

## **MOUNTAIN ON FIRE**

“Are we there yet?” The wail comes from the back seat of the car – at any time from five minutes after the start of the journey. You’ve promised your young family a trip to the beach, but at five years old it is hard for any child to understand that a promise usually needs time to come to fulfilment.

So it was with Abraham and Sarah, who had to wait twentyfive years from the day that God first promised them a child, to the birth of their son Isaac, that first link in the chain of promises God had made to Abraham. There were more links coming, but only in the fullness of time. More than five hundred years would pass before the birth of the next link – namely, Moses.

***Read Exodus 1:6-14, 22. Did that period of slavery come as a natural process of history? Was it sent from God? Or was it something that God used for His own purposes?***

As God had foretold to Abraham, his descendants were enslaved in Egypt for four hundred and thirty years and now it had reached the stage where Pharaoh was commanding that all the baby boys of the Hebrews be killed at birth.

***Read Exodus 2:1-10.***

With a combination of his mother’s uncommon commonsense and the intervention of God, baby Moses was saved from that fate, rescued by none other than Pharaoh’s daughter. If you ever wonder whether God has a sense of humour, you have only to read the account in Exodus chapter 2, where, through a very sensible big sister Miriam, Moses’ mother was paid – handsomely, I should think – for breast-feeding her own child! That would probably have lasted for three years at least, during which time that godly mother must have so inculcated the sense of God into his infant mind that Moses never ever lost the awareness of the one true God.

***Can you think of other stories in the Bible where God used natural mother love for His own purposes?***

***Read Exodus 2:11-25.***

Moses’s palace upbringing, with the best education the nation could offer, and some military training (Josephus says he commanded an army) were equipping him for the mission he was to accomplish later under the hand of God. Then when he fled Egypt in disgrace, to spend the next forty years in the desert, God used that time to equip him further as he developed his skills of shepherding and surviving in an unforgiving land – skills he would need as he shepherded the wayward nation of Israel through that very same desert. Halley says Moses still stands out as the foremost man of the pre-Christian world, who took a race of slaves and, under extremely trying circumstances, moulded them into a powerful nation which has altered the whole course of history.<sup>1</sup>

***Look at verse 6, and at verses 23-25. God used the distress of baby Moses to arouse the Egyptian princess to action, thus saving his life. God used the distress of the nation of Israel to motivate them to escape and become a nation in their own right, when otherwise they might have just been absorbed into Egypt. Can you see some purpose of God when distress comes into your own life? How does that help you?***

***“Who, me?”***

***Read Exodus 3:1-15.***

At the burning bush God gave to Moses a revelation of Himself and a commissioning for the task ahead .. It is wonderful to see how God has always been involved and pro-active in the affairs of men. Here He says He has ... *seen ...heard... am concerned... have come down to rescue them... and bring them out...* and then, to the astonishment of Moses, God concluded, “So now go, I am sending you!”

But first, Moses had to learn a lot more about God. Fire in the bush indicated the holiness of God whom he must revere, and in the presence of such holiness Moses must go barefoot, as a slave obedient to his master. After centuries of slavery the nation of Israel had little opportunity – and maybe little inclination – to learn about God, even to knowing His name, which in that culture, implied the character of the person. In verse 14 God gave Moses that wonderful revelation of Himself – “I AM WHO I AM” – the name that expressed His character as the dependable and faithful God who desires the full trust of His people. In John 8:58 Jesus applied that name to himself and the Jews understood full well that in doing so, he was claiming to be God – “Before Abraham was born, I am!” The thought is culminated in Revelation 4:8 – “Holy, holy , holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.”

Despite his reluctance and feelings of inadequacy, Moses obeyed God and returned to Egypt. He gathered the elders of Israel together and told them God’s message of deliverance, and in Exodus 4:31, “when they heard that the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshipped.”

***Why didn’t God give Moses his commission while he was still comfortably established in Egypt? Why did God wait for forty years after Moses had left Egypt, to begin His rescue of the Israelites? How much significance can we attach to the roles of the different Pharaohs?***

**Out of the frying pan ....**

***Read Exodus 6:1-8.***

But Moses’ demand to Pharaoh that he free the enslaved nation, only served to make their hardship worse, whereupon God countered with the encouragement we find in chapter 6. It is significant that, at this very dawning of freedom for the people of Israel, God should refer back to His covenant with Abraham. “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty.... I also established My covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they lived as aliens. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered My covenant.” (verses 3-5) We begin to see here how each of the great covenants grew naturally out of the previous ones. God’s word to Abraham in Genesis 17:8 – “The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God” - finds an echo in Exodus 6:7 and 8 – “I will take you as My own people, and I will be your God.... And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the Lord.”

