

Have Yourself a Merry Little Exodus

Introduction

The Text

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. (Exod. 2:23–25)

Through the Backdoor of the Old Testament

- A. In light of the little mini-series we've been running these past weeks, regarding seeing Jesus in the OT, it seemed appropriate for me this morning to attempt to preach a Christmas sermon but from an OT text and narrative.
 - 1. I'm not sure how many Christmas messages you've heard from [Exod. 2](#) but my guess is this may be the first. And again this is just a part of a larger passion I have to show you that Jesus and the gospel are on every page. There are echoes of Christmas even here in Exodus.
- B. So we're going to make our way through four headings this morning: (1) God Hears; (2) God Acts; (3) God Surprises; and (4) God Comes. And in it all we'll make our way towards Christmas, but again, through the backdoor of this OT story.

(1) God Hears

The Backstory

- A. You remember, perhaps, the people of Israel had, at an earlier point, actually enjoyed the favor of Pharaoh because of Joseph's surprising rise to prominence there.
 - 1. Much like Daniel later with Nebuchadnezzar, God had given Joseph revelation and things in a manner that served Pharaoh and his kingdom. In this instance, Jacob had been given word from God concerning a coming famine and the right way to deal with it. But he had favor, and his family had favor—all of Israel had moved in and been provided for.
- B. And Jacob, when he'd come to the end of his earthly life, he left his family with a final note of confidence in God and his faithfulness, [Gen. 50:24](#): "And Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.'"
 - 1. He says: "Yes, you're in Egypt for now, but God will bring you out soon enough and take you to the land of Canaan promised to your forefathers in covenant. God will come through for you."

- C. It sounds nice. It sounds hopeful. But the weeks turn into months and the months turn into years and the years turn into decades and the decades turn into centuries and they're still in Egypt—400 years had gone by to this point (cf. [Gen. 15:13](#); [Exod. 12:40](#); [Acts 7:6](#)).
1. And worse, we learn in [Exod. 1:8](#) that “there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” And he started to see the growing number of Israelites there in Egypt as a threat to his reign. So, while he still had the chance, he knew he had to get them squarely under his thumb. So he oppressed them and beat them and enslaved them in ruthless, merciless fashion.
- D. And, finally, we're told the people of Israel just cry out in anguish, really, v. 23: “[T]he people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help.”
1. We can imagine the sort of things this cry would entail: “Where are you? Where is the promise of your coming? We're dying here. You've forgotten us. You've abandoned us. If you're out there, please help.”

Crying Out with Israel

- A. Have you ever been there? Are you there even now? You just feel like God has not kept his end of the bargain with you, he's not delivered on his promise, he's turned away from you.
- B. You know I've read many articles that speak of the precarious state of mental health these days. The pandemic is taking its toll. And we think we're coming out and then we're right back in. And we're struggling. We're not okay.
1. So in one article, the author writes: “We are not feeling good. . . . You can tell from the numbers. In a recent national poll by NPR, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, half of U.S. households polled said someone within the home was experiencing serious problems with depression, anxiety, or stress—or sleep issues. You can tell from the recent streak of bad behavior in airports and other public spaces. And you can tell from the surge of interest in self-help books on trauma and anxiety” ([The Atlantic](#), “The Pandemic Is Still Making Us Feel Terrible”).
 - a. Perhaps more than ever people are feeling stuck, people are feeling helpless and hopeless, alone.
- C. And for the Christian this can actually be especially distressing because God's supposed to be there for you, right?
1. Well, where is he? What's he doing? Why's he taking so long? Has he forgotten you?

God Hears!

- A. Certainly not! And that's what comes to the foreground in this story with Israel. They cry . . . and God hears: “²³ . . . 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” (Exod. 2:23-25).

