

Exodus 1; Luke 4; Job 18; 1 Corinthians 5

"THEN A NEW KING, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt" (Ex. 1:8). Those who learn nothing from history are destined to repeat all its mistakes, we are told; or, alternatively, the only thing that history teaches is that nothing is learned from history. Whimsical aphorisms aside, one cannot long read Scripture without pondering the sad role played by *forgetting*.

Examples abound. One might have expected, after the Flood, that so sweeping a judgment would frighten postdiluvial human beings into avoiding the wrath of God, but that is not what happens. God leads Israel out of bondage, deploying spectacular plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea, but mere weeks elapse before the Israelites are prepared to ascribe their rescue to a god represented by a golden calf. The book of Judges describes the wretched pattern of sin, judgment, rescue, righteousness, followed by sin, judgment, rescue, righteousness—the wearisome cycle spiraling downward. One might have thought that under the Davidic dynasty, kings in the royal line would remember the lessons their fathers learned, and be careful to seek the blessing of God by faithful obedience; but that is scarcely what occurred. After the catastrophic destruction of the northern kingdom and the removal of its leaders and artisans to exile under the Assyrians, why did not the southern kingdom take note and preserve covenantal fidelity? In fact, a bare century-and-a-half later the Babylonians subject them to a similar fate. Appalling forgetfulness is not hard to find in some of the New Testament churches as well.

So the forgetfulness of Egypt's rulers, aided by a change of dynasty, is scarcely surprising. A few hundred years is a long time. How many Christians in the West have really absorbed the lessons of the evangelical awakening, let alone of the magisterial Reformation?

Not far from where I am writing these lines is a church that draws five or six thousand on a Sunday morning. Its leaders have forgotten that it began as a church plant a mere two decades ago. They now want to withdraw from the denomination that founded them, not because they disagree theologically with that denomination, not because of some moral flaw in it, but simply because they are so impressed by their own bigness and importance that they are too arrogant to be grateful. One thinks of seminaries that have abandoned their doctrinal roots within one generation, of individuals, not the least scholars, who are so impressed by novelty that clever originality ranks more highly with them than godly fidelity. Nations, churches, and individuals change, at each step thinking themselves more "advanced" than all who went before.

To our shame, we forget all the things we should remember.

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Exodus 2; Luke 5; Job 19; 1 Corinthians 6

IN THE MOST CRUCIAL EVENTS IN REDIMPTIVE HISTORY, God takes considerable pains to ensure that no one can properly conclude that these events have been brought about by human resolve or wit. They have been brought about by God himself—on his timing, according to his plan, by his means, for his glory—yet in interaction with his people. All of this falls out of **Exodus 2:11-25**.

The account is brief. It does not tell us how Moses' mother managed to instill in him a profound sense of identity with his own people before he was brought up in the royal household. Perhaps he enjoyed ongoing contact with his birth mother; perhaps as a young man he delved into his past, and thoroughly investigated the status and subjugation of his own people. We are introduced to Moses when he has already so identified with the enslaved Israelites that he is prepared to murder a brutal Egyptian slave overlord. When he discovers that the murder he committed has become public knowledge, he must flee for his life.

Yet one cannot help reflecting on the place of this episode in the plotline that leads to Moses' leadership of the Exodus some decades later. By God's own judicial action, many Egyptians would then die. So why doesn't God use Moses now, while he is still a young man, full of zeal and eagerness to serve and emancipate his people?

It simply isn't God's way. God wants Moses to learn meekness and humility, to rely on God's powerful and spectacular intervention, to await God's timing. He acts in such a way that no one will be able to say that the real hero is Moses, the great visionary. By the time he is eighty, Moses does not want to serve in this way; he is no longer an idealistic, fiery visionary. He is an old man whom God almost cajoles (Ex. 3) and even threatens (Ex. 4:14) into obedience. There is therefore no hero but God, and no glory for anyone other than God.

The chapter ends by recording that "the Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham" (2:23-24). This does not mean that God had forgotten his covenant. We have already seen that God explicitly told Jacob to descend into Egypt and foretold that God would one day bring out the covenantal plan. The same God who sovereignly arranges these matters and solemnly predicts what he will do, chooses to bring about the fulfillment of these promises by personally interacting with his covenantal people in their distress, responding to their cry.

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Exodus 3; Luke 6; Job 20; 1 Corinthians 7

TWO ELEMENTS IN **Exodus 3** demand attention.

The *first* is the dramatic introduction of “the angel of the LORD” (3:2). Initially, at least, Moses does not perceive an “angel.” The text reads, “There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush”—but this cannot mean that an angelic being appeared within the flames, differentiable from the flames, for what draws Moses’ attention is the bush itself which, though apparently burning, was never consumed. The manifestation of “the angel of the LORD,” then, was apparently in the miraculous flames themselves. Strikingly, when the voice speaks to Moses out of the burning bush, it is not the voice of the angel but the voice of God: “God called to him from within the bush, ‘Moses! Moses!’” (3:4). The ensuing discussion is between God and Moses; there is no further mention of “the angel of the LORD.”

