

CHAPTER 4: Exodus 2 thru 18

As we noted last time, Pharaoh is evil. His actions are what we defined as “bottom line” – he is going against God’s plan for His covenant people, the Israelites. God promised Abraham 450 years before that his descendants to become a great nation through whom God would bless the world. If Pharaoh’s plan succeeds, it will prevent the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise to Abraham (and later repeated to Isaac and Jacob and his sons). So then, Pharaoh’s plan must not and cannot succeed. God will have to intervene and soon.

We focus now on one Hebrew family living in Egypt. **A man from the household of Levi married a woman who was a descendant of Levi.** (Exodus 2:1) Levi was one of Jacob’s 12 sons. So this couple is part of God’s covenant people. They are Israelites.

The woman became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a healthy child, she hid him for three months. But when she was no longer able to hide him, she took a papyrus basket for him and sealed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and set it among the reeds along the edge of the Nile. (Exodus 2:2-3) This Israelite woman defies Pharaoh’s evil order and takes decisive action to protect her newborn son. She waterproofs a basket, places her son in it and sets it afloat along the banks of the Nile River.

Pharaoh’s daughter sees the basket floating near her. She opens it up and looks inside and sees a baby boy crying -- **and she felt compassion for [the baby] and said, “This is one of the Hebrews’ children.”** (Exodus 2:6) Pharaoh’s daughter takes the baby boy into the palace and raises him as her own son. She names the little boy Moses. As part of God’s plan, Moses’s biological mother is chosen by Pharaoh’s daughter to be his nurse.

And so it is that this Hebrew boy Moses, one that Pharaoh had tried to do away with, ends up being raised in Pharaoh’s own royal household at Egypt’s expense. Moses receives the best education in all the land and at the same time he has the godly influence of his own mother.

Well, time passes...

In those days, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and observed their hard labor, and he saw an Egyptian man attacking a Hebrew man, one of his own people. (Exodus 2:11) Even though he has grown up in Pharaoh’s

palace, Moses is aware that the Hebrews are “his people.” He knows this probably from the influence of his mother.

He looked this way and that and saw that no one was there, and then he attacked the Egyptian and concealed the body in the sand. (Exodus 2:12) Moses ends up killing the Egyptian.

When he went out the next day, there were two Hebrew men fighting. So he said to the one who was in the wrong, “Why are you attacking your fellow Hebrew?” The man replied, “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Are you planning to kill me like you killed that Egyptian?” Then Moses was afraid, thinking, “Surely what I did has become known.” (Exodus 2:13-14) Moses realizes that he has been found out and is in big trouble!

Sure enough, when Pharaoh receives news that Moses has killed an Egyptian man, he becomes very angry and seeks to kill Moses. Moses flees from Egypt and settles in the land of Midian. He takes up residence with Jethro, the priest of Midian. Jethro employs Moses to tend his sheep and it is there in the wilderness Moses that remains for years. He becomes very close to Jethro’s family and eventually marries his daughter.

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, the oppression of the Israelites continues. In fact, it gets a lot worse. The people cry out to God for deliverance from their suffering. **God heard their groaning, God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the Israelites, and God understood...** (Exodus 2:24-25)

Fast forward 40 years... Moses is out in the wilderness tending the sheep. It is just another day on the job. Suddenly Moses sees the most amazing sight – a bush on fire and yet the bush is not consumed! Moses moves in closer to get a better look and to try and figure out what is going on with this bush.

When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him from within the bush and said, “Moses, Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.” God said, “Do not approach any closer! Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.... I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Then Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. (Exodus 3:4-6)

God tells Moses His plan to deliver His oppressed people the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage. He will bring them **“to a land that is good and spacious... flowing with milk and honey.”** (Exodus 3:8)

“And now indeed the cry of the Israelites has come to Me, and I have also seen how severely the Egyptians oppress them. So now I will send you to Pharaoh to bring My people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:9-10)

Moses is less than enthusiastic. He responds by giving God all the reasons why he is not qualified to be the deliverer. **Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh or that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”** (Exodus 3:11) God responds by promising Moses that He will be with him.

Moses said to God, “If I go to the Israelites and tell them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you’ and they ask me, ‘what is His name?’ -- what should I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM that I AM...” (Exodus 3:13-14) This is a very significant statement. For the first time ever the God of Creation, the one true and living God reveals His holy name. “I AM” – it is in the present tense indicating that God is eternal and not bound by time.

