

The God Who Hears – Exodus 1-6 (Part 1 of 7)

“God Heard Their Groaning”

Exodus 1:1-14; 2:24-25

Mark Vroegop

¹ These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: ² Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, ³ Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, ⁴ Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. ⁵ All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt. ⁶ Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. ⁷ But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. ⁸ Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹ And he said to his people, “Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. ¹⁰ Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” ¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. ¹³ So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves ¹⁴ and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves (Exodus 1:1–14).

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 (Exodus 2:24–25).

About a year ago our twelve-year old son, Jeremiah, had one of those childhood epiphany moments. Do you know what I mean? I’m talking about when a child suddenly realizes how different life is now compared with “back then.” We were talking about technology, how quickly it has changed, and the way in which it has shaped our everyday lives in surprising ways. The conversation went something like this:

Dad: “You know, son, you’ve grown up in a world that has always had the Internet. But that hasn’t always been the case.”

Mom: “Yeah, when we were your age there was no Internet, no email, no Netflix, no Skype, and no Google.”

Jeremiah: “My word! How did you guys survive?! What did you do?”

It was a funny moment as we reflected on how many things we take for granted in our present culture. Sometimes things are so familiar that we forget there was a time when life was very, very different. And when we think about those “earlier days,” it is remarkable how much has changed.

Spiritual Foundations in Exodus

I would suggest that, as New Testament believers, we are a bit like my son when it comes to what we “see” when we look at Exodus. It is remarkable how different the spiritual dynamics are as Exodus unfolds, and we can hardly imagine what life was like. There are many themes, symbols, and concepts that have deep biblical meaning which are formed or birthed in this book. It is a very foundational book. Here are a few examples of what was absent prior to Exodus:

- There would have been no context for words like the Lamb of God, the Passover, unleavened bread, wilderness wanderings, the Ten Commandments, and manna from heaven.
- There was no Law, sacrificial system, ark, tabernacle, priesthood, and no identity of Israel as an independent nation.
- There was no understanding of God as YHWH (“I am”), as holy or as near.

Obviously, these are very significant themes as it relates to biblical theology, and it is remarkable how important Exodus is in the development of these crucial ideas and concepts. But there is one more issue that is foundational to everything: **salvation**. Prior to Exodus, God was not known as a rescuing, saving, delivering God, and the exodus event becomes a defining moment in God’s relationship with His people. This is why we need to study Exodus. It is a foundational book for our understanding of God and the gospel. J.A. Motyer in his commentary says the following about Exodus:

It begins the normative Old Testament (and biblical) revelation of God’s way of salvation; it underlines the nature of God as holy and of humankind as sinners; it explains the meaning of blood and sacrifice; it is a book of the grace which reaches down from heaven and of the law which teaches redeemed sinners to live in heavenly terms. While some of these great biblical truths are foreshadowed in Genesis, Exodus pulls them all together, giving them a shape and definition that the rest of the Bible will not alter. Under the simplest of forms and by many a fascinating story, Exodus reveals fundamental truth and is, in fact, one of the Bible’s greatest building blocks.¹

This book defines God and His relationship with His people. Listen to what God says in Exodus 20 in the preamble to the first commandment:

² “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ ‘You shall have no other gods before me’” (Exodus 20:2–3)

The events recorded, the laws given, the images portrayed, and the worship inaugurated are foundational to the gospel – the message that Jesus delivers people from the slavery of sin. In the same manner that God delivered His people from slavery in Egypt, He delivers them from the slavery of sin. The salvation out of Egypt with a sacrificial lamb and blood is a clear harbinger of what is to come with Jesus. But Exodus does more than foreshadow or predict; it establishes the foundational concepts upon which the New Covenant is based and fulfilled in Jesus. As John the Baptist said, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29). That statement has no meaning without Exodus. This book is foundational.

¹ J.A. Motyer, The Message of Exodus – The Bible Speaks Today, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2005), 23.

The Message of Exodus

What is this book about? What is the primary message? At first, you might think that it is about the people of Israel since Exodus is a collection of their history. You could read events like the Passover, the Red Sea, and Mt. Sinai and easily draw the conclusion that this book is simply the story of God's people. While Exodus contains some amazing stories regarding the nation of Israel, the book is about much more.

