

And God Knew Exodus 2:23-25

You may know the name Horatio Spafford. He penned *It Is Well With My Soul* in the late 1800's. It's a hymn we love to sing here at South Woods and we're certainly not alone in that love among the Protestant world. The hymn's usage appears across multiple denominations. It has memorable musical appeal. It offers a theological feast that has nourished many through the years. But perhaps one of the central allurements of the hymn is its background, which helps it to resonate deeply with many. Spafford was a man of means and a well-established Presbyterian in Chicago. In 1873 he saw his wife and four daughters off as they set sail for Europe, remaining behind to finish up some business matters before planning to join them. The ship nor many of its passengers made it to Europe. It collided with another ship on the journey. All four of his daughters perished in the accident, with the message arriving shortly after from his surviving wife, "Saved alone. What shall I do?" On his way to meet his bereaved wife in England, on a piece of stationery from a hotel back in Chicago, a crushed, grief-ridden Spafford wrote *It Is Well With My Soul*.¹ It's hard to envision Spafford not carrying that sorrow for the rest of his days.

Some burdens in my own life have never let up since the LORD brought me to Himself. Many of you could say the same. The question arises, then, "How do we keep walking in Godward trust?" Some of that comes down to expectations. Do I expect Him to serve as my personal genie, or is He the Lord who has purposes beyond my own comforts? Like a divine vending machine, should He dispense answers or blessings to me when I live in the unsaid, subconscious space of presenting my own forms of currency to Him—my goodness, my prayers, my tithes, even my most humble acts of quiet service? Far from these things, the answer to why we keep placing trust in our God is summed up by the message of book of Exodus: God has made Himself known to us. And He graciously keeps doing so. This undeserved self-disclosure by God is one of the truths emphasized by Jesus to His disciples.²

Our text today moves from displays of God's sovereign provisions on behalf of Israel, Moses, and his family to conveying stated realities about God Himself. The rapid-fire verbs in verses 24-25 offer balm to the deepest hurts in a fallen world. There are promises and truths found here which can help us all to breathe again, as they can help us to view our circumstances through an eternal lens.

As we've seen over the past three weeks, we've gone from this thing to that thing rather quickly here at the start of Exodus. From the brief mentions of Jacob and Joseph to the disturbing scene of death in Egypt; from a poignant maternal love to the common grace compassion expressed by a woman devoted to pagan worship; from a newborn experiencing a deliverance out of the deadly Nile waterways to that newborn who will grow up and happen upon his future wife, himself delivering her beside a well of water; from seeing the burden of his own people to Moses fleeing those deplorable sights, smells, and sounds to find new life—Moses now brings us to a transition which will serve to stir even further the sympathies of all who encounter this divinely inspired narrative. He's returning briefly to the sum up the larger scene, to reset the context. And as he provides it, he adds to the reader's sympathies a hopeful anticipation. God's purposes are now

¹ Leland Ryken, *40 Favorite Hymns on the Christian Life*, 79.

² John 14:21

beginning to ripen even further. His nostrils catch the pleasing scent that has wooed the LORD from the beginning of time—the scent of need and desperation.

I. A fresh administration rises to power—a persistent enemy

Verse 23, *During those many days the king of Egypt died...* As Matt mentioned last week, after the missteps of Moses in Egypt, he spent the next four decades in the Midian wilderness. This scene, however, pauses God's direct dealings with Moses to check back in on Egypt and the political situation that's transpired. It begins with information that has a short-lived facade of being good news. The cruel ruler who once sought to eradicate Hebrew, infant boys, as if they were no more than pesky street rats, he is now dead. The rumor quickly became fact among the people of Israel. But hope of relief, bouncing expectantly from house to house in Goshen soon died off, as nothing changed with the new Egyptian administration. *During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help.*

Many of us have been around long enough to observe that a change in power often means a change in policies. Somebody can always do it better, and if not better, they'll at least do it different to give the appearance of improvement. But in this circumstance, a change in Egyptian slave-policy, regardless of renewed hopes, never came. The status quo of man-theft and oppression remained. It had become institutionalized, imbedded into Egyptian culture as a means to many Egyptian-centric ends.

What did this mean for Moses? The text here doesn't give us commentary answering that question, but surely the death of the Pharaoh seeking Moses' life is a significant development in the storyline. God makes the point to Moses in chapter 4 that all who were seeking his life were dead.³ Backing up to the beginning of chapter 3, Moses is placed once again at the heart of what God was doing. God is attentive to Israel in these verses, and next week we will see God relaying the pain of Moses' own people to Moses' own ears.