And He said, “You must say this to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you... 15 The Lord – 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 and this is My memorial from generation to generation.” (Exodus 3:14-15)

God then promises Moses that he will be successful in delivering God’s people out of Egypt.

Well, Moses argues with God. He raises several objections and God counters each one. Finally God becomes angry with Moses for his unwillingness to do what He is calling him to do. Moses IS God’s man! HE is the one God has chosen for this job. At Moses’s request God allows his brother Aaron to accompany him on his mission to Egypt. Aaron will serve as Moses’s mouthpiece, but God will speak directly to Moses.

God tells Moses precisely what is going to happen. Moses will perform various miracles before Pharaoh that God empowers him to do. **The Lord said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the wonders I have put under your control. But I will harden his heart and he will not let the people go.”** (Exodus 4:21)

It will appear as though Pharaoh is resisting Moses by not releasing the Israelite people. But God assures Moses that Pharaoh’s continued resistance will only serve to bring greater glory to God. Eventually God will strike dead Pharaoh’s oldest son. This will be the catalyst to get God’s covenant people out of Egypt. So then, God reveals to Moses exactly the way it will all play out.

So what does it mean that God will “harden Pharaoh’s heart”? In the early encounters between Moses and Pharaoh we are told that Pharaoh’s heart grew hard. In an apparent act of Pharaoh’s own free will he resists God repeatedly – the demands to let the Israelite people go. But Pharaoh’s resistance does not take God by surprise.

In response to Pharaoh hardening his heart God sends five plagues upon the land of Egypt. Each plague is directed at Pharaoh and one of the false Egyptian gods. Rivers, ponds and reservoirs turn into blood; frogs, gnats, then flies throughout the land; disease upon livestock, horses and flocks. But none of the Israelites’ livestock died. Each time Moses gives Pharaoh an opportunity to do what is right, to do what God says and let the Israelites go. And each time Pharaoh hardens his heart.

Pharaoh digs in his heels. He ignores God’s demands. His evil escalates. So God sends four more plagues. Boils cover the Egyptian people; severe hail falls on the land destroying crops; swarms of locusts everywhere; thick darkness over the land of Egypt for three days. But the Israelites have light where they live. **But the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he was not willing to release them.** (Exodus 10:27) We begin to see now that GOD hardens Pharaoh’s heart. God uses Pharaoh’s evil to fall in line with God’s sovereign purpose. After nine terrible plagues Pharaoh still refuses to release the Israelites on God’s terms.

Pharaoh gets so upset and frustrated that he threatens Moses and Aaron. **Pharaoh said to [Moses], “Go from me! Watch out for yourself! Do not appear before me again, for when you see my face you will die!” Moses said, “As you wish! I will not see your face again.”** (Exodus 10:28-29)

God is finished negotiating with Pharaoh. He is about to render His final judgment upon Egypt – a plague of death.

The Lord said to Moses, “I will bring one more plague on Pharaoh and on Egypt; after that he will release you from this place...” Exodus 11:1 God’s plan is to kill the firstborn of all the land of Egypt – the firstborn of both of all the people and their animals. **“There will be a great cry throughout the whole land of Egypt, such as there has never been, nor ever will be again.”** (Exodus 11:6)

God is about to do to Pharaoh what his predecessor had done to the Israelites years before. Just like that Pharaoh had killed the sons of Israel, God will now kill the children of Egypt through a final act of judgment.

The stage is set for God to render His judgment upon Pharaoh and Egypt. However, unlike the previous Pharaoh who was “bottom line” evil and had shown no mercy, God is a good God. He is merciful. He provides a way to escape His wrath through the blood sacrifice of an animal.

We are introduced to the Passover. God gives His people instructions. They are to sacrifice a young spotless lamb and place its blood on the doorposts of their homes. God says... **“I will pass through the land of Egypt in the same night, and I will attack all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both of humans and of animals, and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment. I am the Lord. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, so that when I see the blood I will pass over you, and this plague will not fall on you to destroy you when I attack the land of Egypt.”** (Exodus 12:12-13)

And so that is what God’s people do. They place the blood of a sacrificed lamb on their doorposts.

The act of God’s mercy in saying, **“when I see the blood I will pass over you”** becomes an annual celebration by the people of Israel. God tells His people that the Passover will be **“a memorial to you.”** (Exodus 12:14) In the future the people will re-enact the events of this very night in what becomes known as the Passover meal. By this they will always remember God’s judgment on Pharaoh and the Egyptians and His mercy on the Israelites.