- B. To be clear, this idea that God “remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob” does not mean that he somehow forgot it and he needed Israel to remind him of it here. God is not senile.
 - 1. In fact, his original promise to Abraham on the matter stated the duration of things, Gen. 15:13-14: “¹³ Then the LORD said to Abram, ‘Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years.¹⁴ But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.’”
 - a. So God’s had his eye on them all along, even when it seemed like he didn’t. He’s not forgotten. He’s been readying their redemption and rescue from the beginning.
- C. But the piece I wanted to focus on here for a moment is this idea that God hears . . . that he hears you and your cries for help, for rescue.
 - 1. I don’t know if you’ve ever reached out to someone for help and you start to share your heart and things, and then, well-intentioned probably, they immediately jump to fix it for you or give their opinions and even as they’re sharing all this stuff you just have this sense that you’ve not been heard. They’re trying to help but they’ve missed you. They’ve not truly heard you.
 - a. I’m sure, sadly, some of you have experienced this from me. I have this pressure sometimes I put on myself when I meet with people—I’m a pastor I have to have something helpful to say. I’ve got to make this meeting “worth your while.” So I can jump to advice and solutions and things. And sometimes I speak past you. In my anxious attempt to be a “good” and “helpful” pastor I don’t truly listen, I don’t truly hear. And in that I don’t end up helping, right?
- D. We all know what it’s like to not be heard. But it’s not that way with God. He hears you. He knows right where you’re at, what you’re feeling. And when he speaks and acts in response, it is always the right thing at the right moment.
 - 1. And that’s what we see next . . .

(2) God Acts

- A. God doesn’t just hear and know that we are struggling, that we need rescue, he acts on what he knows. He does something about it.
 - 1. In this instance, it’s the exodus, right? He ultimately breaks the bonds of Egypt and sets his people free. Here we recall the plagues and the Passover and the parting of the Red Sea—all this magnificent redemptive activity.

- a. Because he has compassion, because he hears, and he knows, so he acts.
- B. But, again, we can't forget the tension in the story, the fact that 400 years had gone by, that God had seemed to be late to the party in all of this.
- 1. We can feel that in our own lives, can't we? I'm talking about how God says and does just the right thing at just the right moment, but while we're waiting for him to act, it just doesn't always feel that way, does it?
 - a. Sometimes it feels like we're last priority to him.
 - b. Sometimes it feels like he's got more important things to do.
 - c. Sometimes it feels like he only moves for us if we bug him enough otherwise he'll just pass us by or put off helping as long as he can.
 - d. Sometimes it feels like his calendar is in conflict with ours. "I wanted you here yesterday. You say you're showing up tomorrow. It's too late."
- C. I often quote Tim Keller and I've got another insight from him at this point. This comes from his book *Hidden Christmas*. He writes this: "You cannot judge God by your calendar. God may appear to be slow, but he never forgets his promises. He may seem to be working very slowly or even to be forgetting his promises, but when his promises come true (and they will come true), they always burst the banks of what you imagined. . . . God's grace virtually never operates on our time frame, on a schedule we consider reasonable."
- 1. God's timing is unexpected. And it's, at first, a very frustrating thing. But he's never doing less than we'd hope for, however it may seem. He's always doing more.
 - a. And he doesn't just do it at a surprising pace, he does it in surprising ways. And that leads to what I'd want to say next . . .

(3) God Surprises

Moses, Really?!

- A. You know, if we ever needed evidence that God was already on the move even before Israel cried out for help, it's actually right there on the surface of this chapter.
- 1. Moses—the guy who would factor in huge for the exodus, the guy who would lead the charge, as it were—well, the story of his birth and early life was already told in the verses prior to [Exod. 2:23-25](#). The whole chapter ([vv. 1-22](#)) is virtually given over to it. God is preparing us for what's to come next where Moses will feature large.
 - a. In other words: God is already moving for redemption and rescue even before they'd cried out for it. But, again, he's doing it not just on a surprising timetable but in a surprising way.
- B. We tend to, after the fact, paint these prominent figures in the Bible as strong and heroic and obvious leadership material, but that simply isn't the case if you look a little closer.

1. The story of Moses begins with him in a precarious place as this vulnerable, helpless little baby.
 - a. Pharaoh was having the Israelite newborn males killed to keep them from growing in number and strength so rapidly, and the mother of Moses had hidden him away for three months and when she could hide him no longer, in an act of desperation she put him in a little basket made of reeds and dropped him into the river. He's crying and fragile and exposed and the only reason he even makes it is because Pharaoh's daughter sees him and "took pity on him" (Exod. 2:6).
 - i. So Moses story begins with this snapshot of incredible weakness, not the sort of strength and regality you'd imagine as God is preparing the one who will lead his people out from Egypt. Straight out of the gate, he seems quite pathetic.