We get a hint of what is the real target of Exodus in two texts. The first one is found in Exodus 6 when God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, and the second is the closing passage in Exodus 40. Let's look at them in turn:

⁶"I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. ⁷I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. ⁸I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD" (Exodus 6:6–8).

What do you hear and see? Notice the prominence of the phrase "I am the Lord." God begins with this statement (v 6). He explains that the purpose of their deliverance is so that "you shall know that I am the Lord your God" (v 7). And God links His commitment to keep His promise to Abraham with a final affirmation – "I am the Lord" (v 8). **Therefore the book of Exodus is not really about Israel; it is actually about God.**

We see this even further at the very end of the book. Everything in the book is leading to this climactic moment. The storyline of the book is that God has delivered His people from slavery at the hands of the powerful nation of Egypt. He's brought them through the Red Sea, defeating their enemies, gave them His Law, and specified what worship should be like. And where does this lead?

³⁴ Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁵ And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁶ Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. ³⁷ But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. ³⁸ For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys" (Exodus 40:34–38).

Don't miss the significance of this moment! The God who rescued them from slavery, drowned the powerful Egyptian army, displayed His glory on Mt. Sinai, and issued His holy Law lives among his people. God has delivered His people, and He dwells in their midst. God is not like the so-called gods of the other nations – unmoved and uninvolved in the affairs of his people. **God is near!**

If I take those two verses and put them together, I think that you could summarize the message this way: **Exodus displays the God who delivers His people and dwells among them.**

Exodus is about God! And you could easily divide the book in three major sections which tell us something new about God. The nation of Israel becomes the platform upon which the glory of God is seen by the people of God and the rest of the world.

- **Part 1** – Israel in Egypt: God the Savior (1:1-13:16)
- **Part 2** – Israel at Sinai: God the Holy Companion (13:17-24:11)
- **Part 3** – Israel around the Tabernacle: God the Indweller (24:12-40:38)²

Throughout the book we see an emerging picture of what God is like. We see a God who controls history, who reveals Himself as “I am,” who is holy, who acts to save His people, who acts in judgment, whose anger can be averted, who speaks, who is transcendent, and who lives among His people.³ Israel is a canvas on which God displays the portrait of His glory.

I find it interesting and amazing that the apostle Paul says something very similar in Ephesians 2. Israel, you see, was only the first canvas of God’s glory.

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4–7).

The gospel is not about us; it is about the glory of God. **Exodus is not about Israel; it is about the glory of God.**

How Exodus Begins

The first fourteen verses of Exodus establish very quickly the setting in which the book takes place, and it is clearly connected to other parts of the Bible. Exodus is the second of five books that Moses wrote which are called the Pentateuch, and Exodus is designed to be the continuation of the story from the book of Genesis. Verse one begins with a Hebrew word for “and,” which connects us to where Genesis left off.

Genesis 50 ends with Joseph’s death in Egypt after a very interesting and providential journey. Joseph was the 11th son of Jacob (also called Israel). Jacob was the son of Isaac, and Isaac was the son of Abraham, the man God called out of Ur and promised that he would be the father of many nations – that his offspring would inherit the land of Canaan (see Gen. 17:1-8). Joseph was dearly loved by his father, hated, and sold into slavery by his brothers, promoted to a place of prominence in the Egyptian government, saved the nation from starvation during a famine, forgave his brothers for their sins against him, and relocated his father’s household to the land of Goshen, a province in Egypt.

Verse one begins with the names of Jacob’s sons who eventually become the twelve tribes of Israel, and we learn that “all the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons” (Ex. 1:5). This data point is given to establish the incredible growth of the nation in future years and may also

² Motyer, 24.

³ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus – Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1973), 20-43.

symbolize completeness.⁴ In verse seven we hear a reference that sounds very similar to what God commanded Adam and Eve to do in Genesis 1:28 – *“the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.”* Exodus begins with a growing and expanding nation of God’s people.

There is a major turn in verse eight. A new king begins to reign in Egypt who “did not know Joseph” (v 9). According to Exodus 12:40, the people of Israel lived in Egypt 430 years, so there was ample time for multiple dynasties to come and go. Just stop and consider 400 years for a moment, and how much can change. What would your great, great grandfather’s life have been like?