So here is what happens... At midnight, the night after the first Passover meal has been observed, God strikes all the firstborn in the land of Egypt. He kills both humans and animals, great and small, including Pharaoh’s oldest son. Just like God said He would do, He passes over all of the houses that have the blood on the doorposts and does not strike the firstborn in those houses.

Pharaoh got up in the night, along with all his servants and all Egypt, and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was no house in which there was not someone dead. Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron in the night and said, “Get up, get out from among my people, both you and the Israelites! Go serve the Lord as you have requested!” (Exodus 12:30-31) Pharaoh finally relents and lets the Israelite people go.

And so after dwelling in the land of Egypt for 430 years, God’s people leave en masse in what later became known simply as “The Exodus.”

[The Israelites] had requested from the Egyptians silver and gold items and clothing. The Lord gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians and they gave them whatever they wanted, and so they plundered Egypt. (Exodus 12:35-36)

The exodus of God’s covenant people from Egypt and their taking of much of Egypt’s riches with them as they left actually fulfill a promise God had made to Abraham more than 600 years before... We flash back to when God gave His covenant promises to Abraham. **Then the Lord said to [Abraham], “Know for certain that your**

descendants will be strangers in a foreign country. They will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years. But I will execute judgment on the nation that they will serve. Afterward they will come out with many possessions.” (Genesis 15:13-14) As it turned out this “foreign country” was Egypt. So you can see that God is in control of history. Things happened exactly as He had told Abraham they would!

Great rejoicing and excitement fills the air the night that the Israelite’s depart from Egypt. God’s covenant people, now nearly a million strong, are finally heading home to a place none of them have ever seen. They are on their way to the Promised Land, to the land of Canaan, to the place the Lord God had promised to Abraham and his descendants!

As the people head out, God personally leads the way. **Now the Lord was going before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them in the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel day or night. He did not remove the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night from before the people.** (Exodus 13:2)

God will use the journey from Egypt to the land of Canaan to teach His people a basic lesson – to rely on Him completely for everything. Through Moses, God gives specific instructions. God equips His people with the knowledge they will need to represent Him to the nations. Their experiences during this long journey home will teach them to trust God no matter what. It will test the Israelite’s faith in God.

Well, it doesn’t take very long before their first test comes. God tells Moses, **“I will harden Pharaoh’s heart and he will chase after the people of Israel. I will gain honor because of Pharaoh and because of all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.”** Exodus 14:4 And sure enough it happens exactly as God told Moses. Pharaoh has a change of heart about releasing the people. He and his army take up pursuit with hundreds of chariots and horsemen. The people see that they are trapped by the Red Sea and think they are going to die. They are afraid of the Egyptian army.

When Pharaoh got closer, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians marching after them, and they were terrified. The Israelites cried out to the Lord, and they said to Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the desert? What in the world have you done by bringing us out of Egypt? Isn’t this what we told you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone so that we can serve the Egyptians, because it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!’” (Exodus 14:10-12) This is a classic example of Revisionist History. That is NOT at all the conversation they had with Moses while in Egypt. But

because of their own self-reliance and fear they turn on Moses. They do NOT trust God. They fail their first test!

Moses said to the people, “Do not fear! Stand firm and see the salvation of the Lord that He will provide for you today; for the Egyptians that you see today you will never, ever see again. The Lord will fight for you...” (Exodus 14:13-14)

The Lord God places a dark cloud between the Egyptian army and the people of Israel. This keeps the Egyptians away. Following God’s instructions... **Moses stretched out his hand toward the sea, and the Lord drove the sea apart by a strong east wind all that night, and He made the sea into dry land, and the water was divided.** (Exodus 14:21)

So the Israelites went through the middle of the sea on dry ground, the water forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. (Exodus 14:22)

Just before sunrise the dark cloud is lifted and Pharaoh’s army chases after the people into the middle of the sea. By now the people have safely reached the other side. Moses again stretches out his hand toward the sea and it returns to its normal state. **The water returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen and all the army of Pharaoh that was coming after the Israelites into the sea – not so much as one of them survived!** (Exodus 14:28)

So the Lord saved Israel on that day from the power of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea. When Israel saw the great power that the Lord had exercised over the Egyptians, they feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses. (Exodus 14:30-31)

The Israelites join Moses in singing a song of praise and deliverance. They exalt the greatness of God demonstrated by His incredible victory over the Egyptian army at the Red Sea. They declare, **“The Lord will reign forever and ever! Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously; the horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea!”** (Exodus 15:18, 21) The entire song of Moses tells the story of God’s coming kingdom. God is on a mission to deal with the evil in His world. His plan is to redeem those enslaved by it. This song looks forward to what it will be like when God is the King over His people. So we see God leading His people toward the Promised Land where He intends to have His divine presence dwell among them.

