

Last week we started to take a 5 week journey across the terrain of the entire Bible. We're going to move from Genesis to Revelation and survey the one big story that holds this book together. Essentially there are two questions: 1) *what is the big story that holds it together?* 2) *Can I believe it?* Is it really true, and if it is really true, what difference does it make to me? Last week we looked at Genesis 3. We saw that Adam and Eve gave in to temptation and, as a result, their relationships with God, creation and each other were broken. In response God said that he would send someone who would rescue them.

I don't know about you but I enjoy a good wedding. Sometimes the couple are surprised that the actual legal bit is so short. And the heart of a wedding is the promises that the couple make to each other. It doesn't really matter what those words are, what is important is that they are promises made from person to person. Having said that the Anglican vows which were written in 1085 by the Bishop of Salisbury contain one line which you never hear, even at Anglican weddings. In those vows the bride promised to be 'bonny and buxom in bed and at board'.

Of course, the words have changed meaning over time, and it's really about being kind and generous in the whole of life. It's the promise that's important. You don't earn your marriage. You make promises and you live out those promises.

The Bible is based on promises too. This story of God's dealings with men and women, through history is a story of the unfolding of the promises a faithful God makes to people. We finished last week's expedition in the foothills of the Bible with the promise of God. In Genesis that there would be a deliverer, a serpent crusher, a rescuer.

Well, since that first rebellion in Genesis the extending family of Adam and Eve have moved further and further from God. Ancient events in primordial history record constant decline, a great Flood at the time of Noah, a tower at the time of Babel and no matter what God does to bless people, men and women seem committed to being their own masters and to push God aside.

But God remains true to his promise and that's why he calls a man named Abraham, through whom God planned a special people for himself. He promises that Abraham will have a land in which he can live and a vast number of descendants who become known as the Israelites. However, in order to escape famine the people of God travelled to Egypt. They spent four hundred years as settlers and slaves in Egypt. From the archaeological records it seems that there was a long period when Egypt was ruled by non-native rulers. During this particular period it would have been possible for someone like Joseph to rise to a position of significant authority in the country.

There are carvings in the tomb at Beni-Hassan which show Canaanites arriving and being welcomed as settlers. What could have been a place of rescue for them ends up being a dead-end. After four hundred years of prosperity and growth the land of Egypt, where they have spread in number, their masters turn against them. The Israelites then become a persecuted and

enslaved people. This is nothing new for them. Down through the years the Jews, even as a remnant of those ancient Israelites, continue to prosper and be persecuted. It's as if there is a pattern in history when it goes hand-in-hand.

But then there is the great event that we remember as the event of Passover in Exodus. It is the time when God brought judgement on Egypt and the Israelites were set free. That Passover meal has been celebrated consistently ever since by the Israelites. It is a memory of that historic event. They flee from Egypt into the wilderness heading back for their ancestral homeland in Canaan. But Pharaoh changes his mind and sets out in pursuit of them, and we read in verse ten, <sup>10</sup> *As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord.* <sup>11</sup> *They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt?"* <sup>12</sup> *Didn't we say to you 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!"*

The first thing we read in this incident is that God's people grumbled. Nothing new there. Sometimes the people of God can be a very poor advertisement for the power of God. If you are here and you're new to church or faith, and you happen to come across Christians who grumble, please remember that the power of God is changing people. It's just that it takes some of us a long time to change. And if they didn't have the power of God in them, think how much worse they would be.

The Israelites, however, find that they must do something that sets a pattern for anyone who wants to follow God. It's called faith. The word faith simply means trust, to trust God. They are at a dead-end where they must trust God. But this is not blind faith or foolish trust. The Israelites have already seen the hand of God in the Passover events and the plagues. The Israelites had evidence for the faith they showed in trusting God now. Ahead of them lies a large body of water and behind the armies of Pharaoh. And so the question is can they still trust God? *Faith doesn't fly in the face of the evidence, faith goes further with the evidence.* The evidence is there, but do they trust it and step out? They know they can trust God and now they are called to act upon that trust. Ch 14:13 <sup>13</sup> *Moses answered the people, "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."* <sup>14</sup> *The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."*

This is the very nature of trust - *taking God at his word*, despite how bleak it appears. In this moment they are called to exercise faith and that leads us from Israel's dead end to Israel's deliverance.

In verse fourteen Moses tells the people to be still. In verse fifteen God tells them to move on. Be still, move on. Is that a Bible contradiction this morning? Well no, it's another pattern in Scripture. It is the **immovable mobility of faith**. Standing still on the promises of God and

moving on in faith. That is the immovable mobility of faith. Faith means standing still, trusting in what God has done, and what he has already promised. And yet faith also means moving on, trusting those promises and doing something about them. It means getting on with whatever God has called us to do. It means stepping out and taking a risk. That's what we're going to be doing with the Path of Renewal group – spending the first few months being quiet before God, listening to what God is saying and then acting on it. Don't expect anything much to happen soon but remember to keep praying.

So, guiding the Israelites is this physical manifestation of God's presence. The pillar of cloud and of fire has guided and protected them day and night and has brought them to the sea. I think it's hard to overstate just how important this event is in the Bible. It really is a formative event for the people of Israel. We know it as the parting of the red sea. It is an awesome miracle, bringing destruction to the Egyptian army and deliverance to the Israelites. It is remembered each year in the Passover meal and has been retold in many a Hollywood film. But perhaps you're asking yourself, "Did it really happen?" Can you really believe that this parting of the sea took place in history? If it really happened is there evidence elsewhere in literature?

