

Keep Still, the Lord Fights for You

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Date: 12 October 2008

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[0 : 00] Exodus takes its name from the key event in the whole of the book of Exodus, which is the departure of Egypt via the crossing of the Red Sea. And Exodus, as you've probably previously been told, means literally departure.

And this was a mass migration on a scale that most of us, I think, would find hard to conceive of or imagine. I guess if you lived in Bangladesh or you lived in India or you lived in China, it may not be as inconceivable because they deal with vast numbers of people in regular ways, and that's beyond our conception and personal experience.

But in Exodus, we see it was the action of God that enabled the Exodus to take place. And for the people of Israel, there was no more important event in their history and in their life as well as in their self-identity than this particular event.

And it has parallels for us in the death of Christ, the significance of Christ's death for us as God's people. As Alan Cole, the commentator, puts it, what the cross of Christ is to the Christian today the Exodus was to ancient Israel.

So this is an incredibly significant event that we're thinking about and reflecting on this morning together. And the key verse, I think, in the first part of the book of Exodus that I've always loved because I think it really captures the heart of God is in Exodus chapter 2, verses 23 to 25, where we read that the Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out.

[1 : 22] And their cry for help went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned for them.

What a classic depiction of the whole attitude of God towards us and towards the people of God. The Israelites, as we know, were in slavery and they'd been in that situation for 430 years.

The Egyptian taskmasters were piling up the burdens upon them. So they cry out to God. They moan before him about their lot and their situation. We're told that God remembers, he totally hears, he remembers his covenant with them and he listens to their plight.

And in a sense, the action that we think about this morning is the outworking of God's remembering and his commitment to them. For Israel, the Exodus event was the great culmination of God's hearing and God's therefore acting.

Now, as you know, there were 10 plagues upon the people of Egypt as part of God seeking to, in a sense, stir up Pharaoh to get him to the point where he would drive the Israelites' rights out.

[2 : 28] And you've no doubt given further reflection on all of that in recent weeks. The most awful of those plagues, of course, was the last and the 10th, where every firstborn male and every firstborn animal and all beasts of the field as well as the air were put to death, which would have been the most hideous of spectacles for any nation or any people to live through.

And that 10th plague had awful consequences for the people of Israel. And as a consequence of it, Pharaoh, ironically, is the one who initiates the sending out of God's people.

So in chapter 12, verse 31, we read, Up, leave my people, you and the Israelites, go, worship the Lord as you have requested, take your flocks and birds as you have said, and go, and also bless me.

So they literally left. And we read that they left literally carrying the things that they belonged to, their possessions, the unleavened bread upon their heads. And they actually took the silver and gold that the Egyptians in their confusion and foolishness gave to them, and they took off.

Now, it's, as I said, hard to ask to conceive of, I think, the size and the sheer quantity of what we're dealing with in this exodus. I think when you're a child in Sunday school, you have lovely little pictures of a pile of people going through the Red Sea.

[3 : 48] I don't know that I ever conceived of how many people were actually involved. It would, in a sense, be like the whole of the eastern suburbs of Melbourne literally taking off on one day and heading to the other side.

Now, I know that's inconceivable for most of us to think that you would cross the Yarra and go to the other side, certainly by choice. But nevertheless, the image is of a very, very large number of people taking off and moving at once.

We're told that there were 600,000 men plus women and children. Now, of course, if Paul was preaching, he would know the exact number because we're told that there were many other people beside, but there were at least two million people, maybe one and a half.

I don't know. It's hard to calculate. In those days, they presumably had large families, so we're dealing with a very, very large group of people that took off, plus all of their animals and all of their livestock because they had become a great people.

And one of the things we see, and it's just through the sheer number of people, is that God had been blessing the people of Israel while they're in captivity, as well as blessing them as we will see in their deliverance.

[4 : 57] Well, the story itself that we're focusing on this morning starts off in Exodus chapter 13, verse 17 onwards, and we see that in spite of this vast multitude, God takes them on a somewhat circuitous route because it was safer.

I did appreciate the reading this morning, and I'm avoiding using any of those difficult pronunciations, but I thought the reader did an exceptional job, and I am, in my cowardness, avoiding all of those names, but you got it brilliantly, so well done.

So this vast multitude takes off, and they don't go on a direct route. They go via the desert road to the Red Sea, and you ask the question, why? Because if you had two million people plus animals and livestock to get out, you'd want to go directly, wouldn't you?