You might think that maybe the people have learned they can fully trust God. Here on the edge of the Red Sea, with the bodies of dead soldiers and horses washing up on the shore, we hear the people declare their faith in God...**they feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses.** (Exodus 14:31. We hear their

voices worshipping God in a song of praise... **“The Lord will reign forever and ever!”** (Exodus 15:18)

But as we shall soon see the memories of the Israelite people are very short. Just three days later they will face a second test. How do you suppose they are going to do this time?

The people are in the wilderness. They are tired and thirsty. They see a watering hole and they get their hopes up. Water! They rush to the water only to be disappointed at its bitter taste. Facing this dilemma, what should the people do? Who is their source for everything? Is it Moses? No. It is God. So they should cry out to God for water. Instead, they grumble and gripe. Once again they fail the test.

But God is faithful and He comes through for His people. At God’s direction Moses finds a small tree and tosses it into the water. The water is no longer bitter, but good to drink. Well at this point the Israelites should know that their God WILL lead them. He WILL protect them. He WILL provide for their physical needs. They should know.

Two tests so far and the people have failed both. So it should come as no surprise that they will face a third test.

The people become hungry. And just like they did before, they grumble – and not just a few of them, but the whole bunch! **The entire company of Israelites murmured against Moses and Aaron in the desert. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this desert to kill this whole assembly with hunger!”** (Exodus 16:2-3) What terrible memories they have! Not only have they forgotten what God did for them miraculously just a few days before but now they can’t even remember how BAD life was for them in Egypt – “We had it so good back there!” Oh, really?

Again God is gracious. He is incredibly patient with His people. God works another miracle. He provides manna, bread from heaven. And then when the people begin to belly ache about having the same old thing to eat day after day, well, God provides the people with quail to eat. God is so good to them!

Do you think the people have finally learned to trust God to provide for their needs? No. In the very next test the people run out of drinking water. **The people were very thirsty there for water, and they murmured against Moses and said, “Why in the world did you bring us up out of Egypt – to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?” Then Moses cried out to the Lord, “What will I do with this people? – a little more and they will stone me!”** (Exodus 17:3-4) Incredibly, the people just will not learn to trust God! And Moses is getting very frustrated with them.

Yet again God meets their physical need. The Lord leads Moses to a rock and tells him to strike it. When Moses does so, water flows out of the rock and the people drink. Time and time again on their journey through the desert God demonstrates His love and compassionate care for His forgetful and ungrateful people.

On one particular day while they were traveling the Israelite people are attacked by the Amalekites who are the descendants of Esau. With God's help the untrained and poorly equipped Israelites led by Moses' general, a man named Joshua, destroy their attackers. God demonstrates that He will fight for His people whenever they come up against any of their enemies.

The people now enter the land of Midian. This is familiar territory for Moses. He had spent the last 40 years shepherding here. Moses is reunited with his father in law Jethro who has heard all about what God has done for the people of Israel. He gives Moses some much needed practical advice. It will help Moses better handle the heavy workload of leading such a large group. Jethro advises Moses to delegate capable God-fearing men who will judge all minor disputes that arise. This will allow Moses to focus his time and attention on the major issues. Moses follows Jethro's advice.

The people of Israel camp in close vicinity to Mount Sinai, also known as the mountain of God. They have almost everything they need to become a nation. They have the people. They are on their way to take possession of their land – which God has promised to give them. They have strong leadership. God is the Head, with Moses and other men leading as God directs them. They have an army that has been battle tested and witnessed God fighting for them. The one thing that they lack now is laws. With Mount Sinai as the backdrop, the stage is set for God to give His laws to His people.

But, let's face it. All of the constant grumbling and forgetfulness by God's covenant people casts a dark shadow on our story. We can't help but wonder, "Are the hearts of these Israelites just as hard as Pharaoh's heart?" And how on earth are these hard-headed and hard-hearted people ever going to be a blessing to the nations? Stay tuned.