

## ***Holy Love***

If you are just joining us today, we are in the midst of a journey through the story of the Exodus in the Old Testament – the story of God's rescue of the Israelites – *from slavery to freedom*.

And today, we come to one of the memorable climaxes of the story –

### **Exodus 11-12.**

In truth, Exodus 12 is one of the most significant moments in the whole of the Old Testament, if not in Scripture. One of the most defining moment in the history and self-understanding of Israel. An event which many refer to as the Gospel in the Old Testament – ***the Passover*** – the moment when God fulfills His promise to rescue the Israelites from Egypt.

But, for all of its beauty, this event is also complicated – a saving action that means death and destruction for others.

And this makes this **a hard story** to read, to hear, and to preach.

If I'm honest, this is one of those passages that makes me glad that we have **kids' ministry**, because ***this is no bedtime story***. *Not for kids, and not even for us.*

And in case you don't know what I'm talking about, **Exodus 12** – the incredible and glorious rescue and deliverance of Israel – is bound up in the events of **Exodus 11** – the introduces the final plague on the Egyptians – **the death to the firstborn of all Egypt.**

If we're honest, this moment in God's story, is hard to reconcile with what we believe about God as revealed in the life and death of Jesus.

Simply put, Exodus 11-12 is a **sobering** story. A **heart-rending** story. One that stirs up many responses and questions in us. One that stirs up many responses and questions in **me**.

And yet, amidst the pain and horror of some of what happens in this story, heard in its context, I think we **need** this story – **and the God who is at work here**. Because – what this story reveals about God is actually **integral to His Saving Grace – integral to the Gospel...**

*And I mean that.* I hope you'll hear and feel some of that with me today...

Not that I think we should love this part of Exodus, but I think it gives us reason to love the God of Exodus...

But I suspect right now, that makes no sense...

So, let me start by reading a reflection for you from the footnotes of one of my Bibles. I read this somewhere this week, and it's lingered with me. I think it's helpful as a preface to all that we will reflect on this morning... **It reads...**

The God of the exodus is a God with teeth. Who can dismiss blood on the doorposts or plagues of hail, locusts, and darkness, and paint a portrait of divinity that is all sunshine and orchids? Who can read these words – "*Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead*" (v.30)—without stopping to wonder who this God really is and to what lengths he will go? This is not a comfortable or convenient God. This God is not the God of children's picture Bibles. He is not easily painted. He is wrapped **in mystery.**

But neither did Moses understand everything that swirled about him, disaster after disaster wounding people and animals and the earth. His people certainly did not understand. Even as they rushed from slavery to freedom, clutching gold and silver and bread dough that had no yeast, there is no sense of comprehension, not then, and not later as they staggered through the wilderness, facing mountains of thunder, commandments, clouds by day, and fire by night. This God was inexhaustible in his ways to surprise and awe. He was known, but unknown. He could never be taken **for granted.**

We ought to ignore nothing, even what we do not like or what does not fit into our favorite theologies. The Christian faith is not a tidy faith. Not every *i* is dotted or every *t* is crossed, at least not to our way of understanding. When we are in the presence of the Holy One, we are in control of nothing and we see only what we are permitted to see.

[Life with God Bible – study notes]

So, as we venture into this complicated story, **let's pray.**

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Now, if you were here last Sunday, you'll remember our exploration of the **10 plagues.** And how each echoed with God's refrain – "*I am the LORD...*"

**Ex 7:17,** "*by this you will know that I am the LORD...*"

Which alerts and reminds us of **the real purpose** of the plagues – not simply to bring judgment on the Egyptians (although that was part of it), but to **expose** the idols of Egypt as false-gods – unworthy of their worship – **and to call** Pharaoh and the Egyptians to **turn** from their death-dealing idolatry **to know Life in the worship of YAHWEH,** the one true God over all – who alone is the giver of life.

And the climax comes in the **10<sup>th</sup>** and **final** plague – the plague on the firstborn sons of Egypt.

**Exodus 11:4-6**

*So Moses said, "This is what the LORD says, 'About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the female slave, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt—worse than there has ever been or ever will be again..."*

Now, if you are breathing, you have a **hard time** with this plague – or really, you have a hard time with **God** because of this plague.

Just the **idea** that YAHWEH, the saving God of Israel, would kill all the firstborn sons of the Egyptians seems utterly **reprehensible** to many of us. **Unacceptable. Counter to everything we know of God in Christ.**

Honestly, this is a passage – a story – that we can easily want to pass over – if not, completely remove from our Bibles. [\[Or at least not speak on the morning of a child dedication!\]](#)

***Why would God do this?  
And how could we ever love a God like this?***

If we're honest, this is a story that makes us cringe. Heard from our vantage point, this plague makes God seem horrifically cruel.

But this is where, like any portion of Scripture, we need to read and hear this passage in its context. From its own vantage point. A vantage point or context which the narrator of Exodus has labored hard to give us.

Exodus does not begin with ch.11. It begins with ch.1.

