

The Mystery of Passover

Exodus: Out of Slavery

3/15/15

Intro/welcome

Before we jump into what we're talking about today, want to invite you to step into our Easter extravaganza, really looking forward to a great Easter season

First, the weekend before Easter we're doing our 2nd 24-hour prayer event where we ask you to sign up for a 30-minute slot and then come to the church office

And in the church office space we'll have all KINDS of prayer prompts and prayer stations for you to engage with—all kinds of different ways to pray and things to pray for

It's like stepping into a workout facility with all these different exercises and you can just pick whichever you like

Some are very personal and just for you, some is for our church, for our neighbors here in Chatham county and for God's work all over the world

We did this back in December and much of the initial response to the idea was freak-out:

"Why are we doing this? Why do I have to go to the church office? Can't I just pray on my own? What on earth would I pray for for 30 minutes?"

But to many of your credits, we had somewhere around 80-ish of you come out even though many of you weren't sure what was up with this thing

And then you got to the space

and you saw how wonderful the prayer stations were, and you experienced the peace and power of stepping into the flow of 24-hours of prayer with your community

And the overwhelming response from the 80 folks who went was "We have GOT to do that again!" and "30 minutes wasn't long enough, I should have made more time to be there"

And to the people who didn't go, they got tired of hearing how great it was!

So if you missed it, this is your big chance to make up for it! You get to be the annoying person who tells everyone who didn't go how incredible it was!

It'll start Saturday, March 28th at 9:00 and we'll end it here in worship on Sunday morning the 29th

Sign-ups are live at www.24hourprayer.info. People are already starting to sign-up, come and enter into the Easter season with prayer-filled joy!

The second thing I wanted to give you a heads up on is that Easter here is always a great time:

live bunnies, family photos, easter egg hunt for kids between the two services

AND on Easter Sunday we'll be kicking off a four or five week series on the topic of forgiveness:

For many of us, one of the most defining events in our lives is something stupid that we did, and we struggle to forgive ourselves for it

OR something terrible that someone else did to us, and we walk around with angry conversations in our heads, sometimes for decades, struggling to know how to forgive.

We're going to tackle that starting Easter Sunday, I'm looking forward to seeing what God might do and I encourage you to begin to think about this for yourself

But also to be praying about anyone around you who might be struggling with issues of forgiveness or unforgiveness in their lives and invite them to join us!

Before we get to all of that, we're a couple of weeks into a series on the book of the Bible called Exodus

it's the second book of the Bible, a couple of thousand years before Christ

In the Bible, this Exodus story is one of the most important events that happens because it's the FIRST place where the nation of Israel as a group and collectively meet God.

And what you find is that throughout the Bible, this Exodus story gets echoed and cited over and over and over again

Including and especially Jesus who will re-enact this story several times in his life and in many ways will be the perfect fulfillment of this Exodus story

The basics of the story in Exodus is that the Israelites are in Egypt as a slave nation and God has raised up Moses to go and be the instrument to deliver his people out of slavery

Moses, goes to Pharaoh king of Egypt and declares that God has ordered him to let his people go

And not surprisingly, Pharaoh says NO WAY DUDE:

“Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go?” (Exodus 5:2)

So last week we talked about how God answered this question by a series of signs called plagues

God sends 10 plagues: frogs and flies and death of livesock and blotting out the sun and on and on

and over and over again God says “I’m doing this so that all of Egypt AND all of my own people the Israelites might know the answer to that great question, “WHO IS THE LORD?”

Because remember, this is just the second book in the Bible. And at the very beginning of Exodus we’re reminded that this story starts with just one big family moving to Egypt to survive during a famine

And they’ve grown and grown and grown over four hundred plus years and now they’re a nation

And there’s no written down Scriptures at this point, Genesis and Exodus get written down by Moses and his scribes AFTER all these events happen in Egypt

So at this point in the history of Israel, there’s no Scripture, no real understanding who this God is that their fathers and forefathers prayed to

They don’t even know God’s real name at the beginning of this story, Moses gets told that name and then has to tell the Israelites:

“hey, that God character that we’ve been praying to—his name is Yahweh! Just FYI!”

