

EXODUS

תּוֹמַשׁ דָּבִיר

40

Exodus 4:18-31 **From Death to Life**

For almost 2000 years, churches have gathered to worship on Sunday mornings. And a 2000 year-old habit can be one of those things we get used to and can easily forget what is supposed to be happening and why we do it.

When we get together, we do so for a number of reasons. One is to see each other. The little greeting we do is a little sample of that - the church is a weekly family reunion and we hang out before and after church as well because the connections we have to each other matter.

We sing songs, and we try to focus the songs in the same place that the Psalms, the songs in the bible, are focused. On celebrating God and what He is like and what He has done, in addition to our response to that in confessing sin and rejoicing in the freedom from it He has given us.

We pray - we pray for God's grace, we pray prayers of confession, hopefully as small samples of how we pray all week long. We start and end with scripture as we're called in to worship and sent out to serve our neighbors all week.

We give - this is an important part of our worship. Whether it is through the box in the back or online or through the bank, our financial sacrifices are really just ways we generously give back to God some of what He has given to us. That's a regular observance for Christians.

And we have a strong emphasis on teaching through books of the Bible. We don't usually start with a topic we want to talk about and then address it (sometimes we do topical preaching like that, it isn't wrong, it is just rare for us.) We believe God has communicated Who He is in the Bible in the these books and stories, and we think that if we usually rearrange it when we teach, we'll miss a lot of the good that God gave us in the Bible. We'll focus on the passages that are the most familiar to the preacher, and sometimes the ones he feels best about preaching (which means he doesn't have to speak against any of his weaknesses.)

But in teaching through books, we hit topics that I wasn't eager to talk about, but that many people might need. We treat the Bible like it's God's word and must have good purposes even when we don't see them. It's an act of faith to teach through books. We just trust that it's powerful. And we are all fed the steady diet of "this is what God says."

And it isn't that we never skip texts, we sometimes do. When we get to the second half of Exodus we will fly over large pieces of real estate because the detail there doesn't lend itself to week after week preaching too readily. But we never want to skip a text because the content is too hard, too convicting, too counter-cultural, or too strange. Because we expect a book that was first written to another culture 3000 years ago to seem strange. We expect it to be hard and convicting. If it is God's word given to shape us, we can expect to be carved by some sharp instruments sometimes.

And also, I believe in the cumulative effect of Bible teaching and repeated gatherings. The goal every week is not to knock you over with emotion most of the time. I'm not trying to Benny Hinn you with the sermon this week. But I want us to feed on it week after week. And I think decades of waking up on Sundays, starting the week with worship, regular observance of the Lord's Supper, seeing baptisms, singing Gospel-centered songs, praying prayers of confession, and hearing the teaching of the word of God shapes a life. We are shaped by how we worship.

I hope there are moments of emotion along the way as we feel the weight of these things, but I have far more confidence in the cumulative effect of teaching the word of God than I have hope that today will slay you.

And some of the reason for that explanation is that we are working through the book of Exodus this year, and today we are coming to a passage that is one of the weirdest in all of the Bible. Not a passage I would choose as the most relevant for our church today, not the topic that is has been burning in your mind (hopefully), but the word of God nonetheless, written for our good.

Exodus 4:21 And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. 22 Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, 23 and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'"

This is a little strange. But it will pale in comparison to the next part. God sends Moses to Egypt with three signs to do before Pharaoh: his staff will turn into a snake, his hand will turn leprous when he puts it in his coat, and a cup of Nile water will turn to blood when poured on the ground.

Moses will do those miracles and speak to Pharaoh with the powerful promise from God that Pharaoh *will not let the people go*. God sends him into a battle and tells him he is going to lose.

So God tells Moses to tell Pharaoh that Israel is a son to God. God has a unique relationship with the Jews, a father-son relationship. And God's son is not free right now, so Pharaoh is commanded to let them go so they can serve God.

And if Pharaoh refuses and continues to oppress the son of God, God will crush the son of Pharaoh. Remember the Pharaohs had ordered that there be harsh working conditions for the Jews because their population had become too large. He was hoping Jews would die. The sons of God. So God mercifully gives Pharaoh a chance to let them go, otherwise the plan would tragically backfire and it would be Pharaoh's son that dies.