The grave has now received this Pharaoh, lord of this type of underworld called Egypt. The one so eager to control his own surroundings by edicts of death has now, like everyone else, succumbed to it. But the true God over all, life only Author, is now poised to act for His glory, using the natural means of Pharaoh's last breath to further His own aims towards His people, who are the apple of His eye.⁴

II. A fatigued cry for help rises to God—a groaning people

Look at the end of verse 23, *Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God.* Moses does not circle in the clouds, flying over the pain so debilitating and surreal to these peoples. He's interested in speaking to this dark space of Israel's history. He doesn't speed on ahead to the victorious parts of God's providence. As we take in this story, perhaps it's good that we, in some sense, lose our way with them. That we might pay closer attention to a people who have long since dared to offer to Almighty God questions of "Why?" "How long?" and "Will you not...?" We are meant to feel the stabbing pains with these exiled peoples, to envision those fresh Exodus scrolls dampened by

³ Exodus 4:19

⁴ Deuteronomy 32:10, Zechariah 2:8

the somber, grateful tears of Moses himself. If we fail to grasp the whelming flood of bitter sorrow, then the eventual triumph will be stripped of some of its nourishing sweetness. The Moses of God and the God of Moses intend for us to sample the bitter, visceral, multi-generational strains of being considered less than dispensable cogs inside the engine of a heartless and pulseless nation.

So, this cry for rescue **came up to God**. The image that this phrase invokes is that of priestly world. It takes us to a place like Psalm 141:2, “*Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!*” Considering what we have through Christ, we can extend this idea even further. Revelation 5:8 explicitly states, “*The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.*” Just as the cries of Israel **came up to God**, the cries and groanings of the church of the Lord Jesus rise like the smoke of the incense. But the eventual unfolding of the plan of God for Israel, playing out in the wilderness wanderings, was to establish a picture of the acceptance of their prayers, which would foreshadow our own. In Leviticus 16 we read, “*And [the priest] shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the LORD, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it inside the veil [13] and put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die.*” Atonement, from the altar, was the means by which God would hear these cries to the Lord for mercy and help and forgiveness. Prayer rises to acceptance solely out of atonement, specifically the sacrificial, atoning work of Christ for His true people. Those prayers of desperate faith in Exodus 2 were applied forward on the same basis we enjoy today.

Their slavery was long in human terms, to say the least, and describing it as taxing would be an understatement. The children of Israel were desperate for relief. They needed a rock higher than them, a refuge, and a strong tower against these enemies who stripped them of dignity and struck them with death.⁵

III. A faithful God rises to respond—an attentive LORD

[24] And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. [25] God saw the people of Israel—and God knew. If you hear anything else I’ve preached today and it benefits you in some way, I’ll praise the LORD for that. But dear brothers and sisters, I would pray most earnestly for you to sink the whole of your life into these two verses. Moses briefly moves away from his own life details to put on display the paternal heart of the sovereign LORD. This LORD, who had drawn Moses from snaking Nile and snatched him from the venomous bite of Egypt’s king, is showing concern for the whole of Israel. We see this in the four verbs in these verses.⁶

First, God **heard**. What did he hear? He heard **their groaning** and their **cry for rescue**. I know not all the roads each of you have been down, but there is a place in suffering where it seems like another step can’t be taken. You’ve run dry of the best laid prayers, and all that you kept saying in those moments was, “Lord. Lord!” You seemingly are dragging yourself, weighed down by sin, circumstance, or the state of things that just aren’t right, and you vacillate between uttering only

⁵ Psalm 61:1–3, “*Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer; from the end of the earth I call to you when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I, for you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy.*”

⁶ T. Desmond Alexander, AOTC: Exodus, 71.

God's name, to weeping, and back again. And whatever sounds your mouth or simply your soul are producing, please take heart. God hears His peoples' miseries and concerns.

Second, He **remembered**. This idea of God remembering could carry some connotations that might make us somewhat uncomfortable, right? If my wife praises me for remembering something important, you just need to know that she's doing that because I typically am sent to Kroger to get four items and only come back with three of them. In recent years, she's learned to text me a list with the grand hopes that I'll actually look at said list, which becomes yet another shining opportunity for forgetting. It's become comic relief in our home. But this phrase **God remembered** doesn't in any way imply such failings.

The Holy Spirit is the very kind Author of scripture, and I say that because He has spoken to us through the human pen in ways that connect us to our humanity. John Calvin uses an image that's helpful. He wrote in his *Institutes*, "For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is [inclined]...to 'lisp' in speaking to us? Thus, such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like, [but such speaking] accommodates the knowledge of Him to our slight capacity. To do this He must descend far beneath His loftiness."⁷ Sane nurses don't talk about quantum physics to newborns at the labor and delivery ward at Germantown Methodist. How do they talk to them? Well, gently, and with that all-too common infant dialect known as *goo-goo-ga-ga*. God has given us words that resonate with the human experience. Being creatures that recall what once was, God does the same. Moses uses the imagery of remembering to help us feel the weight of 430 years. On the heels of a long bondage experienced in a foreign land, **remember** carries a punch we should feel. No, God does not forget what is past but is faithful to recall and act upon His past promises.

So, what did He remember? **His covenant with Abraham**. God determined it was time to honor the terms of His covenant made with the patriarch.⁸ In that covenant He declared that Abraham would possess land, offspring, blessing, and a relationship with the living God.⁹ All of these things were missing realities for Israel in Exodus 2, but the tide of these things would soon turn because God was faithful to His word. God was and is faithful to the glory of His name, and He is faithful to His immovable decree to bless the whole world through a single Man rising out of this nation, of which you and I are unworthy recipients. God **remembered**.

