

Behold the Lamb of God

Part 5: Passover Us

TEXT: EXODUS 12:21-27 (ESV)



(About the Art: by Abby Mangan, commissioned for Oak Hills Presbyterian Church's 2009 Christmas CelebrationTM)

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Tying In

We've been tracing our way through Genesis, studying the 1st explanation of the need for and the promised coming of Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We began with Deuteronomy's call for parents to tell their kids the story of how God saved them from bondage and gave them His law, that they might know how to live as His people and understand they need the rescue God has promised. We return to those same people from Deuteronomy

today by focusing on one of the single most defining experiences of their identity as a people. Let's read it and tie the story we've been unfolding together, so we might behold the Lamb of God whose coming we celebrate this Christmas.

Exodus 12:21-27

²¹Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go and select lambs for yourselves according to your clans, and kill the Passover lamb. ²²Take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin. None of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning. ²³For the LORD will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you. ²⁴You shall observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons forever. ²⁵When you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this service. ²⁶And when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' ²⁷you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.'" And the people bowed their heads and worshiped.

The Line Unbroken

Salvation is not some academic exercise relegated to the mind. It is an unfolding story, a true tall tale with heroes and villains, plot twists, and narrow escapes. It is a story of people living between wandering and homecoming, transgression and grace. Every mortal in the story needs rescue, but "they have all turned aside; there is none who does good, not even one." (Psalm 14:3)

Still, even with all the intrigue, conflict and suspense, this tale is not ultimately a story about mere mortals. It is a story of divine love. The Law of the Lord is a love story—the story of the one true God calling people who've rebelled against Him beloved. And even more, it is the story of God's love for His Son, Jesus. God commands His people to live as tellers of His story. (Ac 1:8)

The story begins as far back, and further still, as the creation and fall of man—how the snake came into the garden to tempt Eve and her husband not only to eat the fruit God forbid them to touch, but also to question God's goodness in the process. (Gen 3) When this happened, God came speaking of consequence and discipline to the man and woman—life would be a struggle—(Gen 3:16-19) and of doom to the tempter—one would come from the woman's line who would crush his head. (Gen 3:15) But the Lord showed the couple mercy, and though they were cast out of the Garden of Eden forever, they retained the Lord's call to fill the earth and subdue it. (Gen 1:28, 9:1) And this they did, establishing the line from which the Savior would come.

Tracing Adam's line through his son Seth, down to Noah, father of the only survivors of the great flood to the descendants of his son Shem, comes Abraham whom God called to become the father of a great nation through which all the earth would be blessed, (Gen 12:1-3) an allusion to Christ's coming. God promised Abraham Canaan as the land where His people would dwell.

It was hard to imagine since Abraham's wife was barren. But through a miracle birth, Sarah bore Abraham a son, Isaac. God told them, "Through Isaac your offspring will be reckoned." (Gen 21:12) Isaac went on to have Jacob and Esau. With Isaac's blessing on Jacob's line, the Lord changed Jacob's name to Israel. Jacob had 12 sons who'd become the fathers of the twelve tribe of Israel.

Four Hundred Years

The Lord's plan was unfolding just as He had said. And as much as this bolstered the faith of Abraham's descendants, it must've also carried some measure of fear, because at one point, when Abraham was particularly unsure, he pleaded with God for assurance that His promises would be kept. The Lord replied by detailing some specifics of what his future would hold; "Know for certain your offspring will sojourn in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they'll be afflicted for 400 years." (Gen 15:13-14)

Four hundred years of slavery were part of God's design for the descendants of Abraham. Shrewd leaders would do anything to avoid this, but Abraham's descendants never saw it coming. Here's how it happened. When Jacob had only 11 sons, one was his favorite—Joseph. His brothers resented him for this, so they sold him to a caravan of Ishmaelites for 20 shekels of silver. (Gen 37) The caravan took Joseph to Egypt and sold him into slavery.

While Joseph served there, he came to be known as a man blessed with God's vision. The King of the Land was having nightmares about skinny cows eating fat cows and wanted to know what they meant. He heard of Joseph and summoned him for an interpretation. Joseph told him this was God's way of warning them of a coming famine, and he could help them prepare for it. So Joseph went from a dungeon-dwelling slave to a ruler in the land second only to Pharaoh himself, saving the kingdom through an aggressive food-storage program. (Gen 39-41)

The entire region suffered under this famine, but unlike Egypt, few were prepared. People came from all over hoping for some of Egypt's stores. Joseph's brothers languished in nearby Canaan with their aging father Israel until they too came looking for food. In a tale of surprise, reconciliation and mercy, Joseph moved his family there to live off the provisions the Lord had used him to lay up. ^(Gen 42-50) What Joseph's brothers meant for evil, God meant for good. ^(Gen 50:20) They were invited to settle in Goshen, Egypt's best land, to tend theirs and Pharaoh's flocks.

When Joseph grew old, he told his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." ^(Gen 50:24) This was not their permanent home. "When the time comes for you to return to take the Promised Land," he said, "take my bones with you." ^(Gen 50:25)

Though Egypt had made this former slave into a prince, it was no more his home than it was his father's. But it wouldn't take some noble, selfless gesture from Joseph to drive this reality home to his descendants—just a regime change. "Now there arose a new king over Egypt who didn't know Joseph. He said to his people, 'Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty. Let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and... fight us and escape.' So they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens." ^(Ex 1:8-11) This lasted 400 years, just as God had said.