Many scholars believe that a major political shift in Egypt took place during these 400 years. Joseph likely came to power during the reign of the Hyksos pharaohs, a group of outsiders who invaded and conquered Egypt.⁵ Eventually the Hyksos rulers were overthrown, and Egypt was ruled by Egyptians. As often happens, a new nationalism was birthed in this revolution. It bred a disdain for foreigners, and Israel was caught in the middle of this political upheaval. So the fact that Joseph was not “known” could be more than just a lack of knowledge about Joseph’s existence. It could mean that the ruling Pharaoh treated the Israelites as though Joseph had never been the prime minister of Egypt. Joseph was, after all, a foreigner.

Over time, the Israelites became a persecuted and abused minority. Under the banner of national security, a culture of oppression developed. Verses 10-14 seem to have a progression to them as the racial fears of the Egyptians prompt more and more aggressive actions. They move from “dealing shrewdly” to “oppression” to “ruthlessness.” The Egyptians feared losing control of their country again. In time, the Israelites became the slaves of the Egyptians and a vital labor force to build up the nation of Egypt. The goal was to reduce the influence and the threat of the people of Israel by enslaving them. Population reduction by government-sanctioned oppression was the goal.

⁹ And he said to his people, “Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. ¹⁰ Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” ¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. ¹³ So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves ¹⁴ and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves (Exodus 1:9-14).

This situation is not static. There is a clear sense in the text that the population reduction plan did not work. Eventually, as we will see next week, this led to government-sanctioned genocide – the intentional killing of male babies. The more Egypt oppressed the people, the more they grew. The tension increased as Israel felt the full force of a governmental policy of slavery. And it was this way for a long time! Hundreds of years. God’s promise to Abraham about blessing and land seemed very far away.

⁴ Nahum Sarna, *Exodus - The JPS Torah Commentary*, (New York, New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 4.

⁵ Doug Stuart, *Exodus – The New American Commentary*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006).

The book of Exodus establishes very early the enormity of the challenge that God's people faced. God providentially led His people to Egypt to protect them, but now they are victims of national and systemic abuse. It is hard for us to even imagine how hopeless the situation must have felt to them.

They were there by divine command, under divine promise, awaiting divine intervention. Of these things, however, they saw no outward sign. Heaven above was as silent as earth around was threatening.⁶

They had become the slaves of Egypt, and their lives were filled with ruthless, bitter work.

It isn't until chapter two that God's name is even mentioned, and the first time it is used in a hopeful context is in Exodus 2:23-25:

²³ During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. 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 (Exodus 2:23–25).

These are powerful verses with lots of emotion. Israel is in pain; they are groaning. They cry out to God for rescue – don't miss this word! God hears their cry. God remembers His covenant. And then verse 25 drives home the point that must have been nagging at the people as they suffered under this oppression: Does God see? Does God know?

And the answer to those questions is "Yes!" Exodus is the story of God as He rescues His people. God heard the groaning of his people.

How Exodus Makes Us Sing!

As New Testament believers, the book of Exodus should lead us into wonderful worship. We know the full picture of the gospel – the big picture story of the Bible – and we can see it appear in many different ways. In other words, once you start looking at the foundations of redemption in Exodus, it is remarkable what you find. It is no wonder that Psalm 106, often called the Exodus Psalm, says the following:

*Praise the Lord!
Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
For his steadfast love endures forever!
Who can utter the mighty deeds of the Lord
Or declare all his praise! (Psalm 106:1-2)*

It is no wonder that the book of Revelation says that in heaven they "sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb" (Rev. 15:3). What does Exodus do for us? Why does it make us sing?

⁶ Motyer, 28.

1. Exodus shows us that while life can be very hard, God always keeps His promise

It is one thing to hear that God keeps His promises, but it another to see a tangible and specific example. Exodus becomes “exhibit A” that even while it feels as though God has forgotten, abandoned, or not heard our cries, it is only a matter of time until He acts. Exodus shows us that even hardship and suffering can fit into the plan of God. Without the slavery, the deliverance would not have been as glorious or maybe even on their mind. Philip Ryken says,

“Our sufferings help us look for our salvation. Or to quote again from Spurgeon, ‘The whip of persecution is helpful because it makes us learn that this is the house of bondage, and moves us to long after and seek for the land of liberty – the land of joy.’”⁷

Exodus shows us that even in the midst of long seasons of painful waiting, God’s promises are still true. It is only a matter of time. God will deliver His people.

