

LESSONS FROM EXODUS
YAHWEH: THE GOD WHO IS WITH US
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What is a “Good Samaritan”? In the days of Jesus, if you had raised that question, many a Jew would have answered you, “*Good Samaritan?* What are you talking about? There is no such creature. The Samaritans are dogs.” For such a Jew, the expression “Good Samaritan” would have been an oxymoron at best and a contradiction at worst. And yet, Jesus told a story in which the hero was a compassionate Samaritan—a Samaritan who was extraordinarily good. If you recall, the story was the answer to a lawyer’s question. A lawyer asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” And by means of a parable, Jesus essentially said, “Anyone who needs your help.”

Since it was a lawyer who provoked this parable, I felt it was appropriate to go to my *Dictionary of Legal Terms*. Interestingly, there is no entry for the term “neighbor”; however, there is an entry for the term “Good Samaritan.” A “Good Samaritan” is . . .

one who renders voluntary aid without compensation to a person who is injured or in danger. There is no requirement to intervene; however, if one chooses to be a Good Samaritan, one may face liability if reasonable care is not exercised and the rescued party is further injured. Various state statutes may provide limited levels of immunity from lawsuits for the rescuer.¹

The phrase that just jumps out at me is: “*There is no requirement to intervene.*” Oh, wow! The lawyer in Jesus’ day would have loved that. I realize that, legally speaking, there is no requirement to intervene. But the whole point of Jesus’ parable is that, morally speaking, there *is* an obligation to help. This obligation is not the result of a code of law; it is the response of a compassionate life. The need of the victim moves us to show mercy.

¹Steven H. Gifis, *Dictionary of Legal Terms: A Simplified Guide to the Language of Law* (3d ed.; New York: Barron’s Educational Series, 1998), 206.

In the Old Testament, there is a Hebrew word that I want to acquaint you with this morning. The word is צַעַף (*tsa'aq*), and it means “to cry out.” Just try to say the word . . . צַעַף (*tsa'aq*) . . . it sounds like a cry. This term refers to the human cry of distress. It is both, at one and the same time, a cry of pain and a plea for help. In the story of the Good Samaritan, it is when the Samaritan *sees* the badly beaten man that he is moved with compassion and comes to the victim’s rescue. I do not know if the battered man was able to cry out or not. If he was able, then he would have צַעַף-ed (*tsa'aq-ed*) – the anguished cry of pain and the agonized plea for help. In Deut 22:24 and 27, צַעַף (*tsa'aq*) is the term used for the cry of the woman who is being raped. On the one hand, I apologize for using such a graphic example when there are so many more to choose from. On the other hand, I want you to *feel* the force of this word. It is one of the most powerful words in the Hebrew language. It is a term that is emotionally charged with moral outrage and soul-stirring passion as it denotes the anguished cry of the oppressed and the agonized plea of the helpless. It is a word that describes what must have been one of the last things done, if they were able, by the victims of the September 11th tragedy.

Ok. I have set the stage, so let’s get on with the story. Look with me to the Book of Exodus, where we will begin reading at verse 23 of chapter 2. (The translations are mine.)

Years passed, and the king of Egypt died. Now the Israelites moaned from the agony of their slavery, and they cried out for help.² And their pleas for deliverance from the agony of their slavery rose up to God. God heard³ their groaning, and God remembered⁴ His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God looked upon⁵ the Israelites, and God felt concern for them.⁶

Now Moses was shepherding the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, a priest of Midian, and he drove the flock deep into the wilderness, when he came to the mountain of God, Horeb. Suddenly, the messenger of Yahweh appeared to him as a blazing fire in a thornbush. He stared in amazement: the thornbush was engulfed in flame but none of it was destroyed! Moses said to himself, “Holy

² צַעַף (*za'aq*)—by-form of צַעַף (*tsa'aq*).

³ שָׁמַע (*shama*’).

