands, and they contain those passages of Scripture. The sobering thing about that is, for hundreds of years they have kept the ritual but totally missed the point—the whole point to the story.

The whole point of the exodus is one day God would send His Son as the Lamb of God, whose blood would be shed in order to make atonement for our sins, that our sins might be forgiven, that we might stand right before a holy God. Two thousand years ago, God kept His promise. The Messiah came and died on the cross, as the Lamb of God. Yet here we are, 2,000 years past that, and they're still keeping the ritual, but have completely missed the point. It's a sobering thing to realize how easy it is to go through the motions, the rituals, but not really remember the point.

God has graciously put so many things into the rhythm and the life of the church to make sure we don't forget who God is and what God has done for us. We are the generation who has inherited land flowing with milk and honey that we did not earn or deserve or pay a price for. And there is great concern in the Scripture that we will forget that.

Last week, Jeff talked about communion. Communion is one of those things that God has put into the life of His church, that we always remember that it's through the broken body and the shed blood of Jesus that we, as the people of God, stand right before a holy God. But it's easy to just go through the motions...check the box...Check! This week, we have the opportunity to celebrate baptism, literally a reenactment of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, to remind ourselves that this is the basis by which we stand right before a holy God. But it's easy to just see this as some sort of a ritual. It's a box...Check!...What's next?

Soon, Christmas will be upon us. After that Easter is upon us. It's really easy just to go through those seasons without giving much thought to it. Even the idea of gathering together as the people of God—one of the primary reasons we gather—is to remember. To remember who God is, to remember what God has done for us, to remember what's true. And to remember who we are as the people of God, that we do not allow the leaven—the sin and idolatry of the world—to creep into our lives. But it's easy to forget that; it's just another Sunday. You go to church, check the box, onto the next thing. The great concern in these chapters is that we will not remember, having taken most of three chapters to stop the action to talk about this. Verse 17. On with the story:

Now when Pharaoh had let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near; for God said, “The people might change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.” Hence God led the

people around by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea; and the sons of Israel went up in martial array from the land of Egypt. (Vs. 17-18)

So, coming out of Egypt, the shortest route to the land of promise was what was called the *Via Maris, the way of the sea*. It was right south of the Mediterranean Sea, straight across, right through Gaza, which has been in the news so much lately, right into the land of promise. This was a major road coming out of Egypt that was the road that their troops traveled to go out to war. Also there were multiple Egyptian outposts, heavily fortified, all the way down the road, of course to keep the enemy from coming in on that road. Also, exactly where the presence of the Philistines was, was a little hard to determine.

But we would all agree, God could have easily incapacitated all those people, and the Hebrew people could have strolled right into the land of promise, which would have been a disaster. At this point, they don't even know who God is. They don't know who they are. They don't know what it means to be the people of God. They're angry, bitter slaves, so God is going to have to take them to the wilderness, and it's in the wilderness that they will have to learn who God is. They will have to learn what it means to be the people of God, and what it means to walk in obedience to Him, in order to prepare them to enter the land of promise. The text refers to the Red Sea, literally the Hebrew is *the Sea of Reeds*, talking about papyrus reeds. We know today that that was kind of a generic reference to a number of bodies of water in that general area, so it's really hard to figure out exactly the route and exactly where they crossed. They could have very easily crossed one of the arms of the Red Sea coming up. There are also multiple lakes and bodies of water. It's really not possible to pinpoint that. Verse 19:

Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, “God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones from here with you.”

So this, again, connects us to the Genesis story. We've mentioned that multiple times in this study of Exodus. This is just a continuation of the story of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph. At the end of the book of Genesis, when Joseph was on his deathbed, he made them promise that, ***“When the time comes, you'll carry my bones with you into the land of promise and bury them there.”*** Joseph knew that Egypt was not their home, that one day God would keep His promise to give them the land, so his statement of faith is, “I don't want to be buried here. I want to be buried in the land God will give us.”

I find it quite impressive that Moses, in the midst of the chaos and all that was going on that night, remembered the bones. This is Moses' statement of faith. This is not just an exit out of Egypt. This is a journey into the land of promise that God promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and there the bones of Joseph will be buried.

