

LESSONS FROM EXODUS
YAHWEH: THE GOD I HAVE DISCOVERED
Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road
Plymouth, Michigan 48170
Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 01.06.2002

I am on a quest, and I invite each of you to join me. No, I am not searching for the magical unicorn or the magnificent city of Atlantis or even the marvelous Holy Grail. I am on a quest to see God. Since October 7th of the past year, we have studied together ten lessons from the Book of Exodus—lessons about God. Today, I will bring this series of sermons to a close as I share with you a very personal reflection entitled: *Yahweh: The God I Have Discovered*.

I am on a quest to see God, and I have seen Him. No, I have not experienced a vision of His glorious essence. However, like Moses in Exodus chapter 33, I have seen visible proof of God's glorious presence—His presence in our world, His presence in our church, and His presence in my life. I have seen, and continue to see, the glory of Yahweh; and such a sight has not left me unchanged.

When I embarked on my journey through the pages of Exodus, I did so with enthusiasm and energy. I was also very naïve, for I have found far more than I bargained for. Like a pirate who has unearthed a treasure chest on a secret island only to find that it is so massive that he cannot carry it all by himself, I have discovered a treasure that is so vast and so rich that I cannot keep it all to myself. In fact, I have discovered a treasure that grows in value as it is shared. It is my prayer that through my sermons, I have given you a glimpse of this treasure. I must confess, I have been disappointed with every single sermon. Why? Because—in the words of Pope Gregory the Great—“Almost everything said of God is unworthy, for the very reason that it is capable of being said.” After all, “if God was small enough for us to understand, He wouldn't be big enough for us to worship” (Anonymous).

There are those who characterize Yahweh—the God of the Old Testament—as a commanding deity who is often cold and cruel. For these folks, it's a good thing that

Jesus came. After all, someone needed to convert God. All I know to say is that such folks are wrong. That's all there is to it: they are wrong. What I have discovered is a powerful, purposeful, and passionate God—a God who is holy, loving, and gracious. Only such a God—Yahweh—could be the Father of Jesus Christ. So the next time you are tempted to speak unworthy words about the God of the Old Testament, just remember . . . you are talking about Jesus' Dad.

One of the things that struck me in my studies was how personal and passionate Yahweh is. The stage is set by the direct speech of God in Exod 3:7-8a:

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 . . .

Yahweh hears the outcry of the oppressed Israelites and He intervenes to save them not because He happens to be in a good mood and not because of any legal duty, but because He is touched by their cry of distress. Yahweh chooses not to remain safe and secure in some heavenly home, but intimately involves Himself in the sorrows of this world. And then we come to Exod 6:6-8:

Moses, this is what I want you to say to the Israelites: I am Yahweh. I will free you from the oppressive burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their slavery, and I will redeem you with mighty power and with marvelous acts of judgment. And I will take you to be My very own people, and I will be your God. And you will know by first-hand experience that I am Yahweh your God, the One who has freed you from the oppressive burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land which I solemnly swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, and I will give it to you as an inherited possession. I am Yahweh.

“I will free . . . I will deliver . . . I will redeem . . . I will take you”—Can you think of any, any promises more precious to the human soul? These are words spoken by a passionate and powerful God who personally sees to it that you and I can experience freedom, forgiveness, and fellowship with Him.

And then there is the matter about Yahweh being a jealous God. Exod 20:1-6:

Then God spoke all these words, saying: “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods in My presence.

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is on the earth below, or that is in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down in worship to them nor shall you serve them, because I, Yahweh your God, am the Jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generations of those who reject Me, but

lavishing loyal-love to a thousand [generations] of those who love Me and obey My commandments.”

Yahweh dares to declare that He is a jealous God. This is, in my opinion, the most personal revealing of God in the Old Testament. We see into the very inner emotions and feelings of Yahweh Himself. Yahweh’s fierce jealousy, which tolerates no rivals, is without parallel in the religious literature of the Ancient Near Eastern World. For Yahweh to call Himself a jealous God is His way of saying, “I will have nothing less than your full devotion, and you will have nothing less than all My love.”

Finally, there is the ugly episode of the golden calf. Fickle and faithless Israel has broken the covenant. Yahweh is furious, and rightfully so. To Moses Yahweh says, in Exod 33:5,

Say to the people of Israel, “You are a stiffnecked [obstinate] people. If I were to go in your midst for one moment, I would finish you off! Now, then, put off your festive dress, and I will decide what I am to do with you.”

Do you see the deeply internal struggle that is going on within Yahweh? How can He be faithful to an unfaithful people? How can a covenant-keeping God tolerate a covenant-breaking people? How can a holy God commune with an unholy people? How will a sinless God deal with a sinful people? *How in the world, for heaven’s sake, does God put up with us?* And then listen to what Moses says in Exod 34:9:

Please, if I have gained Your favor, O Lord, please, let the Lord go in our midst, even though this is a stiffnecked [obstinate] people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own possession!

Yahweh states, “I cannot dwell among Israel *because* they are a stiffnecked people.”