First thing to say about this is that there is a controversy over the exact location of the sea. That in itself should warn us that when we read about events that happened 3 ½ thousand years ago, whether they are in the Bible or not, it can be hard to find direct evidence. The Hebrew which we translate as red Sea, literally means the Sea of Reeds. That suggests a location much closer to Egypt than to the east of the Sinai peninsular and the Red Sea.

Exodus 14:27-28 <sup>27</sup> *Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward-it and the LORD swept them into the sea. The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen – the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.*

Of course you can question that historically. Is this tremendous event recorded anywhere in Egyptian history? Even if we don't know the exact location surely there must be other records recording such a significant event. The first historical pointer to the event is the incredible consistency of the memory. For 3,000 years this event has been remembered by the Israelites in the Passover meal. Regardless of where the Jewish people are in the world this memory is shared. There are even records from Auschwitz and other places during the Holocaust that show Jewish people scratching together whatever they could so that they would not miss the Passover. And we need to remember that this meal does not celebrate the people who were grumbling in the desert – it celebrates the power of God demonstrated in this event. So, one key question it's why don't the Egyptians record it? Why can't I put up a picture of Egyptian hieroglyphs recording in the event? To understand that we need to understand something of the origins of historical writing. Early history was even more like propaganda than it is today. Ramases II built the temple Abu Simbel on the banks of the River Nile around 3000 years ago

and you can still visit today. It was built to celebrate the Egyptian victory over the Hittites and there is a huge relief depicting the amazing victory Egyptians had over their enemy. However, if you read the Hittite version of the story you'll find that they won, and the Egyptians lost. Other more independent records suggest that it was pretty much a stalemate in which both sides lost a lot and eventually agreed a peace treaty. But both sides needed the propaganda of victory.

The British Museum has a list of Egyptian kings from before the Exodus to long after the Exodus and it is significant that a number of those kings have been missed from the list. They have simply been erased. A number of them would have been around the traditional dating time of the Exodus in the middle of the 14th century BC. At that time we have what is called the **Armarna Heresy** – a heresy because it introduced monotheism to Egypt. Eventually the Egyptians returned to the worship of their old gods and erased this portion of their history. Of course, there is not a mention of Moses or the Exodus, but it is an illustration of history being used as propaganda. The first record of Israel is dated at around 1200 BC and, rather than recording the name of the city it records the name of the people – the Israelites, and that they lived in Canaan and were considered an enemy of Egypt.

So, that is Israel's deliverance and now we want to look at their destination. Having crossed the sea they were given the commandments and, after a generation of the grumblers die out during a nomadic existence, they enter the land of Canaan. This land was a flashpoint in those days and it still is 3000 years later.

The Israelites begin the settlement of the land of Canaan, and through conflict and conquest, for a time, they live in peace and safety. But is this really the destination? Is that the destination of bible history? It's day two of our expedition through the bible and we've made it to the promised land. So can we take our boots off and have a rest?

The land is still a perplexing question – even now there is violence and conflict over the Gaza strip and the West Bank. This strip of land around the size of Wales has huge strategic importance as it forms the land bridge between three continents – Africa, Europe and Asia. For the armies of the ancient powers and the merchants the sea was too dangerous and the desert was virtually impassible, but between the sea and the desert lay this tiny strip of land. Throughout history wars have been fought here and it is an incredibly strategic place for God to launch his rescue plan for the world.

Here is a location from which the entire world could be touched. But interesting as all that is, the destination for Israel was never really a plot of land. God took the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt and that wasn't simply slavery, it was a captivity to the gods of ancient Egypt, to the glory of ancient Egypt, the ways of ancient Egypt, to the comforts and prosperity of ancient Egypt. They were in captivity to all that Egypt represented.

God gave them a law and that was not just rules, it was a blueprint of what it would look like to be God's people living in God's place under God's rule. You see, God was giving them a

picture of a new Eden. Israel was to be a new Eden, and that's the people as much as the place. Here was a new opportunity to be the people of God. Their destination was not a place but a person. Not a region but a relationship – a relationship repaired and restored. That's the real meaning of Exodus. That's why God rescued them through the sea and only after that gave them the law. They didn't earn their rescue by being given the law and obeying it.

They were rescued first and then given the law. They were told, 'Now you are my people, look like my people.' 'Now I've rescued you, look like you've been rescued. Keep my blueprint for the people of God.' And so Exodus becomes a picture of salvation. God rescues people from slavery. That's what he's in the business of doing. God redeems people through sacrifice and he brings them into a new relationship. That's why, 1500 years after Moses, Jesus would still speak of an exodus. Jesus would speak of a crossing – John 5:24 '*Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.*' The death of Jesus makes our personal Exodus possible. You see, God wants you and me – and he doesn't want us primarily in church. He doesn't primarily want you in a place – he wants you, and he wants me. To that end he sent Jesus to be the rescuer.

Believing in Jesus is having your own personal Exodus. You cross from the world of death to the world of life. You can cross over from slavery to the things that hold you back, to the freedom of new life in Christ. And what looked like rules and laws don't look that way anymore. They become a picture of what we want to be to look like children of God. Not because we have to be, but because we want to look that way. We want to be free of the past.

The Exodus that really matters is not the one we read about, it's the one that happens today. But because the original Exodus is true, salvation today is also true. Your own personal exodus is real. If you believe in Jesus then you too can cross over from death to life. How can you be sure? Because it happened in history, so you can be confident that it can happen today.