

Series: SO YOU WANNA GO BACK TO EGYPT...

May 23, 2010
GETTING EGYPT OUT OF ISRAEL!
Exodus and Numbers

1. Gord, a close friend of mine who lives in Ohio, went into the hospital a couple of years ago for surgery on his back. The surgery actually went very well and he got out of the hospital. However, he picked up an infection in the hospital that put him flat on his back for months. The early prognosis was that *if* he lived, he would never work again. When I saw him—almost a year after that—he was doing well—but still not able to work full-time. As I thought about that—I realized that Gord got *out* of the hospital. That was pretty straightforward. The *hardest* part was getting the *hospital* out of him—at least the part of it that he brought home with him. *That* was what almost killed him.

-Actually—that principle applies to a *lot* of life. Every child grows up in—and eventually leaves their home; what's trickier—is getting the *home* out of them—especially if it wasn't a healthy one. Someone experiences abuse in a marriage. They get *out* of the marriage and are freed from abuse—but sometimes the abuse never gets out of *them*.

-The story of God freeing an entire nation, Israel, from slavery is a phenomenal story. Powerful. Dramatic. Unforgettable. Sometimes people say things like, "You know, if God would only show up. Speak. Do miracles—you know, give me definite proof of His existence and power—I think I could believe!"

-The strange thing is that this story of the Exodus is about a group of people who *had* all that—and still wouldn't trust God. They saw it *all*—tangible proof of God's existence and power—and his judgment--and wouldn't believe. God got them out of Egypt, but couldn't get Egypt out of *them*.

2. This entire series is about God's Mission—to rescue and restore all of His creation—especially his people. And there are some points where it feels like all is lost—and this is one of them. God's people—Abraham's descendants are *not* blessed—they're enslaved by the most powerful nation on earth. And those who curse them—the leaders of Egypt-- are *not* cursed. In fact, they're doing just *fine*. And God's people are not blessing the nations—they've lost hope. It's questionable whether they even *believe* in the Most High God!
 - a. What they didn't realize was that something powerful would rock their world—and the world of that day. God was planning a mass extraction. And he was at work calling and preparing a man to lead it. Moses. Someone who believe God when no one else would.
 - b. We pick up the story where Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh about releasing the Hebrews. Needless to say—it didn't go well. In fact, Pharaoh made things worse for the Israelite slaves—and they, in turn, were angry with Moses—and Moses, angry with God. And God said:

“Therefore, say to the people of Israel: ‘I am the LORD. I will free you from your oppression and will rescue you from your slavery in Egypt. I will redeem you with a powerful arm and great acts of judgment. I will claim you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God who has freed you from your oppression in Egypt. I will bring you into the land I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I will give it to you as your very own possession. I am the LORD!’” (Exodus 6:6-8 NLT)

3. It’s important to know what God was up to here. The core of this story is *not* about setting oppressed people free. God could’ve done that with a single miracle. No, God was judging the gods Egypt—and Israel—trusted in for the whole world to see. God wanted to once again dwell with His people—and for them to *be* His people—they would have to follow Him. For them to bless the nations—they would have to become *like* Him.

-But their 400 years in the most polytheistic nation of the ancient world had shaped their hearts. They didn’t *know* that God alone was **Most High God**—Lord of all. So, in ten systematic acts God exposed the **gods** they trusted for what they really were. Fake. Powerless. This was a showdown about who’s God—and who’s not.

- a. In general, the Egyptians worshipped life; particularly, life after death. The evidence of this is *still* visible in our day with the pyramids—huge monuments to the **afterlife**. So, they worshipped anything that seemed to have to do with life, death and afterlife.

-And that makes sense of each of the judgments. The first plague, turning the Nile River to blood, was a specific attack on the **Mother of Egypt**. Without the Nile there would be **no** life in Egypt. God was saying, “As the Most High God—I can turn life to death!”