⁴ זָכַר (*zakhar*).

⁵ רָאָה (*ra'ah*).

⁶ יָדַע (*yada*’).

Smokes! I have got to go over and take a look at this incredible sight. Why is the thornbush not burning up?”

When Yahweh saw that He had caught Moses’ attention, God called to him from out of the thornbush, saying, “Moses! Moses!” Moses replied, “Here I am.” Then He said, “Do not come any closer! Remove your sandals from your feet, because the place on which you are standing, it is holy ground.” Next He said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” When Moses heard this, he hid his face in his hands because he was afraid to look toward this God.

Yahweh continued, “I have seen clearly the humiliation of My people in Egypt, and I have heard⁷ their cry for deliverance⁸ from their harsh slave-drivers. Yes, I am aware of⁹ their suffering. And so, I have come down to snatch them from the power of the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land gushing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now, take note of this: the outcry¹⁰ of the Israelites has reached Me, and I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh, and you will free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt.”

But Moses answered God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should free the Israelites from Egypt?” God immediately replied, “The point is, I AM¹¹ with you. And this will serve as proof that I have sent you: When you have freed the people from Egypt, you will return here to worship God at this very mountain.”

Then Moses asked God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites, and I tell them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What can HE do?’ [lit.: ‘What is his name?’]—What am I to say to them?” And God answered Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.”¹² He continued, “You tell the Israelites, ‘I AM¹³ has sent me to you.’” God said still more to Moses: “You tell the Israelites, ‘Yahweh,¹⁴ the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob has sent me to you.—

This is My name forever,
the name by which I am to be remembered for all generations”
(Exod 2:23-3:15).

Words fail me as I attempt to communicate to you the force and the feeling of Exod 2:23-25. In just three verses, there is a fivefold reference to God. Four terms give voice

⁷שָׁמַע (shama’).

⁸צָעַק (tsa’aq).

⁹יָדַע (yada’).

¹⁰צָעַק (tsa’aq).

¹¹אֶהְיֶה (’ehyeh).

¹²אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (’ehyeh ’asher ’ehyeh).

¹³אֶהְיֶה (’ehyeh).

¹⁴יְהוָה (YHWH).

to Israel's suffering: "moaned," "cried out for help," "pleas for deliverance," and "groaning." Four verbs express God's response: "heard," "remembered," "looked upon" [lit.: "saw"], and "felt concern" [lit.: "knew"]. When God "hears," He responds. When God "remembers," He acts. When God "sees," He begins to be moved with compassion. And when God "knows," He feels the pain of those suffering. To catch God's ear and eye—to use one of the Bible's anthropomorphic phrases—is to be able to expect God's help. At this point in the narrative, the question that confronts the reader is: What will God do? What will happen now?

Well . . . what happens now is that we are brought before a burning bush that does not burn up. It has been suggested that the self-sustaining fire that requires no substance for its existence or perpetuation is a representation of God's presence. Furthermore, the bush that remains intact in the face of the flames may be symbolic of the Israelites surviving the Egyptian oppression. As much as I would dearly like to talk more about this bush, we must move on to verses 7-10 of chapter 3.

I simply cannot over-impress upon you the immense importance of these verses. While the last two verses of chapter 2 give us the report concerning what God is doing, these verses—3:7-10—give us the direct speech of God. *This is the first word of God in Exodus and it both sets all that follows into motion and reveals the kind of God it is who acts in the events that follow.* I need to repeat this point: *This is the first word of God in Exodus and it both sets all that follows into motion and reveals the kind of God it is who acts in the events that follow.* God hears the cry of the Israelites and He intervenes to save them not because He happens to be in a good mood and not because of any legal obligation, but because He is touched by their cry of distress. God chooses not to remain safe and secure in some heavenly home, but intimately involves Himself in the sorrows of the world. And yet, while God suffers with His people, God is not powerless in the face of such suffering. However much God's work may be complicated by the sorrows of the world, God is never stymied or immobilized by His engagement with suffering. The Israelite's situation is of such a desperate character that they cannot deliver themselves. God must do for Israel what she cannot do for herself. Listen again to the very words spoken by the LORD God:

I have seen clearly the humiliation of My people in Egypt, and I have heard their cry for deliverance from their harsh slave-drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. And so, I have come down . . . (Exod 3:7-8a).