On the face of it, then, this “angel of the LORD” is some manifestation of God himself. We shall have occasion to think through other Old Testament passages where the angel of the Lord appears—sometimes in human form, sometimes not even explicitly called an “angel” (recall the “man” who wrestles with Jacob in Gen. 32), always hauntingly “other,” and always identified in some way with God himself.

We might well ask if, when the text before us records that “God said,” it really means no more than that God spoke through this angelic messenger: after all, if the messenger speaks the words of God, then in a sense it is God himself who is speaking. But the biblical manifestations of “the angel of the LORD” do not easily fit into so neat and simplistic an explanation. It is almost as if the biblical writers want to stipulate that God himself appeared, while distancing this transcendent God from any mere appearance. The angel of the Lord remains an enigmatic figure who is identified with God, yet separable from him—an early announcement, as it were, of the eternal Word who became flesh, simultaneously God’s own fellow and God’s own self (John 1:1, 14).

The *second* element is even more important, though I can assign it only the briefest comment here. The name of God (3:13-14) may be rendered “I AM WHO I AM,” as it is in the NIV, or “I will be what I will be.” In Hebrew, the abbreviated form “I am” is related in some fashion to YHWH, often spelled out as *Yahweh* (and commonly rendered “LORD,” in capital letters; the same Hebrew letters stand behind English *Jehovah*). The least that this name suggests is that God is self-existent, eternal, completely independent, and utterly sovereign: God is what he is, dependent on no one and nothing.

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MARCH 01

Exodus 4; Luke 7; Job 21; 1 Corinthians 8

IN EXODUS 4 two elements introduce complex developments that stretch forward to the rest of the Bible.

The *first* is the reason God gives as to why Pharaoh will not be impressed by the miracles that Moses performs. God declares, "I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go" (4:21). During the succeeding chapters, the form of expression varies: not only "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (7:3), but also "Pharaoh's heart became hard" or "was hard" (7:13, 22; 8:19, etc.) and "he hardened his heart" (8:15, 32, etc.). No simple pattern is discernible in these references. On the one hand, we cannot say that the pattern works up from "Pharaoh hardened his heart" to "Pharaoh's heart was hardened" to "God hardened Pharaoh's heart" (as if God's hardening were nothing more than the divine judicial confirmation of a pattern the man had chosen for himself); on the other hand, we cannot say that the pattern simply works down from "God hardened Pharaoh's heart" to "Pharaoh's heart was hardened" to "Pharaoh hardened his heart" (as if Pharaoh's self-imposed hardening was nothing more than the inevitable out-working of the divine decree).

Three observations may shed some light on these texts. (a) Granted the Bible's storyline so far, the assumption is that Pharaoh is already a wicked person. In particular, he has enslaved the covenant people of God. God has not hardened a morally neutral man; he has pronounced judgment on a wicked man. Hell itself is a place where repentance is no longer possible. God's hardening has the effect of imposing that sentence a little earlier than usual. (b) In all human actions, God is never completely passive: this is a *theistic* universe, such that "God hardens Pharaoh's heart" and "Pharaoh hardened his own heart," far from being disjunctive statements, are mutually complementary. (c) This is not the only passage where this sort of thing is said. See, for instance, 1 Kings 22; Ezekiel 14:9; and above all 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12: "For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness."

The *second* forward-looking element is the "son" terminology: "Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, 'Let my son go, so he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son" (Ex. 4:22-23). This first reference to Israel as the son of God develops into a pulsating typology that embraces the Davidic king as the son *par excellence*, and results in Jesus, the ultimate Son of God, the true Israel and the messianic King.

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MARCH 02

Exodus 5; Luke 8; Job 22; 1 Corinthians 9

ACCORDING TO **Luke 8:19-21**, “Jesus’ mother and brothers came to see him” but were unable to achieve their objective owing to the press of the crowd. Word was passed up to Jesus: “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you”—apparently under the assumption that Jesus himself would make his way to them, or use his authority to ensure that a passage was opened up for them. After all, this was a culture much less individualistic than our own, much more oriented to the family and the extended family.

That is what makes Jesus’ answer astonishing: “My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice” (8:21). Four things must be said.

First, this is not an isolated passage. Once Jesus begins his public ministry, on no occasion, until the cross, does he betray any slight preference for his own family members, including his mother. In every instance, he either quietly distances himself from them (as here and 11:27-28), or else gently rebukes them (e.g., John 2:1-11). There is no exception. Those who argue that Mary has an inside track into the affections and blessings that only Jesus can bestow cannot responsibly adduce evidence from these texts.

Second, the reasons for Jesus’ conduct are not hard to find. Quite apart from this passage, the Gospels keep drawing attention to Jesus’ uniqueness. In the context of Luke, the familial connection is overshadowed by Jesus’ virginal conception, which is tied to Jesus’ mission and to who he is. Judging by the book of Acts, even Jesus’ natural family had to come to terms, after the resurrection, with who this son and brother of theirs really was, and they became part of the Christian community that worshiped him.