-The Egyptians had a reverence for amphibians—so God covered the land with them. They had a reverence for bugs and flies—because they seemed to appear out of dead things—as in maggots—and spring to life. Livestock, bulls and rams in particular, were symbols of fertility in Egypt—and in most of the pagan worship rites of that day—so God sent a plague on them that killed them. That didn’t work—so God sent a plague of boils—so severe that Pharaoh’s magicians couldn’t even come into his presence, let alone try to reproduce it. And *still* this guy’s heart was hard!

-They depended on the weather to keep their crops alive; God used the weather to destroy their crops—through a hailstorm, and through a wind that blew a swarm of locusts that ate everything the hailstorm hadn’t killed. Pharaoh *still* hardened his heart.

-Well, then God went to the core god of their culture—called Amon-Re—the **sun**. And the land was covered with darkness for three days. Ultimately, that didn’t work either. After a heated exchange, Moses warned Pharaoh that the

final plague will kill every firstborn in the land—from the stables and barns—right to Pharaoh’s household.

-Moses then went to his people—and told them that the angel of death would be passing through the land—and that their **only** hope was to spread the blood of a lamb on their doorways. The special meal eaten that night would become a core holy day for the Jewish people—**Passover**—when they remembered that God had spared them and brought them out of slavery. They had **no way** of knowing that the Messiah, the One who would come to bless all peoples, would shed his blood on that very day—and be called the **lamb of God**.

-And this final judgment finally broke Pharaoh’s will. In fact, he demanded that they leave!

- b. But Pharaoh’s pride still got the best of him. He rallied his army—and chased Israel to a place where they appeared to be trapped between the mountains, the Sea of Reeds, and his army. But somehow in his arrogance—Pharaoh thought he could **still** win against the power of this God who had decimated Egypt—and taken every firstborn child—including his own.

-As you know, Moses stretched this shepherd’s staff over the sea, it parted, and the Israelites crossed. Why Pharaoh thought **he** could use the same path this God had created for His people is beyond me. But arrogance and hardness of heart knows no limits. They tried to cross, the sea went back to its original basin—and the entire Egyptian army was destroyed.

-And the score at the end of this showdown was pretty clear. God is God. Not the sun, not magic, not food supply or health or fertility—or power. And when God was done judging the other gods that people—**His** people--had put their confidence in, it was clear to everyone—including all the other nations—**Who** God is. He’s Lord of everything.

- c. Something interesting about Pharaoh—that maybe we can apply to ourselves—is the fact that several times, in this encounter, he confessed to Moses, “We’ve sinned! We’re in the wrong! Please intercede!” And yet, when God relieved the crisis—he hardened his heart.

-I brought this pack of pry bars—which are **great** for getting stuck things—unstuck. They come in many sizes. It’s like God had to use bigger and bigger pry bars to get his people out of Egypt. The deal is—God is God—and He can’t be scammed or mocked. And He will use bigger and bigger pry bars, if necessary, to extricate us from worshipping stuff that is **not** God. He’s not being **mean**; He’s being **merciful!**

-So, I have a **very** pointed question; where are you stuck? Is God trying to pry you out of something—set you free—but you’re being difficult—and it’s like you’re **daring** God to use the big bar! So...**what will it take**--before you listen?

4. Well, you can just *imagine* the party that took place with Moses and the people he'd led out of Egypt when they saw the *power* of God deliver them as He did! That was an *incredible* high! It was a mountain top experience! But it didn't take them long to come down.

-Days later, they've run out of food and water. Listen to what they say:

“If only the LORD had killed us back in Egypt,” they moaned. “There we sat around pots filled with meat and ate all the bread we wanted. But now you have brought us into this wilderness to starve us all to death.” (Exodus 16:3 NLT)

It's like they *totally* miss the point—that their gratitude for what God has just done leaks out of them instantly.

-Now, what's up with this? Why all the struggle and drama? The point of all this was *not* just to get them out of slavery—and then feed them; it was to make them *His* people who would fulfill *His* mission. If they were going to be His people—and bless all nations—they would have to know Him. They would have to become *like* Him—and respect Him—and *listen* to Him.

-They didn't realize it, but they totally had the mentality of slaves. People who live for meal time—who internally are filled with resentment and anger. People who, because of how they were treated, find it almost impossible to trust—even Someone who loves them as His children. Loyalty? Well you give your loyalty to whoever meets the need du jour!