Then they set out from Succoth and camped in Etham on the edge of the wilderness. The LORD was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the

way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people. (Vs. 20-22)

So this is an addition to the story, that God is going to appear in this **pillar of cloud by day** and this awesome **pillar of fire by night**. It's not just symbolic of His presence. The text says, *He will dwell in the cloud; He will dwell in the fire*. It's just a veil, but His presence is there with them. One can only imagine how absolutely spectacular that cloud was by day and this awesome fire by night.

The nation of Israel had learned through the 10 strikes in Egypt, that God was with them. They learned about the power and presence of God. But now, as they begin their journey out and through the wilderness to the land of promise, God has made His presence unmistakable. Through this pillar of cloud by day and this fire by night, no one could have missed the awesome presence of God that is with us. I mean, you can't ask for anything more than that. It's like Dorothy, in *The Wizard of Oz*, just, "Follow the yellow brick road." What could possibly go wrong? They're leaving Egypt. God's presence is with them. On to the land of promise. What could possibly go wrong? Well, we'll see...next week.

As we wrap this up this morning, there's one simple thing to think about. There's no question in this text—and it's repeated over and over and over again in the Scripture—that there is a huge concern that God has that we don't remember. It's a major theme in Scripture. The reality is, **we** are the generation that has inherited a land flowing with milk and honey that we did not earn, we did not deserve, we did not fight for, we did not pay the price. We've simply received it as a gift. And the great danger is that we forget that and miss the blessings that God has for us.

So think about it this way. In the time that we've spent together this morning, there's been hundreds of cars that have passed us on the highway, and on 70th Street, at Home Depot, and Walmart, and all these neighborhoods, soon in the restaurants and in the bars all over town. And all these places are filled with people whose lives are so filled with despair and hopelessness, they're fearful. They're lost. They're confused. They're lonely. They're addicted. And they don't know what to do, and they don't know where to turn. And many of them struggle every day, trying to figure out a reason to get out of bed in the morning. And the only difference between those people and you and me, is the grace of God.

For reasons only God understands, He made a decision to reveal to you the truth about the Lamb of God who was slain for the sins of the world...that you might receive it and experience the forgiveness of your sin...that you might receive life, hope, and joy, both now and forever. Because here's the deal: You're not smarter. You're not more moral. You're not more clever. You didn't somehow just figure it out. It is only on the basis of the grace of God that you have experienced new life in Jesus. Do we remember that?

So that's my question. "Can you really say on a daily basis you really do remember that?" Maybe the better question is, "Does how you live your life on a daily basis reflect that you really do remember?" I pray that it does.

Our Father we're so thankful this morning for the Lamb of God whose blood was shed that we might have life. God, on one hand, it feels like the story of the gospel is everywhere in this country. Yet the reality is all around us there are so many people living empty lives of despair. But, Lord, for reasons only you fully understand, that is not us today. We come together as your people, saved by the blood of Jesus. Lord, may we never forget that. In Jesus name, Amen.

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FALL 2023 // WEEK 9

Life Group Questions

Exodus- The God Who Delivers // November 4 – 5, 2023

Looking Back to Move Forward // Exodus 13:1 – 22

Introduction

We come to Exodus 13 to discover an interlude of sorts. It is the space between two mighty works of Yahweh: the Passover event and the parting of the Red Sea. Perhaps this may seem like a “fly-over” chapter in the exodus narrative. What does the author have us consider in the in-between moments? The God who delivers is worthy of remembrance through our acts of worship. We can trust that He will continue to guide us in the way of deliverance moving forward.

To think through the main ideas in the sermon and prepare for your discussion together, we invite you to look over all the questions on the following pages and write your thoughts down before you meet with your group. Due to preferences over a wide range of groups, we do not expect you will cover every question each week.

Warm Up *(Suggested time: 30 min)*

- 1) Nebraska is often considered a “fly-over” state in the world of travel. What would you say to someone about our state to cause them to reconsider and visit the good life?

- 2) What is your favorite family recipe? (Bonus points if you bring a copy of the recipe to share with your life group!)

Getting Started

Transition into group discussion.

- 1) Open group discussion with prayer. Here are a few potential prayer items:
 - a. For the Spirit of God to lead you in truth
 - b. For the fruit of the Spirit to be cultivated in your lives
 - c. For grace to hear and apply what the Spirit says to you

Study Questions *(Suggested time: 40 min)*

- 1) Our passage this week begins with a continuation of the Passover event. **What are some important details from Exodus 11 and 12 that you can recall? How are these details significant in discerning the content of chapter 13?**
- 2) Much of chapter 13 describes the details of how the Israelites are to remember and respond to the Passover event. They are asked to consecrate the firstborn, both man and beast (13:2 and 11–16). **How does the dictionary define *consecrate* and *redeem*? Write a definition for both in the space provided.**

Why do you think God commanded the Israelites to consecrate their firstborn sons? What significance does this hold in the context of the Exodus story? How does this image of consecration and redemption at Passover point us to Christ?