So throughout all these plagues, God is introducing himself to the Egyptians and to the Israelites

And this week we’re going to tackle the last of these 10 signs or plagues, the most significant, the most important, and the hardest one to grapple with—the death of the first-born in all of Egypt

I don’t know what kind of week you had this week, but for me, even before this stinking head cold, this week was full of hard, sad or bad news

There have been an inordinate number of challenging situations here in our community over the past week

some job situations, some family situations, some conflicts, some sickness

And as the week went on, and as I was praying and others were praying for God to intervene and do something

And what happened as the week went on is that we saw God move in some clear and wonderful ways that we could celebrate

And in other situations, we saw nothing change at all

And there was no rhyme or reason to it so far as we could tell—some situations we prayed about just once and we saw God do something wonderful

Other situations we've been praying about for months and yet we're seeing nothing

And as the week wrapped up I found myself again face-to-face with the fact that sometimes God moves in mighty and miraculous and clear ways and it's awesome

And then other times, God doesn't move or moves in ways that are hard or painful and to me don't make any sense

Any of you ever wrestle with that?

Today, we're going to get roughly the emotional equivalent of that as we read about this last plague God's sending on the Egyptians

And it's what's going to spring his people free and it's going to become THE DEFINING moment in their history as a people, it's going to define their identity

And not just for this generation but for all the generations that follow

And as we read through this story, we're going to wrestle with all kinds of questions: one is, how do we understand God's goodness in the midst of the pain he inflicts?

But secondly, as we see how committed God is to delivering his people and to setting them free from slavery and oppression
how do we understand and experience and know God's commitment to deliverance and provision for us as well?

Bible/no Bible/Free bible: Exodus 11, starting in verse 4

this whole Passover event takes place over several chapters, we're going to just hit the highlights together to understand the enormity of this event for God's people

Now because this is such an important event from God's perspective, there's multiple layers to it—the first has to do with what's going to happen right then and there in Egypt

And the SECOND layer to it is how this particular event is to be enshrined and marked as a part of the calendar for the Israelites from here on out

But first, we're going to get the description of this last plague as Moses tells Pharaoh what's about to happen:

4 So Moses said, "This is what the LORD says: 'About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. 5 Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the female slave, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. 6 There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt—worse than there has ever been or ever will be again. 7 But among the Israelites not a dog will bark at any person or animal.' Then you will know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. 8 All these officials of yours will come to me, bowing down before me and saying, 'Go, you and all the people who follow you!' After that I will leave."

One of the trends in modern tv and movies and is to create bad guys that are increasingly complicated

they do bad things and yet you're attached to them and their stories are told in such a way that they become sympathetic characters

that makes for good and interesting story-telling because it's not quite so predictable and it invites us into the real complexity of the world

One example of this is the hit Broadway musical "Wicked" which essentially is written to re-tell the story of the Wicked Witch from the Wizard of Oz—by all accounts one of the best plays of the past 20 years on Broadway

And the take-home from it is essentially "nobody's actually wicked, everyone's just mis-understood or a product of their environment."

We presume people are actually all REALLY good, unless they're damaged somewhere along the way

So what happens for some of us at least when we read something like this passage is we rush to the defense of the mis-understood Pharaoh

who probably just had a mean dad or mom and who just needs some good therapy and maybe some medications to help him overcome his obstacles

And while it's important for us to appreciate the complexity of people and why they do what they do

and while we need to be careful before we rush to judgment on anyone

What we see in Scripture and what we actually see in history is that this modern attempt at explaining away wickedness is a lot of wishful thinking

Wickedness is not just the result of some psychological damage along the way. Wickedness is embedded in all of our hearts.

In this Exodus story, for many generations, the wickedness of many Pharaoh's has meant cruel slavery

And for at least part of that story the wickedness of the Pharaoh's has meant that little baby boys as soon as they were born were thrown to their deaths into the Nile

Multiple Pharaoh's had already declared that all Hebrew boys were to be killed at birth, this is wicked.

And many of these boys were hidden and survived, like Moses and his brother Aaron, but many did not.