“I have come down.” Those words give me goose bumps. Perhaps we are more familiar with these words in connection with God’s coming down on Mount Sinai to enter into a covenant with Israel. But prior to His coming to deliver the Law, He came to deliver His people. Grace precedes Law. (By the way, these words from God are foundational to understanding prayer. The nature of the outcry is such that God obligates Himself to respond. He cannot hear the cry and *not* help.)

On a lighter note, observe the words of Moses as he responds to God. He begins with “Here I am” which becomes “Who am I?” which turns into “Who are you?” Humorous . . . but oh so human. Ultimately, the question becomes not “Who is Moses?” but “Who is *with* Moses?” And that brings us to verse 14, one of the most puzzled over verses in the entire Bible.

The name of God—what is it? The most common translation is “I AM WHO I AM.” Other translations include: “I AM THAT I AM,” “I AM THE ONE WHO ALWAYS IS,” “I WILL BE WHO/WHAT I WILL BE,” “I WILL CAUSE TO BE WHAT I WILL CAUSE TO BE,” and—this would be my preference, if I must choose—“I WILL BE WHO I AM / I AM WHO I WILL BE.” Then in verse 15 we are given the personal divine name “Yahweh [יהוה] – YHWH.” “Jehovah” is an artificial form of this name, and most modern translations use the word “LORD”—spelled with capital letters—to stand for the divine name. Whatever else may be the meaning, there is an attempt in these verses to explain the name Yahweh on the basis of the verb יהי - *hayah*—which means, “to be.” Perhaps the most fruitful approach for understanding God’s name is to examine the context in which the name is given. In 3:12, God says to Moses, “I will be with you.” Then in 3:17, God declares, “I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt.” God reassures Moses in 4:12 and 15 with these words: “I will be with your mouth.” Finally, in 6:7 God promises, “I will be your God.” Ok, let’s take a stab at some sort of solution. Here is, I believe, the essence of what is being said: *I will be God for you*. The force is not simply that God is or that God is present, but that God will be faithfully God for Israel. God’s name is rooted in the reality of God’s presence and God’s power: *I am with you; I will help you*. Yahweh – the very name is a promise of God’s presence and

God's power. Yahweh – the very name proclaims that God is with us and that God will help us. And we should respond saying, "Hallelujah!" Which exclamation comes from the Hebrew *hallelu*—"to praise"—and *yah*—the shortened form of Yahweh.

Hallelujah!—Praise Yahweh!

How does the New Testament, in the form we have it, begin? With the Gospel of Matthew. And what do we find at the beginning of that Gospel? Matt 1:23—

"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means, '*God with us.*'" (NIV).

And how does Matthew's Gospel end? Matt 28:18-20—

Then Jesus came to them [the eleven disciples] and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" (NIV).

Maybe we should scratch-off the words "Holy Bible" from our Bibles, and maybe we should write, instead, "I am with you; I will help you." From front cover to back cover, that is the story of Scripture. Yahweh—Jesus—the promise of God's presence and God's power.

There is a well-known piece of writing that has been around for some time. It has made its way to many cards and many plaques. I am sure that most, if not all, of you will recognize it.

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand: one belonging to him, and the other to the Lord.

When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it: "Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me."

The Lord replied: "My son, my precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you." (Mary Stevenson 1922-1999).

Yahweh: the God who is with us. The question for you and for me is not, “Who am I?” No, it is, “Who is *with me*?” For it is the One who is with me that makes me who and what I am.

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