2. And even when he's grown, it doesn't get much better.
 - a. So when he tries to stand between two of his fellow Hebrews who were fighting with one another over some undisclosed matter, they look at him and say: "Who made you a prince and a judge over us?" (Exod. 2:14).
 - i. There's such irony in that statement, because God is going to make him a leader and judge over them. But the point is: he doesn't look the part, it doesn't fit. They brush him off.
 - b. And, furthermore, Moses had earlier gotten in a tussle with an Egyptian and ended up killing the man. And later when he realizes word has likely reached Pharaoh, he doesn't stand up strong and courageous at this point. No! He cowers and he flees. He goes off and lives in the boonies for 40 years, hanging with sheep, lest he get found out and punished.
 - i. So he's not the posterchild of bravery and lionheartedness. Again, it's a rather pathetic picture.

3. But it actually gets even worse. God shows up to him in that burning bush there on Sinai and he says: "I see the suffering of my people and I'm going to set them free. And I'm going to use you to do it. Go to Pharaoh and let's get this rolling." And during the whole discussion, Moses pushes back time and again . . .
 - a. First it's: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exod. 3:11). God says: "It's not about who you are. 'I will be with you' (v. 12). That's what matters."
 - b. But then again Moses says, "But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The LORD did not appear to you'" (Exod. 4:1). So God says: "I'll give you a miraculous sign that cannot be denied. You throw that staff of yours

down and it will turn into a serpent before them. Pick it back up and it's a staff again."

- c. But, even this isn't enough for Moses. "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue" (Exod. 4:10). To which God says: "¹¹Who has made man's mouth? . . . Is it not I, the LORD? ¹²Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak." (vv. 11–12).
- d. Finally, Moses just cuts straight to the point: "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else" (v. 13). And God says: "Fine, Aaron your brother will speak to Pharaoh for you, but I'm still going to use you Moses."

C. Here's the point: Moses is this seemingly small and weak and insignificant figure. And yet God is going to get ahold of him and use him to do mighty things. It's unexpected. It's surprising.

- 1. No one thought the redemption of God would come in such humble packaging . . .

Brown-Bag Paper

A. You know, I thought about the wrapping paper we use for our gifts at Christmas time. We like to use the shiny and flashy stuff, with bows and ribbons and things.

- 1. But sometimes God wraps his gifts in the paper of brown bags. Have you ever seen this? Where you just break down grocery bags or something and use the paper for wrapping. It doesn't look much on the outside. When you're choosing the next gift to open under the tree, your eye is always drawn to the glossier, more festive looking packages. You don't want to open that one. It looks like it was meant for the recycle bin. It looks like trash. And so it does on the outside, but you open it and find that there's surprising power and blessing within.

- a. That's how God works. That's how God wraps his gifts.

B. I wonder how this might be playing out in your life right now?

- 1. I wonder if you might be overlooking the ways in which God is truly at work for your good. You don't notice it because it doesn't look like much.
- 2. You want something flashy or profound, some lightning bolt in the sky. But God often comes under disguise of the simple and the mundane and the unimpressive things.

(4) God Comes

A. Here is where, I think you see, we start to slip through the backdoor of this OT story towards Christmas and the coming of God in Jesus.

1. This story of a people, stuck in bondage, crying out for help and redemption and God bringing it through a seemingly insignificant and, even pitiable, little baby . . . it anticipates what's coming in Christ.