2. Exodus reminds us that the endgame is God’s glory

When you read the book of Exodus through a God-centered versus an Israel-centered lens it changes everything! You come to see that there is so much more going on here than God building a new nation or rescuing people from oppression. God aims to magnify Himself through what He does with Israel. This tiny collection of people will serve as a narrative telescope which will bring near the majesty, glory, power, and might of God. We will see that God didn’t just deliver His people from Egypt because they were being abused; He delivered them because God is greater than Pharaoh and the false gods of Egypt. “The Exodus, therefore, was not simply an epic struggle between Moses and Pharaoh, or between Israel and Egypt. Ultimately it was another skirmish in the great, ongoing war between God and Satan.”⁸ God’s aim is make His name known, and He even raises Pharaoh up for that very purpose: ¹⁶ *But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth (Ex. 9:16).*

When God’s glory is the endgame, it changes how you view everything – suffering, difficulties, opposition, delay, and even success. When God’s people forget about God’s glory and start focusing on their circumstances, bad things happen. Golden calves jump out of the fire (see Exodus 32). People start to complain and say ridiculous things (“Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?” – Ex. 14:11). But when you’ve seen God’s glory, and when you’ve tasted God’s presence, you wouldn’t dare go anywhere without it.

3. Exodus awakens new affections for the gospel

When you have received Christ as your Savior and when you have been rescued from your sin, you read the book of Exodus differently. In the New Testament we hear that *“our self was crucified with him...so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin” (Rom. 6:6)*. We hear the book of Ephesians say *“you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:13)*. And you cannot help but see this emerge in Exodus as slaves are set free with an amazing display of divine power. As the Law is given, the tabernacle built, and God dwells in it, you cannot help but rejoice at the thought of the holy God who dwells with His people. What’s more, you cannot help but think of

⁷ Philip Ryken, *Exodus – Saved for God’s Glory*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Publishers, 2005), 39.

⁸ Ryken, 34-35.

the end of Bible when you hear, *“Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as God”* (Rev. 21:3). If you have a gospel-affected heart, you will read Exodus with gospel-affected eyes. You will see the beginnings of salvation as we know it, and it will make you rejoice! You will see yourself in the book – a slave, desperate for deliverance, completely helpless, and in awe of what God can do.

4. Exodus helps you see Jesus more clearly

The book of Exodus will also help you to see Jesus. Remember that after His resurrection and on the Emmaus Road Jesus appeared to two of His disciples and “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:13). The story of the gospel through Jesus Christ is the theme of the entire Bible, even Exodus.

Jesus is personally involved and pictured in Exodus. Jude 5 tells us that it was Jesus who delivered His people out of Egypt. Matthew 2:15 shows us that Jesus’ life is patterned after Exodus – “out of Egypt I have called my son.” He was born as a savior, rescued from enemies, passed through the waters of baptism, went into the wilderness, and went up on a mountain where He gives the Sermon on the Mount.⁹ Jesus is the Passover Lamb, dying during the very feast that marked the Exodus deliverance. Jesus is the Bread of Life and gives living water. As you read Exodus, you see Jesus and you are reminded of what He really means to you.

“As we trace their spiritual journey, we discover that we need exactly what the Israelites needed. We need a liberator, a God to save us from slavery and destroy our enemies. We need a provider, a God to feed us bread from Heaven and water from the rock. We need a lawgiver, a God to command us how to love and serve him. And we need a friend, a God to stay with us day and night, forever.”¹⁰

Like the Israelites, God has heard the groaning of His people. And the glorious message of the Bible is that there is freedom from the slavery of sin through Jesus Christ. Although things are very different in Exodus, if you read closely and listen intently, you will see Jesus.

Out of the groaning of slavery, God creates the song of redemption.

Salvation is glorious, and Exodus is where it dawns.

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⁹ Ryken, 23.

¹⁰ Ryken, 24.