And we need to keep this in mind - because, as the Exodus narrative reveals, and history affirms, the final plague is truly God's response to **the horror that *already is*** life in Egypt.

*The **horror** that comes from Egypt's idolatry.*

*The **horror** of Egyptian rule and the ruthless, crushing enslavement of the Israelites.*

When we read Exodus 11, we need to somehow take our minds to what life would be like – a few years back – in **Syria** – that would cause tens of thousands of people to walk across countries and traverse the dangers of open ocean just to get somewhere – anywhere – else.

We need to take our minds to whatever life must be like in some countries in Latin America to send a few thousand people walking – days and weeks on end – away from their homeland – because life there is no longer livable.

Or the Rohingya muslims fleeing their homeland – because life is not livable under the unjust and tyrannical oppression of a leader and a people who worship and follow that leader.

If we cast our minds back, or flip the page, we will recall that in Exodus 1, we are invited into a story of **the most oppressive pain** – and a **long** story at that – 430 years in fact – where the Israelites lived under the crushing hand of the Egyptians.

First as indentured servants – and then as *ruthlessly oppressed slaves* – *with no rights and freedoms – no hope of anything except slavery, suffering and death.*

And, in a moment of power-hungry fear, Pharaoh, enacted a plan to have all the newborn Hebrew baby boys killed by their midwives in the act of childbirth. And when this failed, Pharaoh gave the order for every Hebrew boy that is born to be simply thrown into the Nile... ***For no other reason than to crush their ability to rise up.***

*When we read Exodus 11-12, we need to keep all this in mind.  
**The horror of life in Egypt – the horror of Egyptian rule.  
And the cry of the Israelites for justice...***

But it's not just the story of Exodus 1, **Exodus 5** gives us another window into the horror and injustice of life under the Egyptians – where we hear about Pharaoh's initial **rejection** of YAHWEH's demand – and in response, Pharaoh orders the slave drivers to still demand the same output, but to no longer supply the Israelite slaves with straw for making the bricks.

An **impossible** demand. An **inhuman** demand, if it wasn't already...

*Again, when we read Exodus 11-12, **we must keep all this in mind.***

***The horror of life in Egypt – the horror of Egyptian rule. The oppressive and inhuman consequences of Egyptian idolatry.  
And the cry of the Israelites for justice...***

And not only that, but as we talked about last Sunday, we must remember that the Pharaoh and his sons were themselves considered gods in Egypt – the earthly descendents of Re or Amon-Re, the sun god, the chief god of the Egyptians.

In his mind, and to his people, *he could do whatever he wanted*, and no one could question him. He was a god – who commanded the destiny of his people...

And when his days would end, his firstborn son would take his throne – and rule, like his father before him, in the oppressive spirit and name of Amon-Re.

*Again, when we read Exodus 11-12 – the final plague and the Passover – **we must keep all this in mind.***

***The horror of life in Egypt – the horror of Egyptian rule.  
The oppressive and inhuman consequence of Egyptian idolatry,  
the oppressive self-worship of the Pharaoh himself.  
And the cry of the Israelites for justice...***

And so, in response to all this, in a final plague on Egypt, in a final judgment on the Egyptians and the gods of Egypt, **Yahweh unleashed his wrath on Pharaoh and the Egyptians** – with a plague that would take the life of the firstborn of every Egyptian in the land – ***that very night...***

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**Why?** Why would Yahweh do something like this?

***Because He's cruel?***

**NO! Just the opposite. Because He's Holy!**

*[And if that makes no sense to you, stick with me!]*

Do you remember the first thing that God said to Moses when he encountered him in the burning bush?

Moses stumbles upon a burning bush – a Fuelless Fire – comes near to investigate, and from within the bush he hears the voice of God:

**"Moses, Moses."**

Moses replies. *"Here I am."*

And God says, **(Ex 3:5)** **"Don't come any closer."**

Why? Because Moses was in the presence of **a Holy God**.

*"Take off your sandals, for the place you are standing is holy ground."*

As the Exodus narrative reveals to us – Yahweh, Israel's God – is a **Holy God**. Which is the Bible's way of saying that *He is utterly perfect in every facet of his being, and consequently in all he does.*

To say that God is holy is to say that *there is **nothing** impure, evil, or deceptive in God.* He is **perfectly** loving, perfectly good, perfectly just. In Him is *the complete absence of all that is evil, and the complete fullness of all that is good.*

**And because of this, Yahweh **cannot tolerate evil.** He **cannot tolerate idolatry** and **sin**. He **cannot tolerate injustice.****

Which means He **cannot tolerate the injustice of Pharaoh and the Egyptians.**

And so, in the last and final plague, because He is Holy, Yahweh unleashes His **holy wrath** on Pharaoh and Egypt.

Which might seem **frightening**, but, at the same time, is something that **we should be thankful for.**



Yahweh, the Saving God of Israel, is a Holy God – **and his wrath is simply one expression of His Holiness.**

Now, I know we don't talk much these days about **the wrath of God**, and especially not as **a good thing**.

But as one theologian, Emil Brunner, wisely said years ago, when it comes to the God revealed in Scripture, "**The wrath of God is the love of God**".