God has designed the universe in such a way that we have inordinate power to bless each other or curse each other

We have a crazy amount of ability to help one another thrive and flourish or to do damage and diminish one another

Pharaoh takes that power and uses it to kill new born babies.

So the LORD says to Pharaoh: you want to pretend to be God and deal in judgment and death?

I will show you who has the final power and who has the final authority to judge and to decide who will live and who shall die

God is going to give Pharaoh this last, horrific sign that HE is the Lord, not Pharaoh, and then Pharaoh will let God's people go.

One of Steve Tamayo's favorite phrases that has stuck with me as we've worked together over the past several months is "evil always over-plays its hand" (repeat)

In their wickedness, the kings of Egypt have over-played their hands to assume authority to deal in death and judgment—especially over God's people

And so God is going to pronounce one final "NO" over the authority of Pharaoh, he's going to show him who the Lord over death and judgment actually is

so that Pharaoh and all of Egypt might know the answer to the great question: "Who is the LORD?"

Now some of you have no problems with this: God is God, he can do what he wants, it's his creation, it's his authority!

But others of you and I'm here with you really struggle deeply with the comprehensive nature of this—every firstborn, really? Is all this really necessary?

Even the firstborn son of the female slave who has no power or authority in this situation to do anything about it?

If God wanted to set his people free, couldn't he have done it some other way?

And to those of us who struggle with all of this, I want to invite you along with me into an honest and good struggle and wrestling—asking God these good and important questions, he can handle it

There is mystery here, and on this side of eternity
there are always going to be things that God either does or God allows to happen in biblical history and in our lives that we're just not going to fully be able to explain away or understand

And we don't like mystery or ambiguity, it makes us uncomfortable, and so one of the things that Christians sometimes foolishly do is try to take away all the mystery and tie up all the loose ends

And so this morning I want to suggest BOTH that wickedness is a real thing and that God is doing this to combat and answer the wickedness of Pharaoh

This is not random, it's not just vindictive or strictly angry and vengeful

AND at the same time there are things about what God does here that are hard to come to terms with in terms of who pays the price for it

And I want to invite you into the mystery and tension of both of those things.

God is good, just, trustworthy, faithful and good—and at the same time he's not your imaginary friend who you can control or tell what to do or how to do it

And the invitation for us as we wrestle with the goodness of God in the midst of the pain he inflicts on the Egyptians here
is to wrestle faithfully before the mystery of who this God is and how he does and doesn't act all throughout history, including here in this story

Because chances are you've got times in your story, just like I've got times in my story, where I wonder what God was up to

Where we wonder what God was doing or why he wasn't doing something about a situation for us or for a friend that leaves us confused, hurt, or struggling

And someone in my small group summed it up really well when we looked at this the other night:

Sometimes we're in the midst of something very hard but then in hindsight you look back and it all makes sense. That's a relief, right? Oh, now I see what God was up to there.

But not always, right? That doesn't always happen.

What we get is enough things that make sense to give us the signs that we can trust God

even when what he's doing or not doing doesn't make sense to us and even when we don't see it.

That's pretty wise, I should probably just bring my small group up here and let them speak instead of me!

There are these things about God's activity that we don't understand

And we don't get formulas in the Bible that explain it all; the Bible isn't a sit-com with every loose end tied up in 26 minutes.

What we get are stories in the Bible; stories of God's faithfulness to his people, stories of God's activity for his people
sometimes amazing, generous, wonderful, miraculous rescues and we say "YAY" for that God and for those stories

AND sometimes in that same Bible we get stories where God acts in ways that are hard for us to understand OR stories where God DOESN'T act at all...and we wonder why he doesn't.

And the invitation through all of it is to enter into this mystery and wrestle with it faithfully with the God of the universe
who is both very near to us and at the same time much, much bigger than we are.

And as another person in my small group said, the road eventually forks in her own life with either I trust God or I don't.

God is going to strike dead every first born son in Egypt—that's one layer to this story.

But at another level, here's what God is up to with his own people

Here we're in Exodus 12 just after Moses has told Pharaoh what's about to happen to him, here is God speaking to Moses and his brother Aaron we're going to read excerpts from this passage:

² "This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year.

³ Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb^[a] for his family, one for each household... ⁶ Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. ⁷ Then they are to take

some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs...

12 “On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. [we talked about that last week: how God was judging the gods of Egypt through these plagues and showing them who the Lord really was—in fact, here it is again!:] I am the Lord.

13 The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

14 “This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord—a lasting ordinance.

Somewhere over the past 40 years or so, children’s birthday parties have gone from a few friends with some cake

To a billion dollar industry requiring months upon months of planning, preferably including pyrotechnics and a three-ring circus with live lions and an appearance by Barney himself

These people have been in slavery for a LONG years. They’re not really their own nation yet, they’re just a bunch of people in slavery

And so what you get right here is the beginning of God forming this nation for himself. And he’s starting by giving them a new calendar
and in a few chapters your going to get this new nation’s baseline legislation in the 10 commandments

All of this is brand new for this group of people who have never known anything other than oppression for several generations

And this event that he’s about to do is like the birthday of this nation. They came into Egypt a family, they’re going to leave a nation

God’s work to set his people free is the first day of the first month of their new year—this Passover event is going to be their birthday celebration!

And the birth of this nation is going to take place amidst much pain and agony going on all around them

But they will be protected by what? The blood of the lamb.

The blood of the lamb on their doorposts will be a sign to the angel of death to pass-over this house and not strike anyone dead

That's where the name "Passover" comes from—this blood covering that protects them from death

This blood both protects them from death and at the same time is symbolic of the power of death that's going to be the event that propels them out of slavery

Blood both protects them from death while at the same time the God who has the power over death uses that power to propel his people out of slavery and into freedom

Death is unleashed by the power of God but it is also boundaried by the power of God

it is a tool in his hand in this instance to further his purposes of freeing his people AND helping them to fully understand and appreciate who he is

And year in and year out, for generations to come, this is the beginning of the new year for the Israelite people

Every year they are to re-enact this whole scene and explain to their children what it means and what God did for them

So that his event would be ingrained in their culture and in their understanding and in the rhythms of their life

And sometimes the Israelites drift from God and sometimes they don't practice this Passover event

But off and on for 2,000 years or so, the Israelites celebrate this sacrifice of the lamb whose blood protects and delivers them from death

And so when John the Baptist looks at Jesus and declares over him: "Behold, the LAMB OF GOD WHO TAKES AWAY OUR SIN"

What did the people think about? This Passover lamb, this blood poured out to cover and protect them from death

On the night that Jesus was arrested and he and his friends are celebrating what? This very Passover meal instituted by God right here

And then Jesus himself takes up this story, plays the role of this lamb, sheds his blood and declares that by shedding his blood he's forgiving all our sins

God here is setting the stage with a temporary deliverance and a temporary covering so that the imaginations of his people might be ready to receive what he's going to do in Jesus about 2,000 years later

And Jesus, knowing that he's been sent to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, embraces his role as this great Passover lamb

And the invitation to all of us is to let this lamb's blood cover us, wash us, be on our hearts and our souls so that we, too, might be delivered from death

Not physical death, but something much worse--spiritual death and separation from the God who loves us and goes to great lengths to redeem us

All of that is being set into motion right here as God gives them their instructions for how to survive this night and how this night is to be celebrated and remembered as their great birth as a nation.

Here's how this story unfolds as we continue to read in Exodus 12:29:

²⁹ At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well. ³⁰ Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead.

³¹ During the night Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the LORD as you have requested. ³² Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. And also bless me."

³³ The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave the country. "For otherwise," they said, "we will all die!"...

³⁷ The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Sukkoth. There were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. ³⁸ Many other people went up with them, and also large droves of livestock, both flocks and herds.

⁴⁰ Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt^[b] was 430 years. ⁴¹ At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the Lord's divisions left Egypt. ⁴² Because the Lord kept vigil that night to bring them out of Egypt, on this night all the Israelites are to keep vigil to honor the Lord for the generations to come.

This past week in our small group after we read this whole passage I asked the question: "What characteristics of God do we see in this passage?"