Then, verse 24 says that He **saw**. It's one thing to hear and not see. From a human perspective, we could misconstrue all kinds of things by simply hearing of matter without seeing the matter unfold. And, it's another thing altogether to see but not hear. The full picture is surely hidden when the words of others are mute or indistinguishable. But to both see and hear without the proper context? That could compound the confusion even more. Yet, to see, hear, and recall all that's gone before a matter, all that's being brought to bear on the current interactions—that's another level of understanding. Beloved, here God tells us that He, the universe's LORD and Creator, hears even Israel's groanings.¹⁰ Further, He sees all that is happening to His children, all the subterranean things occurring on the heart level of His people—all the heartache, all the disappointments, all the weariness.

⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin's Institutes: Book I, Chapter 13*, 110.

⁸ Douglas Stuart, *NAC: Exodus*, 103.

⁹ Genesis 12, 15, 18.

¹⁰ This same God moves the apostle Paul to express that our own groanings, too deep for words, are heard by Him in Romans 8:26.

But lastly, as the people cried out to God, the text ends with *And God knew*. This is the crowning jewel of these divine veracities. *Knew* here signifies an intimate knowledge rooted in relationship. It speaks to a comprehensive awareness, with nothing sneaking past God's exhaustive understanding.

The sighs and cries heard, the sufferings seen, the prior covenant commitment remembered, and the thoroughgoing knowledge of the omniscient LORD, they all speak to the breadth, length, height, and depth of a love which surpasses our full comprehension. It's the most attentive posture with the most tender care. But it's a mistake to believe that it was solely those sighs and the groanings which caused the earth's LORD to "kick things into gear." That's not what's happening. He was already at work. It was God blessing families, God protecting midwives, and God frustrating this dictator of death. This grief, though moving to God the Father, doesn't force God's hand to actually love them. From eternity He has loved a people for His own possession. Why is it that God drew near at this juncture in history, to hear, to see, to appeal to previous promises, and to intimately know with a resolve to rescue? Worthiness? Accrued merit? Because the wounds ran deeper this time, or because the wailing had reached a particular decibel? No. He chooses to draw near fundamentally because of His covenant promise. He loved a people hundreds of years before Exodus. He loved these exiled peoples while they languished, and He loves the exiles in this sanctuary that are bearing weighty burdens even as I speak this morning.

Conclusion

It's difficult to bury that itch to know the reasons for our trials or at least gain some kind of bearing and direction inside them. And the Bible invites and allows for such wrestlings. How many of the Psalms give voice to us when we can't see straight? Yet, because we sometimes don't know where to draw the line in our inquiries, we must train ourselves to allow those Psalms and other scriptures to guide our thoughts and feelings. Yes, let your petitions rise to the Lord, expressing your unyielding difficulties. Mouth your struggle. Admit your weakness. Acknowledge that it's confusing and you can't figure it all out. Sit in the presence of your heavenly Father with nothing but groans and sighs. But the moment you begin to look away from God in Christ and begin to say things like, "It's not going to get better. It's hopeless. I'm alone." If those spring out from your heart, then find a mirror and begin arguing with yourself. Start stating what is true. "I will be raised with Christ. He has saved me to the uttermost—saved by Christ's death two millennia ago, saved from my own sin in the present, and I will be saved on the Day when every eye shall see Jesus arrayed with omnipotence and glory. His righteousness is my only standing before a thrice holy LORD. The darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining. These tears are being bottled up, and one day they will all be wiped away. They never goes unnoticed.¹¹ Mourning—poof. Pain—good riddance. Say it, believe it, hide it deep within—God hears, sees, remembers, and knows."¹²

What does it mean in the present age that God hears, sees, remembers, and knows? It means a virgin woman giving birth to a Son, a Son who is ever able to save all who truly cry to Him for

¹¹ Stuart, 104.

¹² And if this preaching to yourself is not finding the mark of relief, grind through the embarrassment or whatever insecurities you might be experiencing and find a brother or sister, invite them into your misery, anticipate tears, and pour out your heart before God and that saint.

mercy.¹³ It means that through His suffering at the cross our own suffering will eventually be overcome and undone. ¹⁴ It means that God’s saving arm through the work of Jesus is able to rescue from something far worse than physical slavery. It means that if You come to know His great love by repenting of your sin and believing Christ Jesus paid the penalty for your sin, then you, too, will have the most attentive Father, who hears your pain, sees your life, remembers His promise to provide all you need for life and godliness. And you will be able to say, not merely “it is well with my soul” in your darkest moments, but you’ll have a foundation for saying and singing that in those dark moments: “*And God knew.*”

¹³ As one scholar observed, “God does not remain safe and secure in some heavenly abode, untouched by the sorrows of the world. He is not a typical monarch dealing with the issues through subordinates or at some distance. God knows it from the inside...” (T.E. Fretheim, *Suffering God and Sovereign God in Exodus: A Collision of Images*, HBT: 11:31-56). And how’s God “know” it from the inside? His very own Son, the Suffering Servant LORD.

¹⁴ Timothy Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering*, 163.