The Levite in Pharaoh's House

But near the end of those 400 years for reasons not belonging to political upheaval or Egypt's economy or famine or war, the Lord called another servant from among His people—this one strangely of the house of Pharaoh himself. Born of parents from the house of Levi, Jacob's third son by Leah, Moses came into this world at the time the new Pharaoh was trying to curb Israel's population by killing their newborn sons. So Moses' mother hid him in a basket and had his sister float him downriver to where Pharaoh's daughter would bathe.

Pharaoh's daughter found him and wanted to take him as her own. Seeing she was drawn to the baby, Moses' sister came out to ask if her majesty would like her to find a nurse for him from among the Hebrew women. She did, so Moses' sister ran to tell their mother what had happened, and Moses' mother joined Pharaoh's staff as a nurse to her own son whose life had been spared by Pharaoh's own daughter. ^(Ex 2:1-10) That is how this little Levite came to be the surrogate grandson of the King of Egypt.

Once as a young man, Moses saw an Egyptian guard mistreating a Hebrew slave. Compelled to help his own people, Moses killed the guard—an act which didn't garner the respect he might have hoped for with the Hebrews but did send him into exile to escape death at the hands of the King's soldiers. ^(Ex 2:11-15)

"During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help... God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob." ^(Ex 2:23-25) So the Lord called Moses out of exile to return to Goshen to lead Israel out of their slavery and bondage. Moses knew this would present two pretty significant obstacles—1) getting his own people to listen to this Levite of the house of Pharaoh and 2) getting Pharaoh to listen to this murderous traitor of the house of Levi.

As for his own people, the Lord said, "Gather the elders of Israel say, 'The God of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob, appeared to me, saying, 'I've seen what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise to bring you out of the affliction of Egypt to the [Promised Land] flowing with milk & honey.' They'll listen to your voice.'" ^(Ex 3:16-18)

As for Pharaoh, that was another matter. Israel represented a large, inexpensive work force. He wouldn't free them willingly, so God systematically peeled back Pharaoh's hold on them one finger at a time by sending ten plagues upon the land. Pharaoh's heart was hard and the first nine just couldn't move it. ^(Ex 7-10) So the last was the worst, the death of the first-born sons.

But the Lord gave Moses a word for Israel. He told them their first-born sons would live to see another day if they put the blood of a lamb on their door posts when death passed through the land. ^(Ex 12:13) The image was clear and haunting. The angel of death would see blood glistening on the doorpost and count it as a sign that blood in that home had already been shed—that the people in the house had already surrendered to God what the angel had come to collect. Just as the Lord accepted the life of the ram in the thicket in the place of Abraham's son Isaac, so now God accepted the blood of the lamb for the blood of the sons of Abraham's descendants—a life for a life.

Delivered From, Delivered To

God told them never to forget this moment. It wasn't just that He liberated them from bondage. It was what He was delivering them to—the Land of Canaan. But it was so much more than that. It was the assurance that God was taking them someplace, that after over 100 years of their forefather's traveling followed by another 400 years of slavery, God had not forgotten His people. These people were "a people holy to the LORD their God. The LORD their God chose them as a people for his treasured possession, out of all peoples who are on the face of the earth." ^(Dt 7:6)

So the people of God grew up with this command to tell this story—the story of the rebellion in the garden, the devastation of the flood, the wanderings of the patriarchs and the covenant promises God cut with them, the 400 years in bondage to Egypt and God's holy and sober deliverance that followed. What was the point? God had claimed a people as His own—a people He'd one day fully redeem and restore. It wasn't a simple matter of the Divine helping his subjects when they got into scrapes. It was a matter of affection, adoption, redemption, salvation.

Still, imagine how hard it would've been waiting those 400 years. Imagine the questions of being forgotten. Imagine how easy it would've been to reduce every facet of their existence down to one thing—getting out of Egypt. By the time of Jesus, people had all but forgotten that His covenant wasn't just about what He'd deliver them from. His covenant wasn't primarily a call out of bondage, though it was that. It was a call to—to Someone. God's call on the lives of His people is to Himself. He set his affection on them and swore to cleanse them. But the Lord also made it clear from the start that since the wages of sin is death, reconciliation would be a bloody business. ^(Gen 2:17, Rom 6:23)

So He accepted the blood of another in their place—a ram for Isaac, lambs for the firstborn sons of Israel, and later the Lord would establish an entire sacrificial system by which the people could offer sacrifices to God to atone for their sins. But it was unending. When Israel built her temple later, there was no chair for the priest because his work was never done. The line of sacrificial lambs seemed to stretch on forever. Why? Because no beast of the field could ever be perfect enough to actually take away the sins of the image bearers of God. Would there ever come a perfect, lasting, atoning sacrifice, One who would take away the sins of the world? If so, that Lamb would have to be of God. At Christmas, we have a story to tell and a command to tell it. The story is this: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Let's close by reading Isaiah 53.