And you wouldn't go via Warrandyte, I don't think. You'd probably just go on the Eastern Freeway if you were crossing to the other side. Well, we're told that they were, in this case, they were under, it was in case they came under attack, and therefore they changed their minds and wanted to go back to Egypt.

Well, they leave dressed for battle and bearing the bones of Joseph, which who didn't want to, as we know, be buried in Egypt, but in his home country. And the carrying of the bones of Joseph was symbolic in a sense of the fact that they came to Egypt through Joseph, and they leave to take Joseph back to where he belongs as one of the great people, leaders of Israel from the past.

[6 : 15] And we're told that the Lord literally goes before them. By day, there was a cloud of the pillar of cloud, which led them out and actually was a sign of the presence of the Lord. And at night, there was a pillar of fire which hovered over them again as a sign of the presence of the Lord in their midst.

And they set out again, seemingly going around in circles to confuse Pharaoh. And they end up in a site where they're camped literally along the side of the Red Sea in this vast horde of people, and with a desert around about them, seemingly in an incredibly vulnerable position, very, very vulnerable to attack.

And very anxious about their situation. They camp by the sea and Pharaoh starts to pursue them because he has actually changed his mind and realized that he's made a huge mistake.

Now, political leaders are often associated or criticized for policy backflips. And Pharaoh himself makes what would seem like a monumental one. It's what Paul Keating would have called a backflip with a double pike because he then decides that the people are leaving.

What are we going to do? We're going to lose all of our servants and all of our slaves. His people start to complain that they've lost their servants and he changes his mind and sends out his chariots and forces to go after the people of Israel to bring them back.

[7 : 31] And what do we find? They're hemmed in with one side of them being the sea and the other side being the desert with Pharaoh's troops and his chariots bearing down upon them, seemingly sitting targets.

So the people of Israel cry out to the Lord and they complain to Moses and they say, what did you bring us here into the desert to be killed and buried? What have you done to bring us, to bring us, to us rather and bringing us out of Egypt?

Didn't we say in Egypt, leave us alone? Let us serve the Egyptians. It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert. You can imagine how Moses, the leader of the people of Israel, must have felt with this lament and this complaint going up, leading this great group of people off into freedom and they're complaining and pressing him to take them back into captivity.

Now, in one sense, their situation is totally and their response is totally understandable, isn't it? Here they are hemmed in with the great warriors and the great leaders of Egypt bearing down upon them, as I said, seemingly sitting targets.

But at the same time, it's typical of the people of God that they have no real trust and no real confidence that God would deliver them and bring them through. And it is a remarkable test for Moses, who was a diffident leader in the first place, to actually take up and respond to this challenge.

[8 : 52] But he does so amazingly. He says, do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today, you will never see again.

The Lord will fight for you. You need only be still. I think the hardest part of that is the injunction to be still, don't you think? Can you imagine yet again?

Hemmed in with the Egyptian army bearing down upon you and you're exhorted to trust God and be still. Well, this is an amazing setting and an amazing scene, isn't it?

The people of God, millions of them with their livestock, hemmed in against the sea with the might of Pharaoh's armies bearing down upon them and they're exhorted to trust God to remain firm and faithful and to trust that God would vindicate them and bring them to victory.

Easy to say but so much harder to do, isn't it? To trust God when you're up against it and we'll touch on that later. They didn't know how God intended to deliver them either, did they?

[9 : 51] They didn't have some prophetic utterance about that so they didn't know in fact how they were going to get out of this incredibly tricky situation. So, the deliverance begins. Moses does as he is directed by God to do and he raises his staff and stretches it out over the waters and the waters begin to depart.

He tells the people to start literally walking into the edge of the sea as the waters depart and he's told that God would gain glory through Pharaoh and through the destruction of Pharaoh's armies as the people of God are protected and delivered.

In order to protect the people of God, the angel of the Lord who was present with them, we're told and goes and stands between Pharaoh's armies and the people of God. The pillar of cloud moves from being at the front of the people of God to be behind them and we assume, I guess, that the pillar of fire moves before them and takes them on through this water.

The Egyptian army was therefore shrouded in darkness and the people of God were bathed in light. The waters part and they head into the waters and as we know move into deliverance.

Well, the Egyptian shoulders followed after the waters of the people of God got through and at the end of the night, the beginning of day, the waters close over them and all of Pharaoh's armies are destroyed and the people of God are delivered and vindicated.