Moses responds, “Lord, You must dwell among Israel *because* we are a stiffnecked people.” Do you hear what is being said? Yahweh proclaims, “I cannot be with you because you are a stubborn and sinful people.” Moses pleads, “Lord, because we are a stubborn and sinful people You cannot leave us!” It is *because of* human sinfulness that God promises to stay with this world. We human beings do not deserve the divine presence or divine forgiveness. But because we are so utterly helpless and hopeless without them, God graciously grants both. Amazing . . . absolutely amazing. And so, there can be salvation for the world. There can even be salvation for the Church of Christ! We must not overlook the fact that these words were spoken *to the people of God and not to the world at large!* And let’s be honest, at times we can be as stubborn and as

sinful as anybody I know. We, yes we the Churches of Christ, need the grace of God as badly as anyone else. If we forget this, we will become snobbish and self-righteous; in other words, we will become a stiffnecked people. And if we so desperately need God's grace, it's time that we learn how to be gracious to one another. Listen to how God describes Himself in Exod 34:6:

Yahweh! Yahweh!—a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, overflowing with loyal-love and faithfulness . . .

“Loving others as Jesus loves us”—That is the vision of the Plymouth Church of Christ. We love *because* we are loved. And, we love *as* we are loved. “Others”—that's outward. “Jesus”—that's upward. “Us”—that's inward. In loving others, we hope that *they* will experience the salvation of God. In loving others, lies *our* hope of experiencing the salvation of God.

There is something else that struck me in my studies: the marvelous and yet mysterious name of God. I prefer to translate the name of God in Exod 3:14 as “I WILL BE WHO I AM / I AM WHO I WILL BE.” 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. I cling to this name; for in it, I find not only hope for this life, but also hope for a life to come. The God who is with me will not forsake me, and the God who helps me will not forget me. Yahweh—the name is unending, and so is the promise of His presence and His power. My hope is eternal for it lies in a God whose name is “I AM.”

Perhaps the part of Exodus that most touched my heart is the victory song of Moses in Exod 15. Such is the power of poetry as it attempts to express the inexpressible and to describe the indescribable. This hymn celebrates Yahweh present *with* His people and doing *for* His people as no other god anywhere and at any time *can* be present to do. This song of praise may very well be *the theological heart* of the Book of Exodus. Let's read, beginning at verse 1.

At that time, Moses and the Israelites sang this song to Yahweh, in these words:

I will sing to Yahweh, for He has vindicated Himself victoriously;
horse and chariot alike He has hurled into the sea.

My strength and my song is Yah[weh];
He is my salvation.
Such is my God, and I will enshrine Him;
the God of my father, and I will exalt Him.

Yahweh, the Warrior—
Yahweh is His name!

Pharaoh's chariots and his armies
He has cast into the sea;
the elite among his commanders
are drowned in the Sea of Reeds.

The watery abyss covered them over;
they went down into the depths like stone.

Your right hand, Yahweh—magnificent in might!
Your right hand, Yahweh—shattering the enemy!

And in the vastness of Your majesty You throw down those
who rise against You;
You unleash Your fury, it consumes them like stubble.

At the blast of Your breath the waters piled up,
the surging waters stood straight like a wall,
the watery abyss hardened in the heart of the sea.

The enemy boasted,
"I will pursue, I will overtake,
I will share the spoils;
my battle-lust will gorge itself on them.
I will bare my sword—
my hand will subdue them."

You blew with Your wind, the sea covered them over!
They sank like lead in the mighty waters!

Who is like You, O Yahweh, among the gods?
Who is like You? You who are magnificent in holiness,
awesome in praiseworthy deeds, doing that which is extraordinary!

You thrust out Your right hand,
the earth swallowed them.

With Your loyal-love, You have led the people You have redeemed.
By Your mighty power, You have guided them to the dwelling-place
of Your holiness.

The peoples have heard—they tremble.
Agony has gripped those who live in Philistia.

Now the chieftains of Edom are terrified;
the leaders of Moab, trembling has gripped them;
all who live in Canaan are aghast.

Terror and dread have fallen over them;
by the greatness of Your arm, they are struck silent as stone—
Till Your people pass by, O Yahweh,
till this people pass by whom You have ransomed.

You will bring them, and You will establish them, on the mountain
that belongs to You,
the place fixed for Your dwelling that You made, O Yahweh,
a holy sanctuary, O Lord, Your hands have firmly founded.

Yahweh reigns forever and ever! (Exod 15:1-18).

From time to time, when I want to praise God or when I want to encourage someone, I have found myself saying, “Horse and chariot alike He has hurled into the sea!” If you know Exod 15, then you know exactly what I am saying. If you don’t know Exod 15 . . . maybe that’s why some folks have sure given me a strange look! In Rev 15:3, the seven angels sing “the song of Moses . . . and the Lamb.” From the Exodus to the Cross—there you have it: the story of scripture in a song.

In Exod 5:2, in response to Yahweh’s command to release the Israelites as reported by Moses and Aaron, Pharaoh retorted, “Who is Yahweh that I Pharaoh should pay any attention to what He says and so release Israel?” Who is Yahweh that I should listen to what He says?—It seems to me that is still *the question* all human beings must answer. Whether we are talking about the Exodus from Egypt or the Cross of Christ and His Resurrection, those who do not know Yahweh raise the question: Who *is* this God that you serve? And why should *I* serve Him? Those of us who are Christians must be ready to introduce our God to those who do not know Him. Just as a proud parent welcomes the invitation to talk about their children, and just as you can’t keep a proud grandparent from talking about their grandchildren, we should be eager and excited to talk about our God. *Our God is an awesome God!*

And so, I have discovered a God that I simply cannot *not* talk about. I have also discovered that Pharaoh is still alive and well—that those who refuse to honor God, harden their hearts against God. But I must not stop talking, any more than Yahweh let Moses stop talking.

I am on a quest. I have not arrived, but I’m closer than I was. I am on a quest to see God, and I invite you to join me.

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