-How do you learn to be free—to believe—to love—to hope—to trust—when for a lifetime you've been treated like machinery? See, I think all this resentful dependence just got transferred to the ones they saw as their *new* taskmasters; Moses...and God.

- a. The other huge issue God had to deal with was the fact that, unlike the gods in Egypt, holiness and morality was *part* of following Him and becoming his people.

-In the process of blessing them and claiming them and using them as his people to be blessed—and to bless all nations—God had to help them *know* him. To know that not only was his power unlimited, He *alone* is God. That he is loving and kind and merciful—and morally perfect. Holy. And that humans were originally *created* as morally flawless beings. That if they were going to be His people in *His* land—and if He was going to dwell with them—moral uprightness and justice and love and kindness was all a part of that.

- b. Flip ahead three months. God has called Moses to the mountain to make a covenant with His people. A covenant is like a legal promise between people—about how they are going to carry on their relationship; how they will act when things are good; how they will deal with problems when things go wrong.
- Now, remember—God's presence has been obvious—day after day after day. And yet, like us, they get *impatient*. How many of you are at your best when you're *impatient*? Not usually, right?

When the people saw how long it was taking Moses to come back down the mountain, they gathered around Aaron. “Come on,” they said, “make us some gods who can lead us. We don’t know what happened to this fellow Moses, who brought us here from the land of Egypt.”
(Exodus 32:1 NLT)

-So, Aaron, second in command, gathers up a bunch of gold earrings, nose rings and tongue studs...melts them down, and makes a gold calf. Well, his approval rating goes off the charts—so he declares the next day to be a festival to the “Lord.” It was more like a frat party. People went **crazy**. Meanwhile, on the mountain, God said, “Better go check on your people.” And when Moses saw the chaos, he...well, Moses had anger issues, see—and he smashed the tablets God had written the covenant on. You know, how they would be **His** people—and He would be **their** God!

-Aaron’s excuse for the golden calf He’d made is classic. “These evil people wanted a god! What was I to do?”

So I told them, ‘Whoever has gold jewelry, take it off.’ When they brought it to me, I simply threw it into the fire—and out came this calf!”
(Exodus 32:24 NLT)

-Isn’t this **amazing?** These people had seen God’s power **first hand**--astounding acts of power never seen before or since. In three months—they’ve got a stupid golden calf that Aaron made—calling it the god who had brought them out of Egypt. This calf was one of the symbols of fertility in Egypt! God got them out of Egypt—but hadn’t gotten Egypt out of **them**.

5. The tragedy is—the problems with the Israelites and their rebellion isn’t a one or two time thing. When things don’t go well, they grumble, murmur, complain—and rebel. They think they’re rebelling against Moses. Moses says, “You’re actually rebelling against God.” There’s one account where you realize, as you read, how deep this stuff goes. Let me read it for you:

The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!"
(Numbers 11:4-6 NLT)

-When this happens, Moses is fed up. He kind of explodes in frustration at God—that He just can’t carry these people any further. So, God does two things. First, he places His Spirit on 70 other leaders to help Moses carry the load. Second, he has a message for the people.

"Tell the people: 'Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow, when you will eat meat. The LORD heard you when you wailed, "If only we had meat to eat! We were better off in Egypt!" Now the LORD will give you meat, and you will eat it. You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days,

but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it - because you have rejected the LORD, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?" (Numbers 11:18-20 NLT)

-What happens is that God sends quail, and they gather immense quantities of it—and stuff themselves. And a whole bunch of them get sick and die. That place is named, ***the graves of those who crave.***

- a. These people are in ***total denial.*** I understand how eating the same food -- manna-waffles, manna-burgers, manna soufflé, manna-cotti and ba-manna bread for several years, might make people a little edgy, okay. But “Oh for the ***good old days*** in Egypt! Free fish, leeks, cucumbers, melons, garlic--we want to go back!” Anyone reading this would think, “What total idiots! Of ***course*** they had free fish—they were ***slaves—and their children were being slaughtered!***” What rational person looks at that and says, “Well, there ***was*** an up side to it!”