[11 : 13] Well, in verses 30 to 31 of chapter 14, we read that that day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians. The people saw the Lord's great power. The people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and Moses, his servant.

Exodus is the great salvation event of the book of the Old Testament because God heard their cry. He listened, he responded and he actually remembered his covenant with the people of God, the fact that they were his people and he was their God, that he had a commitment to them of love and of actually putting up with them in their unfaithfulness and he acted through human agents to bring about their deliverance.

Even those who opposed him were used by God. So what can we make of this for today? Well, first off, and in one sense this is the obvious point but it's an important point to make, that God is sovereign.

God was in control through the whole of the experience of the people of God going into captivity as well as coming out of captivity. Both in slavery and in deliverance, God was working out his purpose and his sovereign plan and purpose was being worked out in the midst of their lives.

They went in as a tiny familial group and they came out as a great nation. A huge number of people plus others plus animals and livestock and gold and silver and all of the accoutrements that were needed to become the great nation that they eventually would become.

[12 : 41] So Israel was delivered from bondage in slavery by the mighty hand of God and through God overruling both through human agents who were opposed to him in the case of Pharaoh whose heart was hardened as well as through Moses God's divinely raised up an anointed leader.

They were guided, they were protected and they were saved. And in the Song of Moses which follows in chapter 15 we read these words. Your right hand, Lord, was majestic in power.

Your right hand, Lord, shattered the enemy. In the greatness of your majesty you threw down those who opposed you. You unleashed your burning anger. It consumed them like stubble.

By the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up. The surging waters stood up like a wall. The deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea. Well, we're living in the middle of a major economic crisis when given the nature of the global culture we now live in, we're living in tumultuous times ourselves, aren't we?

There are many pundits out there and many experts who are making all sorts of dire predictions and I think it's in the middle of that sort of crisis that we have to ourselves be confident that God is sovereign.

[13 : 51] Don't we? And to trust the Lord and believe that somehow in a way that even if you were the most sage of prophets or experts you may not actually fully know what's going to happen next that God actually is somehow working his purposes out.

It may well be that what's happening at present is an expression of God's judgment on human greed and reckless behavior. But at the same time God is actually seeking to bring good out of this crisis and we have to in our context today trust him to be sovereign as the people of God in their stumbling had to learn for their good.

So God's sovereign. He's in control of our situation whether we're in a good situation or whether we're in a difficult situation. He's working out his plan and purpose and we only in a sense have sort of particular insights into the outworking of that plan and purpose.

We have to be faithful in the midst of that because we know that God is a God who's capable of doing great things has delivered his people in the past and can deliver us today. But secondly we also see the reality of salvation.

As I've already said this was the great salvation event of the Old Testament and for those who were there it was an incredibly powerful experience. It's hard to imagine what a more powerful experience you could go through than what the people of Israel and in that day experienced.

[15 : 12] Is it? To have been in that situation with this huge crowd with the Egyptian armies bearing down upon them they would have been fearful and anxious and desperately afraid that they were going to be destroyed and yet they went through that miraculous experience of seeing God part the waters of being able to walk through in great safety being led by God protected in both the front and the rear and then seeing the waters close over again and all of Egypt's armies being destroyed.

an amazingly powerful and real experience for them in that day. But what we also see that it was an incredibly powerful and real experience for the people of God in the generations to come because again and again in the Old Testament the Exodus is referred to as the great salvation event of the people of God and so generation after generation of the people of God were called asked to call that event back to mind to remember what God did and in calling it back to mind and remembering it became for them their salvation event and for them a real experience as well.

They weren't the original people that went through the experience but as they remembered God's providence and God's goodness they actually were able to recall and to remember that it was the way that God had delivered his people and was indeed continuing to deliver God's people today.

And as future generations called this to mind they were reminded that this was important and significant for them as well. In chapter 15 verse 13 we read in your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed.

In your strength you will guide them to your dwelling place. Well in the same way for us we know that historically Christ has died don't we? And we'll declare that later on.

[16 : 58] We also know that Christ is risen and we have great confidence in declaring those two things this morning and equal confidence to declare that Christ will come again. Now those were historic things that took place because we believe in the historic nature of Christ's humanity as well as his death and his resurrection.

And we have great confidence that the risen ascended Christ who sits on the right hand side of the Father in his ascended glory will return and to take us to be with him and to judge the world.

But as we call to mind Christ's saving actions on our behalf death they're not just historic events that happened sometime in the past that were significant for the people who were actually eyewitnesses at the time.