So Moses, now prepared as a leader, is sent on a great mission to rescue God's people. He is sent from Midian where he had been a shepherd for 40 years back to Egypt where he spent the first 40 years of his life. He goes with his wife Zipporah and his sons, on the mother of all missions trips to go rescue an entire people from Pharaoh's hand.

So they stop along the way, and this happens:

Exodus 4: 24 At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. 25 Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" 26 So he let him alone. It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision.

Huh.

What in the world is happening here?

First for some details. Verse 24 says God met him and sought to put him to death. We're not totally sure who "him" is. It is either Moses or his son, Gershom. It seems

more likely to be Moses since he's the only guy mentioned by name in this context, but we're not sure. We'll just call it Moses here. We know God is about to kill either Moses or his son. There is a death threat from God aimed at one of those two guys.

We also don't know what it means that the Lord sought to put him to death, and how they knew that. God doesn't seek to do things - for God to seek to put you to death means you're dead. "Our God is in the heavens, He does whatever he pleases," the scripture says. So maybe God had enacted a process that would kill him - he got sick, had a terrible fever, and wasn't getting better.

We do know that the issue here that caused God's anger is that the son of Moses wasn't circumcised. And as a result God was gonna kill somebody, so Zipporah, Moses wife, circumcises him, touches Moses feet with the foreskin, and as a result nobody dies.

Obviously a very practical passage. We could glean lots of practical marriage advice from Moses and Zipporah here. Lots of #relationshipgoals to be gleaned. (Not so much.)

How do we interpret this, and apply this? Well Jesus said this about the Bible which is the lens we use to interpret the whole Bible:

John 5:39 "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me,

The whole thing somehow is about Jesus.

Now it sure didn't look like Jesus was present in this incident between Moses and Zipporah. If this happens on the first night of the missions trip, you'd probably cancel the trip: we are obviously not spiritually ready for this endeavor. As a youth pastor, I once flew a kid home from a mission trip for far less than this. (It involved a knife, but there was no blood yet, fortunately.)

And Moses is not impressive here. He is a pretty lame spiritual leader for the people of Israel if this is his home life, it seems.

And on a surface level, that's one of the ways this passage is about Jesus. Moses is clearly not Him. He's not the final answer to humanity's problems. God calls him to go be a great savior, and on the way to do that work, he has a domestic dispute with his

wife at the Econolodge on the way there that looks far more like a bad episode of Cops than it does a page from Sunday school curriculum. (There is no flannelgraph of this story available at the Bible bookstore, and they cut this scene apparently from the Dreamworks Prince of Egypt movie.)

And with every hero in the Bible until we get to Jesus, we find ourselves horribly disappointed. Noah rescues humanity, but gets drunk and naked afterwards. Lot is righteous and rescued from Sodom and Gomorrah, but commits horrible sin on his way out. David, the great king, the man after God's own heart, commits adultery and conspires to murder. Solomon's life falls apart. Every hero disappoints until we get to Jesus.

Moses would be the great lawgiver, but this story shows that there is deficiency in Moses. And there would be a deficiency in the law. The law itself, because it was inspired by God, was perfect. But it was going to be given to sinful people whose hearts rebel against it, and so by itself wouldn't solve humanity's problems. We would need a better rescuer, a true and better Moses who would come and lead us out of our captivity to sin.

The one hero of the Bible is Jesus. It isn't Moses. And it isn't his laws. We need more than instructions and steps and strategies and commands. We need a Savior, because like Moses, we all fail to obey the commands. Even the guy who would give the laws was personally a wreck and didn't obey them. Something in his heart was still oriented against God, and the whole Old Testament points to the Savior who is coming, who isn't Moses.

And Moses made this clear. Later in his life, in Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses makes this promise,

Deuteronomy 18:15 “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—”

So Moses promised, “God is going to raise up another prophet! Listen to him!” He knew there was someone better coming. But then Moses ages and dies, and this is what it says at the end of Deuteronomy:

Deuteronomy 34:10-12 “¹⁰ And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, ¹¹ none like him for all the signs and the wonders that the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to

all his servants and to all his land, ¹² and for all the mighty power and all the great deeds of terror that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.