-But it seems that they just can't do what needs to be done—keep moving forward. Why? Because they're doing what slaves do; resent, complain and blame. It's like they just can't believe—and trust this God who set them free!

-God says to them, literally, ***you will loathe the meat because you loathe Me!*** Fascinating, isn't it, that they cried for relief and for release—and ultimate resented and rebelled against the very One who saved their lives. How can God, who's mission is to make all things new and restore the ***shalom*** that's been lost use people who resent Him to accomplish it? He can't. Something has to change.

- b. I wish I could tell you that there is a wonderful ending for these people; that one day their hearts broke when they realized what God had done for them—out of love. But that never happened.

*In Numbers 16, Korah—closely related to Moses and Aaron—rebels against their leadership. He says something that blows me away:

Isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness? And now you also want to lord it over us! (Numbers 16:13 NLT)

That has to be the ultimate twist--***Egypt*** as the land flowing with milk and honey!

*And when God takes them out, guess who gets blamed?

The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. "You have killed the LORD's people," they said. (Numbers 16:41 NLT)

Then ***more*** people died. Almost 15,000 of them.

*Everybody loses. Not long after this the Israelites grumble again about having no water, and Moses, in a fit of rage, loses his chance to enter the Promised Land. You'd think that after God had given them water and food time after time after time—they'd get it! But they don't. And sometimes we don't either.

- c. It would appear that the attitudes that had been cultivated as slaves—rebellion, complaining, distrust, hopelessness and blaming gets transferred from the slavemasters in Egypt—to Moses—and to God. Even though they saw manifestations of God's presence that scared them spitless—heard His voice, participated in amazing miracles—they never put their faith in Him. And because they never allowed themselves to become God's people—they never made to the land He'd promised. He got them out of Egypt—no problem. Getting Egypt out of them? Never happened. **Never happened!**

6. I want to talk about slavery and oppression for a few minutes in closing. For years, some conservative believers and teachers applied this story almost **totally** to the spiritual realm. And it is **right** to apply it to the spiritual realm—because it **does** apply. The Book of Hebrews makes that clear.

-But because it applies spiritually, does that mean that ever since He extricated his people from Egypt, God really doesn't have a problem with slavery and oppression and injustice? I don't believe that for a minute. I believe God's mission is **way** big enough to include both. I believe that God's mission is to bring **His shalom to every single human on this planet**. I believe He hears the cries of those who are caught in the traps set by greedy people—who will, like those in this story, **use others to line their pockets**.

-That happens in some absolutely horrendous ways in our world. Sometimes people capture young girls—or buy them from their families—to use as sex slaves. And they are held captive—and raped day after day after day—as people without consciences reap the benefits. And all Heaven **shrieks** in horror that humans would do things like this to innocent children. In my opinion, that's the worst. In a world as advanced as ours, there are still people—millions of them—whole families—held in slavery. And all of Heaven **grieves** at their plight. And God listens to their cries—day after day after day.

-In other places, the oppression is more subtle—but **very** real. The poor are taken advantage of—and, in essence, their heads are held below the waterline of poverty. And that's where their families stay—generation after generation after generation. And oppression happens in both small—and big ways here in Toronto. Some people, through no fault of their own, are stuck in awful situations. Some are refugees from other lands. Some are kids in school systems where they are set up to fail. Injustice and sadness is closer to home than most of us think.

-Our temptation—as people who are free, who really and truly live privileged lives—is just not to **think** about the slavery and oppression that a significant part of the world is in. If God cares, if it's His mission that **everyone** have life and be free and have hope—then I believe that we are **all** called to help in some way. Would you agree?

And the **great** news is—here at The Olive Branch, we are. Can we do more?
Absolutely! And we should!