Consecration of the firstborn is not a memorial practice for current day Christians. We have the opportunity to open our Bibles and read Exodus 11 and 12 to remember how God delivered his people. Still, remembering the mighty work of God in our lives is a way of worship for us now. **Share of a time or moment when you undeniably saw the work of God in your life. How have you chosen to mark this moment in a way that suggests to others that you belong to God?**

- 3) The Feast of Unleavened Bread marked the Hebrews as a unique people—as though they were branded on their hands and forehead. The practices of this feast are meant to create an experiential remembrance of their freedom from Egypt. Take a moment as a group to identify some of the experiences of the feast and what it could represent to the Israelites. **As you read through the details of this feast in verses 3–10, what stands out to you as important (e.g., commands, repeated phrases, metaphors)?**

Perhaps the most important detail of the feast is found in the purpose statement or the *why* behind all the specific details. **We know that there is value in simply remembering, but beyond remembrance, what is the purpose of the feast (see verses 8–10)?**

- 4) **What are some current-day “feasts” and memorials that Christians can experience to remember and proclaim that Christ has delivered us from our slavery to sin?** (Hint: We celebrated a couple of these memorials in our corporate worship the last 2 weeks but there are others as well.)

How do we avoid allowing these practices to become meaningless rituals?

How has your perspective of communion and baptism changed or grown because of our study in Exodus? Are there any next steps or changes you would consider making in order to authentically participate in these spiritual practices?

- 5) The interlude of chapter 13 has us mostly remembering past events, but in verse 17, the author shifts us forward to the other side of the Red Sea when Yahweh guides His people through the wilderness. God doesn’t always work in the way that seems best to us. Instead of guiding the Israelites along the direct route from Egypt to the promised land, he purposely took them by a longer route inferring that there is value in walking through the wilderness. **Describe a situation, a type of journey through the wilderness, where God seemed to lead you in a particular direction, even if it was not the most direct or straightforward path. What did you learn from that experience? What did you learn about God? What did you learn about yourself?**

Moses took the bones of Joseph with him as they left Egypt per Joseph’s end-of-life request (Genesis 50:22–26). **What significance might this have had for the Israelites, and what does it teach us about the way in which God delivers His people?**

The pillars of cloud and fire are the tangible presence of God guiding the Israelites through the wilderness. **How do you perceive God's guidance in your life? How does He lead you, and how do you recognize His leading?**

Personal Spiritual Exercises

Just like physical exercises help strengthen and stretch our bodies for healthy living, these spiritual exercises are meant to move us spiritually in ways that may be new so we might experience inner growth. Since God longs for us to experience Him with our whole selves—mind, body, spirit—we invite you along each week to strengthen your souls with suggestions and prompts. **Next week in Life Group, take a few moments to share how the Lord may have used this exercise in your life.**

Scripture Focus: Read, mediate, and engage with Psalm 136 as it highlights memorable moments in Hebrew history (including the Exodus) next to the never-ending statement of God's love. What are some divine highlights in your redemption story? In the style of Psalm 136, write down your redemption highlights and between each highlight insert the praise statement, *His love endures forever*.

Prayer Focus: As we learned in Exodus 13 the purpose of remembrance is to show that you belong to God, and to tell others how God has redeemed your life. Prayerfully consider this week how you can remember your redemption story in an authentic way that engages your hands, your mind, and your mouth. *For with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt.*

Prayer *(Suggested time: 20 min)*

A significant part of “coming together” is being open and honest with our lives. Sitting in a group of people for prayer may be new or it may be familiar to you. If you would rather not pray aloud when it is your turn, feel free to pray silently and then say “Amen” aloud signaling the next person in the group to pray. Whether or not you choose to verbalize your prayer, everyone is a participant in sharing this time before God together.

Take a few moments to prepare a prayer request. What did the message, working through the above questions or the discussion cause you to notice about your own relationship with Jesus? Would you be willing to share your prayer request with the group?