Moses dies, and they say, “that prophet never came.”

The whole story leaves you wanting more, a better ending, a better prophet, a better Moses. And Jesus is all that and more.

So don't hang your hopes on the perfection of any human leader. Let the leaders God has put in your life point you to Jesus, remind you of Jesus, rehearse in your ears the Gospel of Jesus again and again. Let them feed you His word and nourish your soul and speak in to your life. But don't expect them to be Jesus - if Moses disappoints, how much more will everybody we hang our hopes on.

The best, most faithful pastors, will be, at best, humble struggling sinners. The best most faithful churches will have flaws and deficiencies galore. They are there as signposts to point you to Jesus. If you're driving to Niagara Falls, and you notice that a sign that is pointing you to the falls is rusted and there's graffiti on it, you wouldn't say, “Niagara Falls must not be great.”

The best servants of Christ are rusty signposts. But Jesus is incredible.

And there's something else going on here.

The big sin that somebody is going to die for here is that Moses hasn't circumcised his son. So what? Hardly a capital offense. Why was this such a big deal? Is this just Old Testament God being petty?

The practice of circumcision mattered. It originated among the Jews originated during the time of Abraham, the “founding father” of the Jewish people. And God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. A covenant is a binding agreement with promises and obligations and a sign to symbolize it.

So, for example, God made a covenant with Noah not to destroy the world with water (that was the promise), and the sign of that covenant was the rainbow. God made a covenant with his church not to destroy us for our sin, because that sin was paid for by Jesus, and the sign of that covenant is baptism, with the Lord's Supper as another repeated sign of that covenant.

God is a God who makes covenants and keeps them. And God in Exodus is coming to his people in fulfillment of his promises to Abraham. He is keeping his covenant. His covenant name is Yahweh, and that's the name He tells Moses to call Him by at the burning bush.

And God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants promised three main things- these are in Genesis 12-15, we won't turn there now:

Descendants - Abraham would have lots of children who would have lots of children until his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Dwelling - They would live in the land of Canaan. They will own this land and order a society as a light to the world, so all other nations would see what it is like when a nation has God as its king. God promised He would actually dwell with them there.

Dynasty - They would be a great kingdom, but a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, reflecting glorious character of God to those around them.

These are huge promises, and they were promises God had sworn to Abraham that He would fulfill.

And the sign of that covenant was circumcision:

Genesis 17 9 And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. 10 This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. 12 He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, 13 both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. 14 Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

God makes these promises to Abraham and his heirs. And the sign that is put on those heirs to show they are recipients of the promise is circumcision. This is the "badge of

covenant identity.”¹ People who had received the covenant promises of God circumcised their sons on the eighth day of their lives, and when men converted in to Judaism, they received this sign.

And that was a commanded ritual up until the time that circumcision was replaced by baptism after the resurrection of Jesus. (So circumcision no longer has the same meaning or necessity for us today.)

So it was a big deal.

For us, a covenant we’re familiar with is a marriage covenant. A bride and a groom make promises to one another on a wedding day, promises that are not contingent on it all going well for us - they are binding promises. We say, “For better or for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer.” We are saying, “Regardless of what you do for me I am fully committed to you.” Those are the promises of the covenant.

And the sign of the covenant is the wedding ring.

And the ring itself isn’t magical or a big deal. It’s a small amount of gold, it doesn’t have to be expensive. When Debbie and I got married we had \$200. total to spend, so we went to a pawn shop in Springfield, MO, bought two lightly-used, non-matching, wedding rings, talked him down to \$180, and used the other \$20 to go get a real nice chinese take-out dinner. The significance isn’t in the ring itself, but the covenant it symbolizes.

When someone takes off his wedding ring, he is saying something significant about that covenant. It symbolizes the whole relationship. To take it off after an argument is astoundingly serious. Or, a man who takes off his wedding ring in certain social circles is doing something profoundly awful. He’s living outside of that covenant.