The Wheels Are Falling Off

- A. You see, at the end of the day, Moses was no redeemer, right? No, he was in need of a redeemer himself.
 1. You remember how his story ends, don't you? The whole goal of this redemptive work of God in the exodus was to bring the people out from Egypt to the land of Promise. And though Moses was so instrumental in it all, he himself doesn't get to enter. He will die outside the land while the people of Israel go on to cross over the Jordan.
 - a. Why? Well it was God's judgment for his own sin, when God asked him to speak to the rock from which water would flow but instead, in his anger against the Israelites and against God even, he struck it with his staff.
 - i. Again, Moses is no redeemer. He himself needs a redeemer.
- B. And the whole exodus event itself was not sufficient either was it, when you read on to the end?
 1. They get out from slavery in Egypt and into the land of promise and what happens? Are they now truly redeemed and free?
 - a. Well, in the deepest sense, they're still in bondage, aren't they? You can take the people out of Egypt but you can't take Egypt out of the people. They're enslaved, spiritually, to sin. There's a deeper issue.
 - i. And this will play out there in Canaan, as their sin puts them at odds against God and leads to exile outside the land as well.
- C. The whole story ends in dissonance, with this unresolved tension, like a song stopped halfway through, or a play that called it quits at intermission. Everything is just left hanging in the air.
- D. So many of the OT stories of redemption and things are like this.
 1. They get rolling down the runway and you think all is going great and we're headed for glory and then right before it comes time to take off into the air, the wheels just fall off and the plane skids out.
 - a. So the stuff we have with Moses and the exodus, while it's awesome and amazing and we learn quite a bit of the character and the ways of God, it is still not sufficient, it's not the final act as it were, it's a foreshadow, a hint, an echo of what's to come.

God Himself Has to Come . . .

- A. At the end of the day, it's an indicator of the fact that God himself would have to come and take matters into his own hands if you and I are ever to truly be redeemed. And that's what Christmas is really all about. God comes . . .
- B. I wonder if you realize that the arrival of God in Jesus comes after what has been referred to as “the four hundred silent years”—these are the years since the last of the OT prophets. There was no prophet, no word from God for four hundred years.
1. He'd given them all these promises about a new and greater exodus and freedom from tyranny and true and lasting salvation and all of this, and then it just went quiet. The curtain closed and the intermission just carried on for so long. Just like it did with Israel when they were in Egypt. Four hundred years.
 2. And then, on a seemingly random, inconspicuous night in a seemingly random, podunk town named Bethlehem, after all the audience had likely gone home, the curtains pull back, and the final act begins: “¹⁰ [B]ehold, I bring you good news of great joy [the angel says] that will be for all the people; ¹¹ for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10–11).
 - a. It's as Paul says in Gal. 4:4-5, “⁴ when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” He comes four hundred years too late it would seem, but he comes right on time.
 - i. And he comes to save, to redeem, not just from Egypt or Babylon or Rome, but from the deeper bonds of Satan, sin, and death.
- C. But he comes in humility and weakness. He comes as a helpless little baby.
1. Moses was laid in a basket made of reeds. Jesus was laid in animal's feeding trough. He looks pathetic. He comes, as it were, wrapped in brown-bag paper. He doesn't look like anything special or significant.
- D. And again, just as it was with Moses, the king of the land is trying to kill him and he and his parents are on the run. They look weak and fragile.
1. This is not the inner circle you think the Savior of the world is going to emerge from, right?
- E. And even as he's growing up, as with Moses, there's nothing all that impressive about him.
1. So the prophet Isaiah says: “² [H]e grew up before [the LORD] like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. ³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isa. 53:2–3).

- F. And Jesus, too, will die outside the land, just like Moses. They string him up and drag him outside the gates of Jerusalem, where you take unclean things, and they kill him.
1. But unlike Moses, this death is not in judgment for his own sin, it's in judgment for yours and mine and Moses'.
 - a. You realize, don't you, that Moses hands his ministry off to whom? Joshua. In the Hebrew, *Yehoshua*; in the Aramaic, *Yeshewwa*; in the Greek, *lēsous* . . . Jesus. "YHWH saves." "I can't do it, you can!"
 - i. Jesus is the one who will lead God's people into the land of promise. He's the one who will ultimately save.
- G. And he comes, just as our text in [Exod. 2:23-25](#) mentioned, in remembrance of his covenant to the patriarchs.
1. So Mary, when she's told she'll carry the Lord Jesus, God's son, she rejoices and says: "⁵⁴ [\[God\] has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever](#)" (Luke 1:54-55). She gets it. This is God moving to fulfill all that he's promised from the very beginning!
 - a. Christmas and the cross represent the climax and culmination of God's plan of redemption.