They're just as significant and just as important for us today. And it's in the remembering that it's just as real for us today. So as we come to share in Holy Communion this morning it's going to be a significant moment for us.

It won't be an unfamiliar experience for most of us because we've shared in Holy Communion many many times before. But as we reach our hands and as we actually take hold of cups and as we eat and as we drink we remember Christ's death and Christ's body that was broken and his blood that was shed.

[18 : 13] And in the remembering of those things we feed on Christ and we remember and call to mind God's grace and his goodness to us. And there's a reality in a sense in our remembrance of what remembrance rather what Christ has done for us and the significance of that salvation which was salvation in the past but salvation for us today because Christ's salvation is a reality for us in our lives which we receive by faith and are based on the grace of God.

So this morning I want to encourage you to use the moment of coming forward for Holy Communion as you do reach our hands to receive to give thanks to God to remember what Christ has done for you to feed on Christ to commune with Christ and to rededicate yourself afresh to live for Christ because as the people of God remembered that great salvation event it was a means by them for the renew to renew their trust and for us it ought to be a means for us to renew our trust in Christ and to commit ourselves to live for him afresh in this coming week which also means that we have to actually work recognize and continue to wrestle with the reality that somehow as I sometimes say God is working his purpose out in our lives and in our church and God actually does that in the good things as well as in the hard things that we experience as God's people.

It happens through faithfulness and it happens through unfaithfulness. The people of God were not an exemplary group in the Old Testament in terms of their faithfulness were they? And you probably know more about that than many congregations because of the faithful preaching of the Old Testament in this church.

church and somehow God remained faithful to them and somehow God was working out his purpose amongst them even though they themselves were of varying I guess quality in terms of their faithfulness and respond to him.

And we have to trust and believe that somehow God's doing the same thing in our lives and in our community as God's people today both in good as well as in struggle both in the great things that happen as well as in the difficult things that happen in the midst of being God's people.

[20 : 20] people. I recently with my wife went and visited a young man who's only 22 years old who's got an incredibly advanced form of cancer. A committed Christian and from a very vibrant family and you go home thinking you know why would God be doing this to this young man or allowing this to happen?

It doesn't seem to make sense that someone in that incredibly vital point of their life would be struck down with cancer at this stage. I also recently have been involved in as Paul has been ministering to Phil Muleman one of your former curates who was hit by a motorbike and he's got a fractured pelvis and has a brace and pin which I hope gets removed this week which I'm sure he hopes as well and Phil's have to wrestle with being taken out of action at a critical point in the life of his church when they're finally getting to the point where they're building their new building and I guess he's discovered while he's flat on his back in rehabilitation that he's been able to continue to have a whole significant ministry because his parish has literally all turned up to visit him day after day after day after day not all at once thankfully his room's not that big but he's had an amazing ministry while disabled and out of action.

You see somehow God is working his purposes out isn't he? We don't always know what the full story is because we have to live in the finite dimension of our life today and God's working out his plan and purpose in the eternal sense that we don't have full insight to but we're bound to God in a covenant relationship of love and his faithfulness to us is far more faithful than our commitment and response to him and we have to live in trust and response to him as I've said both in the good situations as well as in the struggles and I think that has big implications for us as the people of God both in the particular sense of you as the people of God in this place at Doncaster as well as the people of God in any sort of church in Western culture at this time because God's calling us into new paths the new ways of being church which is going to be a bit more scary I suspect than it has been in previous eras.

We're now in a mission era when God's calling us to be engaged in mission to the nations and that's going to be involved stepping out in faith taking risks and taking new initiatives. You've already got a great experience of that with your significant commitment to cross cultural ministry in this church and your outreach to the nations that have come into this community through your Chinese ministries and that's in a sense a window of what I think God's calling the church to do these days to let teams and groups of people go out and to seek to do mission in our context as we've sought to support mission in all sorts of other contexts across the globe in previous years.

I don't have time to go into sort of full details about all of that but I think that's part of the challenge of trusting God and seeing the outworking of his plan and purpose in the future as we seek to be God's people together.

[23 : 08] Well the exodus was the great salvation event of the people of God. It demonstrated God's sovereign plan and purpose his majesty and his power and control and the death of Christ is for us our great salvation event and the great salvation event of all humanity.

So let's celebrate that today as we come to share in the Lord's Supper together and dedicate ourselves afresh to live for Christ and to serve him. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.