***How much would Moses have known of God’s covenant with Abraham, which was given six hundred years before?***

God then showed His hand as He sent the ten plagues to convince Pharaoh that he must let God’s people go. With the last plague came the institution of the Passover as an ordinance to remind Israel for ever of God’s deliverance. Every family in Israel was to slay a lamb and put some of the blood on the lintel and door posts: this sign of faith worked out in obedience, would safeguard them when the angel of death passed through Egypt to slay the firstborn in every family.

The people of Israel were then to roast the lamb, not boil it – roast lamb is better than mutton stew anyway – and eat it all to strengthen them for their march to deliverance that night.

### **Saved by a sheep.**

***Read Exodus 12:1-14. Why did God give such strict rules for the preparation and eating of the Passover Lamb? Who described Jesus as “the Lamb of God?” (John 1:29)***

In 1 Corinthians 5:7 Paul talks of Christ as “our Passover Lamb” and a study of Exodus chapter 12, and the conditions God laid down for this ceremony, will reveal the aptness of Paul’s description. Verse 2 says, “This month (when the Passover was instituted) is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year.” Israel’s religious New Year was to remind them that their life as the people of God began with God’s grace and His redemptive work in the exodus. **Through the grace of God and our faith in the Passover Lamb we are born again, we take our first step in our spiritual life. Our redemption is a new beginning for us.**

Verses 3,4 tell us “Take a lamb ... one for each household ... You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat.” **The supply of the lamb was to be sufficient for each person, so Jesus is sufficient for us all, whatever our needs. “He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him”, says Hebrews 7:25, and “My grace is sufficient for you”, 2 Corinthians 12:9.**

Verse 5 goes on, “The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect.” **“The precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect,” 1 Peter 1:19.**

Verse 6 says, “Take care of them until the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the month”, (from the 10<sup>th</sup> day, verse 3), a time to prove there was no defect. **“Can any of you prove Me guilty of sin?” Jesus challenges in John 8:46. And 1 Peter 2:22 tells us “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth.”**

Again in verse 6, “All the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight” i.e. between 3 and 6 p.m. **“It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour,” (i.e. noon till 3 p.m.) “for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, ‘Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.’ When He had said this, He breathed His last.” Luke 23:44-46.**

Down to verse 46, “Do not break any of the bones.” **“When they came to Jesus and found that He was already dead, they did not break His legs.” John 19:33.**

Back to verse 7, “Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs.” **“How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, Who through the eternal spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.” Hebrews 9:14.**

Verse 9, 10, “Roast (the lamb) over the fire – head, legs and inner parts. Do not leave any of it till morning.” **Hebrews 9:14, above – “unblemished” signifies “in the entirety of Christ’s being, not just superficially.” Christ showed complete submission to the Father – “Not My will, but Yours be done.” Luke 22:42.**

And finally, verse 11, “This is how you are to eat it; with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand.” The Israelites had to show their faith in God

by being ready for the escape He had promised would come that night. **Have implicit faith in the Lamb of God for your salvation, and be ready to go wherever He leads!**

### **Long walk to Freedom**

#### ***Read Exodus 13:17-22.***

And so, on that great historical night of deliverance, the people chosen by God marched out of the slavery of Egypt into the glorious freedom of following God. We see in verse 18 that these former slaves were now equipped to be warriors, through the grace and power of God. Echoing the covenant with Abraham, who was blessed so that he could be a blessing to others, this new nation was chosen for the express purpose of being God's people and a light to the rest of the world. They must have had some influence even in Egypt, for Exodus 12:38 tells us that "many other people went up with them."