Four Action Steps

- A. So, in light of what we've seen today, as we prep for Christmas coming at the end of the week, let me give you four action steps you can take to ready your own heart, I'll draw one out from each of the four headings in this sermon . . .

Action Step #1: Because He Hears . . . Cry

- A. The first thing I'd say is that, because we have a God who hears, who is not indifferent to your struggles and sufferings, I'd actually encourage you to cry this week. Cry out for help. You don't have to be in denial, or go it alone.
- B. Listen, Christmas is not candy-coated. It's not about cheap jollity or whatever.
1. We all know some of these Christmas songs on the radio, with the slappy-happy stuff, it's just fake. I love that song "*There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays*." But there's that line in there where he's talking about us all travelling home for Christmas and he says, "*From Atlantic to Pacific, gee the traffic is terrific!*"
 - a. And I'm thinking: "Are you kidding?" Have you ever been sitting in bumper-to-bumper Christmas travel traffic when that song comes on the radio? You just want to reach through the speakers and smack the guy. Give me a break. That's just not

true, the traffic stinks. That's candy-coated, that's plastic. That's not what Christmas is about.

- C. Christmas is about a God who draws near to a crying people, a people in darkness, a people in the mess.
 - 1. Does he set us free? Absolutely.
 - 2. But mapping this onto the Exodus story, we're still in the wilderness part of the journey. The chains of Egypt have been snapped, but we've not yet entered the promised land, the fullness of glory of the age to come. No. This place is hard. This life is hard.
 - a. Christmas is about a God who meets you in dark. So cry. It's okay. It's important. He hears.

Action Step #2: Because He Acts . . . Look

- A. But the next thing I'd encourage you to do is look—look for God's response and action. Don't just cry. Cry and then look. Because, as we've said, God doesn't just hear, he acts. His action will often seem delayed to us, too late, but it's always right on time.
- B. Are you looking? Are you expecting him to move?
 - 1. The image in my mind is like a kid waiting by the window, hoping to get a glimpse of Santa Claus. That's what we should be like with God, we're expectant.
 - a. I thought of that Psalm where David says: ["In the morning, O LORD, You will hear my voice; In the morning I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch"](#) (Psa. 5:3 NASB). I'm not just crying. I'm looking. You will answer.
- C. This is what Christmas tells us. People had given up. They left at intermission, but the show wasn't over. Don't be like that. Hold on, however hard it is, and trust. He's coming. He's working even now.

Action Step #3: Because He Surprises . . . Confess

- A. Here I'm just drawing on that idea that God surprises, and with that, that we don't often notice him. We kind of give up on him and go looking elsewhere. In those four hundred years of slavery or silence, we lose hope and we turn away. "If God's forgotten us, well, we may as well forget about him." And we try to figure it out on our own. We try to work our own rescue because God's not coming it would seem.
 - 1. We set up our idols—this will do it, that will do it. Maybe I need a new relationship, a new diet, a new job, a new doctor who can fix me, a change of pace, a vacation, something. If I get this, then I'd have redemption, then I'd be free.
 - a. And it never pans out. It always makes it worse.

B. Some of us are still trying. Some of us have hit that dead end, rock bottom.

1. All of us probably, in one way or another, need to confess . . .

- a. “God I’m sorry I’ve given up on you, you work with a surprising timetable in surprising ways, and sometimes I miss it. I miss Jesus. A baby in a manger. A dead man on a cross. These things seem so small and insignificant. But you mean them for my ultimate rescue. Help me to stop looking everywhere else and see what you’ve provided for me in Christmas with Jesus.”

Action Step #4: Because He Comes . . . Celebrate!

A. And the last action step I’d give, drawing from that fourth heading that God himself comes to redeem us at Christmas time, is just celebrate. Because we have a God who hears and acts and surprises and comes into the mess himself to save us, we can rejoice.

- 1. We can be free, truly free, to enjoy this Christmas and reflect on just how good God is to us. So you can sing the songs. You can share good food and drink. You can bake those cookies. You can wrap those gifts all up in shiny paper and stuff. You can celebrate.
 - a. But you do it with a deeper joy, because you know the true meaning of Christmas, and the God who loves you and has redeemed you in Jesus.