And in my house, if that were me taking off my wedding ring in certain social circles, that would certainly be a capital offense. You would never find my body.

So the issue with Moses not circumcising his son wasn’t the surgery itself - like God really cares about that surgery. What mattered was all that the surgery symbolized.

¹ Williamson, P.R. “Covenant,” Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch. Edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker. Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity, 1993. 139-155.

It symbolized the promises of God. It said that this person and all of his descendants would receive the promise. It said they were totally dependant on God to give them his grace that He had promised to Abraham. There was blood involved, that symbolized the fact that blood would have to be shed to forgive sin.

And Moses didn't circumcise his son. Which meant his son was outside those covenant blessings of God. Which meant there was some level on which Moses didn't really believe what God had promised Abraham.

Now that might have been because in Egypt, they thought circumcision was a distasteful thing. They didn't practice it at all. And maybe Moses was still clinging to some Egyptian sophistication rather than obedience to God. Maybe that practice was beneath him and he was picking and choosing what to obey.

But for whatever reason, this man who would be the one guy in the whole Old Testament to mediate and codify the covenant of God wasn't living like it was true.

Moses was the one who *wrote* Genesis 17, who wrote about how God gave that covenant to Abraham. But he wasn't obeying what he would write, he wasn't living like what he believed was true.

Which is sadly true for all of us. We believe these things, but we are all like the man who said to Jesus "I do believe, help my unbelief." We pick certain areas of obedience to cling to, and try to ignore others. We are simultaneously sinners and saints right up until we see Jesus.

So God was still working on Moses.

God could be teaching him any number of things.

- 1) The necessity that those who teach the word are faithful

1 Corinthians 4:1-2 "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful."

God has no standard of perfect for ministers and teachers. We all fall short in all kinds of ways. But there needs to be a core faithfulness in ministers, particularly when it comes to having a relationship with God, keeping covenants (being faithful to the

covenant of baptism (not rejecting Jesus), keeping the covenant of marriage (being faithful to a spouse). When God has people spread the news about His covenant, those people need to be faithful to it.

Before there can be faithful public proclamation, there needs to be private obedience. And that wasn't there in Moses yet. So God had to do some cutting.

2) God takes sin seriously

Moses would be a great lawgiver. And the penalty for breaking some of God's laws was death. Maybe this taste of death here gave Moses a real sobriety when he announced those consequences and a real sense that God is holy and doesn't mess around with sin.

When I lived in Missouri, I knew a number of people who were trying out for the police force. And at some point of the training, they would use pepper spray on the cadets so they could experience what it was like and not take it lightly. It made them not want to use it. It made them see how serious it was. And if Moses was going to be writing to us about the seriousness of sin, it would be good if he felt that too.

God wasn't different then than He is now. He still wants us to take it deadly serious when we are choosing to live in rebellion against Him in some area of life. He doesn't mess around with it.

3) He was probably teaching Moses that the only difference between Moses and Pharaoh was God's grace that He gave to Moses through His covenant with Abraham.

Look at 4:22-23 again:

Exodus 4:22 Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, 23 and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'

So Moses has to carry this threat to Pharaoh.

Which would make it real easy for Moses to feel superior to Pharaoh. This guy was going to be in God's crosshairs he was so bad, and Moses got to tell him that.

Moses would be in God's crosshairs too if it weren't for God's grace. Moses was no different than Pharaoh.

Sometimes as Christians we build a narrative for ourselves where we think we are the good guys and they out there are the bad guys. It is us versus the world, we're good, they're bad. But Christians are people who have received the grace of God in Jesus, not people who on their own are morally superior.

So our enemies are people like us.

But whatever lessons there were for Moses, God was very harsh with him in teaching them to him. But in the end it was all to save Moses's life.

Sometimes the way God saves us from ourselves looks like killing us.

The loss of the job that is agony but frees you from an idol.

The failure in college that is such a let-down, but reminds you of the only permanent identity you have in Christ.

The exposure of your sin that is so embarrassing, but that reminds you and everybody around us that we have no hope but Jesus.