#### ***Read Exodus 14:5-31.***

They came to the Red Sea and the second big test of their faith – the Egyptian army behind them and the impassable waters ahead. But God was leading and protecting them: the pillar of fire stood between the two camps, shedding light for the Israelites but darkness and confusion for the Egyptians. "Don't panic," God encouraged Moses, "I have the whole situation in hand." And all that night the wind He sent worked steadily until the waters were divided. But notice that the wind came from the *east*, so that the Israelites on the *west* bank could not see what was happening. How much sleep did they get that night? Very little, I should think, as they trembled, literally "between the devil and the deep blue sea!" It was not until the morning dawned, and the waters before them finally parted to provide a passage on dry land, that they could see that God had been at work all night! We catch but the smallest glimpse of the work that God is continually doing, in our lives and in the world.

In triumph the infant nation marched through the sea – and for those who suggest their crossing was simply in a marshy part of the sea, I would point out Exodus 14:22, "the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with *"a wall of water on their right hand and on their left."* The returning waters were deep enough to drown the vast Egyptian army and more than 600 chariots! Deliverance was followed by praise, in the lovely song of Moses and Miriam, echoed by all the people – chapter 15, verses 2 and 13 – "The LORD is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation." "In Your unfailing love You will lead the people You have redeemed."

***The pillar of cloud and of fire was "supernatural", the wind that parted the sea was "natural". Do you see a blend of the natural and the supernatural in God's working in your life?***

Then followed three months of desert pilgrimage, during which the Israelites complained at the bitterness of the water, the lack of food and again at the lack of water. (Chapters 15-17). Even in their freedom they yearned for the "cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic" of Egypt. No accounting for taste, of course: one would hope that *everyone* ate the garlic, and that their homes were well ventilated. God sent them manna with strict instructions as to how and when to gather it – which they promptly disobeyed – and even quails for some extra protein. And in spite of their waywardness, He gave them a resounding victory over their first enemies, the Amalekites.

***Read Chapter 18*** - a delightful interlude where Moses had a visit from his father-in-law Jethro (they had come to his territory by this time) bringing with him Moses' wife and his two sons whom he had sheltered during this turbulent time. It is lovely to see the fellowship they enjoyed together, and to read Jethro's reaction in verse 9, "Jethro was delighted to hear about all the good things the

Lord had done for Israel” and praised God, bringing to God a burnt offering in acknowledgement that He was greater than all other gods. He also had some commonsense advice which Moses was gracious enough to accept – to trust others enough to delegate and not wear himself out by trying to do everything himself! We need some Jethros today!

***Do you always see a need as God’s calling to you to do something about it? Are there times when it is the right thing to say “no”? Are we, as stewards, called upon to budget our time and energy wisely?***

### **Mountain of Destiny.**

***Read Exodus chapter 19.***

And so, in the third month of their journey, this reborn nation came to a place of great significance – Mount Sinai – the place where God had first appeared to Moses and appointed him to his world-changing mission. Since leaving Egypt they had followed Him, but rather as a spoiled, ungrateful child: now it was time to grow up and be serious in their relationship with God. Exodus 19:3 speaks of this great defining moment for Israel – “Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain.”

In verse 5 we have the initial statement of the new covenant, 600 years after God made His covenant with Abraham. God would keep Israel as His “treasured possession” (a phrase with the connotation of royal property), to be for Him a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, interceding between man and God, as lights in a dark world. Today this privilege belongs to all followers of God, as set out in 1 Peter 2:9, where, by faith in our Lord Jesus, we can all be “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.”

God had to teach them of His holiness: His worshippers must be thoroughly cleansed and consecrated, setting themselves aside for the supremely holy moment when God would appear to them on the mountain. Verse 17 says that when they were completely ready, “Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God.” The glimpse of God’s holiness which Moses had seen in the burning bush, and the pilgrims had seen in the pillar of fire, now descended in all its majesty as thunder and lightning, a thick cloud, a trumpet blast, billows of smoke and a raging fire. And to cap this awful moment came the voice of God, calling Moses to Himself!

***Why did God make such strict rules about cleanliness at Mount Sinai? Why was He keeping the Israelites at a distance from Himself?***

God then proceeded to lay down the conditions of His covenant with Israel, stipulations which took into account the past, the present and the future. Chapter 20 sets out the Ten Commandments like a typical suzerain-vassal covenant of the times, where God identifies Himself, reminds Israel what He has done for them, and then sets out the reverence, trust, loyalty and complete submission required of Israel if they are to continue to enjoy the benefits of His covenant with them.

There follows in chapters 21 to 23, more conditions and very practical rules for good living, ending with the promise in verse 31 that echoes God’s promise to Abraham, “I will establish your borders from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the desert to the River (Euphrates).” This was fulfilled literally in the reign of King Solomon.