And someone said, "his timing isn't our timing—430 years!!!" And the rest of the group nodded and some groaned in agreement!

And then we talked about how this story stikes us as such a mixed bag:

it's full of God's power, his authority, his fulfillment of promises, and setting people free who had been enslaved for hundreds of years

And at the same time, there's hard stuff here and there's no way around it: there were many generations of people who cried out for God to deliver them and they never saw it.

And then, of course, there's just carnage EVERYWHERE in this story

But last week we talked about how God is a good judge that we can trust that as much as we recoil at the idea of judgment, there's a good judge whom we know we can trust because he's done all he can to both judge justly and to extend mercy

This week, the invitation is to trust that in the midst of suffering, pain, and even death, we can trust this same good God

Because this God is no stranger to suffering or death. He himself has come and embraced it.

He has not only come and embraced suffering and death but he has overcome them, he has conquered them.

He has triumphed over all the suffering and all the death experienced all over the world

He is the God who is Lord over death and suffering who gets his feet dirty and his hands bloody

And the blood that covers us from death and suffering having the last word on OUR lives, is the blood he sheds on the cross to take away all our sins

But not only that, throughout the Scriptures we get the promise that the God who suffers accompanies us in our own suffering.

And over and over again, the Scriptures declare the nearness of the Lord to the broken-hearted, the suffering, those who cry out.

And sometimes we experience tangible evidence of mercy and grace and redemption.

Sometimes we are the generation that gets set free, sometimes we see healing or reconciliation or the meaning or purpose behind the hard stuff

But in this life, redemption is always temporary, it is never completely finished.

Pharaoh presumptuously assumed the role of God, and specifically as the dispenser of death

Here, God is putting Pharaoh back in his place
and here at this great moment of liberation, God who has promised his people that he would set them free delivers on that great promise
this is a new start, a new day, a new nation, a new work that on multiple levels sets things in motion and sets the stage for the full redemption and the full work that will be done in and by Jesus

And as God is judging the gods of Egypt, there is mystery and pain and heartache that we do not understand.

But God does this as the one who is close to the broken-hearted, the poor, the oppressed, the victim

And he does so as the one who will ultimately suffer and die himself in order that his blood might cover us

Two questions for us this morning:

1. What does it look like to ask for and wait for God's deliverance in places where you need it today?

The Israelites cry out for deliverance from slavery in Egypt—God hears and answers that cry, but always in his own timing

What places in your life do you feel stuck in? Where do you need help?

Could be something from the past that's still plaguing you
could be a current relationship or work environment where you're crying out for God to work or to release you or to do something new
Or just some decision you need clarity on!

Remember, God's timing and our timing are often very different!

But he invites us to both cry out and ask for him to move but then we have to DO what's so hard for so many of us which is...

2. What work of trust, faith, belief is required of you right now in the places where things don't make sense for you?

For some of you, this whole Christianity thing still doesn't make sense to you. You're here on a journey, asking the questions

And at some point you bump up against the fact that you've got all the answers you're going to get, you've just got to take that step of faith

Putting your trust in the God of the universe, believing that he suffered and died and rose again for you to rescue you from the sin that's inside all of our hearts

For others of us, we're in on this God, we love Jesus, we're walking with God as best we can BUT there's questions, there's mystery, all has not or is not going well

There's stuff we look back on a year ago, five years ago, 20 years ago, from our childhood—and it doesn't make sense, it's painful

OR maybe there's stuff happening right now in real-time, and you feel the need for a real-time God who's going to act in real-time to do something about question number one

And you're struggling to believe that God can or will do something about it. And it's hard to wait

Choosing to trust God is not just a one-time event in our lives. The life of following Jesus is a daily re-deciding to turn toward him and not away from him over and over again

It's integrated into every aspect of our lives.

This week, I want to invite us all into the liberating, life-giving work of trusting and re-trusting in the Lord who is Lord over life and death, Lord over kings and nations

And Lord over all of us—it is TRUE, whether we're trusting in it today or not, the invitation is for us to encourage one another to press in together

Holding onto Jesus with one hand while we bring our questions and the mystery of it all with us