The loss of a relationship that all of your hopes were wrapped up in, that had become like a god to you, that shaped your priorities, your morals, and your beliefs more than God's word did.

Politics not going the way we want them to go, reminding us that our hope isn't in the kingdoms of this world, that it is anchored to calvary and not Capitol Hill.

The sickness that humbles us. The broken relationships that frustrate us. We wonder if the Lord is seeking to kill us.

But for the children of the covenant, those under the blood of Jesus, He is only always saving our lives. Anytime it looks like God is killing Christians, He is only always saving us. The knives he applies to our lives are always the scalpel of a skilled surgeon, not the attack of a murderer. One already died for us.

So God spares Moses.

One obvious tool God used to spare Moses' life was his faithful wife, Zipporah. Zipporah is the latest in a long line of women that rescue Moses. The Hebrew midwives, Moses' mother, Pharaoh's daughter, and now Moses' wife. God uses faithful women all throughout this story.

And a faithful wife is such a huge blessing. God created Eve as Adam's helpmeet. And we read that through a cynical lens that sees it as demeaning toward women because "she's the helper." But when my children were small, I helped them tie their shoes. I helped them walk. I was able to help because I was strong where they were weak. I'm good at walking, and they weren't.

And faithful wives who are strong when their husbands are weak, who will bring correction to him when it's needed (hopefully not quite as dramatically as in this story), who are walking with God when his faith gets weak, who are sensitive to sin when he becomes numb to it - that is so often the help we need.

Even in this story, there are many good lessons. But remember, this is all primarily about Jesus.

So look at the symbolism here.

Moses has sinned. So he is as good as dead. God is seeking to kill him. You don't recover from that.

But blood is shed, and touched with the blood of another, Moses is forgiven and revived.

This is what happens to us when we come to faith in Jesus.

We are dead in our trespasses and sins. We are hopeless. We are under a death sentence from God that you just don't get out of.

But the Son of God came, died for us, and His blood makes us righteous. He was cut off though we deserved to be. We believe in Him and repent, and we are saved by the blood He shed on our behalf.

Just as circumcision may have been a shameful thing to Moses, talk of the crucifixion of Jesus can become uncouth for us. Christians talk so much about blood, and sing songs

about blood, and who keep bringing up the violence of the crucifixion are certainly distasteful.

But it is only that thing that seems foolish, Jesus dying on a bloody cross, that saves. We don't have a sophisticated and acceptable faith, we have a very uncool one that doesn't sound smart and significant at dinner parties. It's a truth that it takes a humility to receive, that it takes faith to receive.

And the whole thing happens to us - we don't work our way to that. You don't earn anything on your deathbed. We are given eyes to see, faith to believe, God breathes in to us the breath of life and the Gospel is applied and we are saved.

And even though we didn't deserve that at all, it is ours, and we are still used by God in His mission to glorify His name around the world. That's the last part of today's story:

27 The LORD said to Aaron, "Go into the wilderness to meet Moses." So he went and met him at the mountain of God and kissed him. 28 And Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD with which he had sent him to speak, and all the signs that he had commanded him to do. 29 Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the people of Israel. 30 Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses and did the signs in the sight of the people. 31 And the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.

The road is long from the ground to glory. There are sins and failures and embarrassing incidents along the way throughout our lives. But we are headed towards worship.

Notes for Bulletin

From Death to Life
Exodus 4:18-31

- I. The Grand Mission (Exodus 4:21-23)
- II. The Grave Threat (Exodus 4:24-26)
- III. The Goal is Worship (Exodus 4:27-30)

Discussion Questions for Small Groups:

- 1) What is a covenant?
- 2) Why is a covenant between God and man significant?
- 3) In what ways has God done great good for you that was painful in the moment?
- 4) What is the role of Christian leaders in our lives? What expectations should we not have for them?
- 5) How does it change the way we read the Bible if we know it is all about Jesus?

Call to worship: Psalm 90:14-17

Exodus 4:21-23

Exodus 4:24-26

John 5:39

Deuteronomy 18:15

Deuteronomy 34:10-12

Genesis 17:9-14

1 Corinthians 4:1-2

Exodus 4:22-23

Exodus 4:27-31

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