***God rescued His people by His grace: then did the blessings and curses laid down in the Covenant depend merely on Israel’s good works?***

## **God's Promise Confirmed.**

**Read Exodus chapter 24**, where the covenant is confirmed. This time God called up to the mountain Aaron, his two older sons and seventy Israelite elders, who were to worship God at a distance, while Moses alone, as mediator of this new covenant, would be allowed to approach the Lord.

**Read Hebrews 12:24.** *Who was it who faced the justice of a righteous God alone for us, and in so doing, became the mediator of a new covenant?*

Early in the morning Moses built an altar on which offerings were made on behalf of the people, who responded wholeheartedly, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey." Obedience then, as now, is a must before there can be any participation in the covenant. Moses then sprinkled them with the blood of the sacrifices, telling them in verse 8, "This is the blood of the covenant", echoed centuries later by Jesus in Luke 22:20, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood."

Film producers are clever with their use of sound effects to build up the drama of a scene: lovesick hero and heroine may be stranded on a desert island, yet that first passionate kiss will have a whole background of meaningful orchestral music. Or she may reject him, to the accompaniment of one mournful 'cello.

But the Bible does not need any orchestra to stimulate the drama: the unadorned words have all the drama in themselves. Just look at verses 9-11 in Exodus chapter 24, where the company of seventyfive went up the mountain and saw the God of Israel. The pavement under Him was like sapphire and clear as the sky itself. Drama? But more is to come! "*They saw God, and they ate and drank*". Can we get our heads around this stupendous fact? The great and awesome God, owner of the universe and all that's in it, condescends to share a meal with bumbling, stumbling human beings! It was a covenant meal, celebrating the sealing of the covenant that God had just made. Again we think of Jesus in Luke 22:15,16, as He instituted the memorial service of communion, "I have eagerly desired *to eat this Passover with you* before I suffer." God and man at table together!

Then God called Moses, along with his servant Joshua, to come up higher into the mountain where he would receive the complete "treaty", the stipulations laid down in the covenant. That took six weeks, and for that whole time the Israelites could see the glory of the Lord, glowing like a consuming fire on the top of the mountain.

## **The Rising Generation.**

Forty years passed – forty years of desert wandering as punishment for their lack of faith, but forty years in which God Himself looked after them, feeding them, keeping them in health and even preserving their shoes and clothing. By now, the adult generation that had been slaves in Egypt, had all died and a new generation had risen to take their place. It was time for them to enter the Promised Land, but first, they needed to hear again the message from God that had come to their parents in such a mind-boggling way. Each generation needs its own revelation and personal experience of God.

***How would the new generation be different from the people who left Egypt? Would they be more prepared for the challenges of entering the Promised Land?***

So in Deuteronomy chapter 29 the covenant is renewed, in a setting that embraced the past, the present and the future, as Moses says in verses 12-15, “You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the Lord your God ... to confirm you this day as His people, that He may be your God as He promised you and as He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I am making this covenant ... not only with you ....but also with those who are not here today.” God always has the future in His plans, even as Jesus, in John 17:20,21, prayed, “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You.” Deuteronomy 7:9 reinforces this theme - “The Lord your God is God; He is the faithful God, keeping His covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commands.” History shows us the miracle of this covenant kept – the nation of Israel that has endured even to the present day, and the worldwide people of God who will endure for ever.

***Explain the significance of the well-known phrase, “There are no grandchildren in the kingdom of God.” How much chance does anyone have of sneaking into heaven on the coat-tails of the most godly parent? And for parents, remember it is imperative for your child to have his/her own experience of God, even though it may have a different flavour from your own.***

Deuteronomy chapter 30 finishes with yet another echo of the past covenant, the present and the future, God setting out before them “life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to His voice, and hold fast to Him. For the Lord is your life, and He will give you many years in the land He swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”

“The Lord is your life,” said God to Israel. And Jesus says to us, in John 10:10, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” God keeps His promises!

***Prayer and Praise. Thank God Who so faithfully saved and established Israel as a nation. Praise Him for the greatness of His power. Ask Him to demonstrate that power in your own life as you seek to serve Him.***

<sup>1</sup> Halley's Bible Handbook, H.H.Halley, Zondervan, Michigan