7. The other mistake that was made in reading this history of the Israelite’s release from slavery—was to make it **only** a call to action against the social injustice in the world—and totally miss what it says about the interior of the human heart. And it’s the slavery to sin that ultimately causes **all** the social issues and pain on this planet. And friends, this slavery is **very** real. And it’s every bit as degrading and destructive as physical slavery. Political slaves are powerless to do what’s best for themselves. And that same thing is true with spiritual slavery. You’re powerless to do what you want to do—and need to do—and what’s **best** for you and everyone around you. Sin is not just an action—it’s a power. And it can and **will** hold you captive!

a. When we think of the slavery of sin, we usually think in terms of the more visible, addictive things—like alcohol or pornography or drugs or hoarding or gambling. And it’s **very** easy to look at someone puffing their life away through a crack pipe—or destroying their hearts because they can’t rip themselves away from a porn site. Does it make **sense** to ruin your life, waste your years—and hurt others with that kind of stuff? Of course not! It’s **crazy!** It’s **stupid!** It’s **insane!**

-And every day the people **willingly** enter these traps, get stuck, feel the pain—and lie to themselves. “This really isn’t **that** bad—and **some day—SOME DAY** I’m gonna kick this thing! But they’re addicted. They’re **slaves** to their own cravings.

b. People like us **get** this. Our culture **gets** it. Most of us here today have at least one person in our family or our lives who is enslaved to something that’s destroying them. And it **hurts**.

-The thing our **world** doesn’t get—and the thing **we** don’t get—is that **all** sin enslaves and destroys. **All of it.** Jesus said to a group of people who had apparently just decided to believe in Him that He could set them free. They immediately bristled and—totally ignoring these 400 years of slavery in Egypt we’ve talked about--said, “We’re children of Abraham! We’ve never been slaves!”

Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin. A slave is not a permanent member of the family, but a son is part of the family forever. So if the Son sets you free, you are truly free. (John 8:34-36 NLT)

-See, our temptation is to live in denial. To ignore the things in our lives that are enslaving us—and keeping us from joy, hope, love—and from being **God’s people!** Because we aren’t officially **enslaved**—at least in the way our culture defines is—we just let it go. And even though it makes us miserable—we tell ourselves, “I’m not a slave. The person you speak of **could not be me!**” But just like these Israelites—we’ve simply traded masters. And we’re living in defiance of—and in subtle resentment of the One who could **really** set us free!

- c. It's possible that some of you need to be set free from a master, an addiction you've **never** named and dealt with.

-You may be addicted to **control**. You **must** control life—and control the others around you—and God, if He'd cooperate—so that you feel **safe**. Because to **be out of control** is so uncomfortable you can't stand it. And **controlling life** has become your Master. You try to control the people in your family, the people you work with—and use whatever it takes; manipulation, anger, nagging, temper tantrums. **Do you want to be free?**

-Another addiction Jesus named—that we rarely name—is **money**. Instead of money becoming a servant—used for good things, for good purposes—it has become your master. Making it, controlling it, hoarding it—dominates your thoughts, how you dress, where you live—who you hang out with—**everything**. And the question is—**do you want to be free?**

-For some of you—being desirable—having a man—having a woman is your master; your addiction. When push comes to shove in your life—this need controls what you do, how you dress, your sexual ethics—just about every decision you make. It takes more and more—and gives less and less.

-Given how much Jesus said about it, I'd guess that **the major slave-owner** on the planet is resentment and unforgiveness. In life, things happen. People slight us, hurt us, wound us—but we **won't let it go**. We **resent** these people—and see ourselves as the victims of what they do. Yet it is **own bitterness and hardness of heart** that keeps us enslaved. And we don't even see it! We are the bitter, unforgiving slaves of our **own** resentment and unforgiveness. Jesus says, "You **can** forgive! You **can** be free! You just have to choose freedom. Will you let it go?"

8. God is actively at work in this world. He wants **every single person** to be freed from the injustice, slavery, oppression and pain that we sometimes turn a blind eye to. He calls to people like you and me, "Will you at least **see** it? Look this monster in the eye—and let me use you to set people free?"

-But to bring real freedom—we have to know what it is.

-Through Jesus' death, God has proclaimed freedom for us. His goal is to **still** make a people for Himself—people who will be free. We **can** be free—but we have to choose whether or not we will hold onto the things that enslave us—or let God chisel them out of our lives. Watch this video.