Third, not for a moment does this suggest Jesus was callous toward the feelings of his family. One of the most touching moments in the gospel of John pictures Jesus on the cross, almost with his dying breath providing the care and stability needed to his distraught mother (John 19:26-27).

Fourth, the force of the passage before us must not be missed: Jesus insists that those closest to him, those he “owns” as his, those who have ready access to him, those who are part of his real family, are henceforth not his natural relatives, but “those who hear God’s word and put it into practice” (8:21). Unlike many rulers, Jesus showed no interest in a natural dynasty. Nor was his ultimate focus on his tribe, clan, or nuclear family. He came to call into permanent being the family of God—and they are characterized by the obedient hearing of God’s word.

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BEFORE WE MEET:

1. In the past week what did you learn about God from what you read?
2. In the past week what did you learn about people from what you read?
3. In the past week what is one question you have from what you read?

MARCH 03

Exodus 6; Luke 9; Job 23; 1 Corinthians 10

ONE OF THE TASKS IMPOSED ON those who wish to read the canonical Gospels sensitively is to see how the various units are linked. Casual readers remember individual stories about Jesus from their Sunday school days, but do not always reflect on the links that weld these stories into a complete Gospel. Moreover, the individual evangelists did not arrange their material exactly the same way as the others, so the special flavor of each gospel is often lost unless the distinctive links are thoughtfully pondered.

An instructive example is found in Luke 9:49-50. The preceding verses (9:46-48) find Jesus' disciples arguing as to which of them would be greatest (in the consummated kingdom, presumably). Knowing their thoughts, Jesus teaches them an embarrassing lesson, employing a little child to make his point. Important people honey up to even more important people. Those who follow Jesus welcome the least powerful members of society—the little children. What Jesus demands is an outlook fundamentally at variance with that of the world: "For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest" (9:48).

It is at this juncture that 9:49-50 comes into play. John comments that he and the others saw a man driving out demons in Jesus' name, "and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us." Jesus forbids them this course of action. "for whoever is not against you is for you." At first glance this is a somewhat different topic from that of the preceding verses. Then again, maybe not: the connections call for reflection. John's complaints no longer sound like godly concern for orthodoxy, but like power-hungry moaning more concerned that those who preach and heal belong to the right party than that the mission itself be advanced. So this is pathetically tied to the debate over who would be the greatest. Personal aggrandizement will inevitably prove an unstable base for making wise assessments of the ministry of others.

The following verses (9:51-56) find Jesus in Samaria. When the Samaritans prove inhospitable, Jesus' disciples are quite prepared to call fire down upon them. Jesus rebukes them. Since these verses follow the themes already elucidated, the attitude the disciples here betray is clarified. Their passion for judgment against the Samaritans is motivated less by a genuine grasp of and devotion to Christ Jesus, than by a power-hungry self-focus.

The closing verses of the chapter highlight the same contrast (9:57-62). The three who protest the loudest about how eagerly they will follow Jesus are firmly put in their place: they have not counted the cost of discipleship, and so their pious protestations take on the ugly hue of self-love.

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MARCH 04

Exodus 7; Luke 10; Job 24; 1 Corinthians 11

THE STORY IS TOLD of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of the most influential preachers of the twentieth century. When he was dying of cancer, one of his friends and former associates asked him, in effect, “How are you managing to bear up? You have been accustomed to preaching several times a week. You have begun important Christian enterprises: your influence has extended through tapes and books to Christians on five continents. And now you have been put on the shelf. You are reduced to sitting quietly, sometimes managing a little editing. I am not so much asking therefore how you are coping with the disease itself. Rather, how are you coping with the stress of being out of the swim of things?”

Lloyd-Jones responded in the words of Luke 10: “[D]o not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (10:20—though of course Lloyd-Jones would have cited the King James Version).

The quotation was remarkably apposite. The disciples have just returned from a trainee mission, and marvel that “even the demons submit to us in your name” (10:17). At one level, Jesus encourages them. He assures them that (in some visionary experience?) he has seen Satan fall like lightning from heaven (10:18). Apparently Jesus understands this trainee mission by his disciples as a sign, a way-stage, of Satan’s overthrow, accomplished in principle at the cross (cf. Rev. 12:9-12). He tells his disciples that they will witness yet more astonishing things than these (Luke 10:18-19). “However,” he adds (and then come the words quoted by Lloyd-Jones), “do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (10:20).

It is so easy to rejoice in success. Our self-identity may become entangled with the fruitfulness of our ministry. Of course, that is dangerous when the success turns sour—but that is not the problem here. Things could not be going better for Jesus’ disciples. And then the danger, of course, is that it is not God who is being worshiped. Our own wonderful acceptance by God himself no longer moves us, but only our apparent success.

This has been the sin of more than a few “successful” pastors, and of no fewer “successful” lay people. While proud of their orthodoxy and while entrusted with a valid mission, they have surreptitiously turned to idolizing something different: success. Few false gods are so deceitful. When faced with such temptations, it is desperately important to rejoice for the *best* reasons—and there is none better than that our sins are forgiven, and that by God’s own gracious initiative our names have been written in heaven.

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