***And before you shut me out - think this through with me...***

Is not God's utter hatred and intolerance for evil and injustice, for sin, idolatry and oppression in all its forms *a good and beautiful thing*?

And with this then, is not God's **decisive action against** evil, injustice, idolatry and oppression truly *a good and beautiful thing*?

*In His Love, a Holy God **acts** out against what is evil – to put an end to evil.*

***Is this not exactly what the suffering and oppressed in our world are crying out for this very moment? Is this not what we all cry out for at times...***

Is it not **good – truly good – to know** that Yahweh, the Almighty God of the Universe, cannot and **will not** tolerate injustice, evil, deception and oppression forever? That He **will not** stand back and just let evil and injustice go unaddressed. His Holiness will not allow it.

*Is this not something for which we should be **thankful**?!*

***Deeply, utterly thankful...***

For those who suffer greatly at the hands of unjust rulers today – and many do – ***is this not vitally good news?***

Yes, the reality of God's holy wrath is a **terrifying** thing to consider, but ***we would have much more to fear if the Almighty God of the universe was NOT holy.***

***We would have much more to fear if the Almighty God of the Universe was indifferent, or evil, or deceptive or unjust.***

*Or simply **indifferent TO** evil, deception and injustice...*

*We live in a world that has no interest or time for a God who judges, and we ourselves often run from the thought that God would judge us or anyone. **But all the while, our hearts cry out for justice!***

*Is it not integral to God's goodness and glory that He would be a God who is just – who acts justly to put an end to evil, injustice and oppression?*

All that to say: ***The wrath of God is the love of God.***

*It is the natural, necessary and good expression of His Holiness...*

And so, in Exodus 11-12, that's exactly what we see. Yahweh, in holy wrath, announced the final plague to Pharaoh **(Ex 11:4)**

*"About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die... There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt – worse than there has ever been and ever will again."*

And let me pause for a second to respond to the unsettling feeling many of us have – and understandably so – about this plague ***falling on***

**the firstborn** – on the **children** – and not on the Pharaoh himself and his peers (the people of power and agency in the story).

And I'll be honest, I don't think we can resolve all of our struggle with this, but **two things** need to be kept in mind...

First of all, we need to remember that Exodus begins with **Pharaoh** ordering the death of all the Hebrew male infants. This was Pharaoh's will – the expression of his defiant self-worship.

And, as we discussed last Sunday, God's intent with the plagues was **not** primarily to **destroy** the Egyptians, but **to call Pharaoh and Egypt to repentance** – to turn from his defiant self-worship **and be saved**.

Which means that all of these plagues are as much the result of Pharaoh's defiance, as anything else. *For if he had bowed to YAHWEH and turned from his self-worship, **he and his people would have been saved!***

Second, in regard to the horror of this plague falling on the **firstborn** of Egypt – it's worth considering, as some argue, that in the light of the tragedy and horror of life in Egypt, the tragedy and horror of Egyptian idolatry and oppression – *and all that came with it* – the death of the firstborn could be viewed as **a merciful act of rescue** for these children (whether young or old) – for truly the heartache of this plague would be borne, **not by the children**, but by Pharaoh's generation. Those who hearts were hard to the saving revelation of YAHWEH...

If it is true that, as Emil Brunner wrote, "*The wrath of God is the love of God*" – then we can trust this Holy God to be just and loving with the firstborn ***beyond the grave.***

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**Back to the story...** You have to wonder how the Israelites responded when they heard about this final plague to come on the Egyptians?

I'm sure some **cheered**, remembering how the Pharaoh had killed many of their boys years before.

And yet at the same time, you have to think some of them must have been **afraid. *Afraid of what Yahweh might do to them.***

Over the last while, ***they've lived*** in the incredible knowledge that their God has come to save them. ***And they've watched*** him bring judgment on their oppressors.

But at the same time, as they've watched, they've come to see that Yahweh, their Saving God, is a holy God who will not tolerate sin, evil and injustice... ***And it must have gripped them with fear at times.***

Yes, they must have been **thankful**, incredibly thankful, to know that Yahweh, their God was a holy God (unlike the gods of the Egyptians).

But, knowing this must also have caused them to **fear.**

Because, although Yahweh was their God, they themselves were not simply **victims** of injustice, idolatry and immorality. They were participants – even **perpetrators**. (**As we all are!.. As we all are!**)

The Egyptians weren't *the only ones* who put their trust in false gods. The Egyptians weren't *the only ones* who treated others unjustly at times. The Egyptians weren't *the only ones* who used and abused others at times... the only ones indifferent to the suffering of others...

Sure, they'd never done the kinds of things the Pharaoh had done, **but that didn't mean their hearts and hands were clean.**

And so, in **Exodus 12**, we're told that Yahweh **gave instructions** to Moses for the Israelites.

Up until now, the Israelites have just stood back, watched the plagues unfold, or suffered alongside others.

**But not on this night.**

*This night there was something for them to do.*

And so, we're told that Yahweh explained to Moses that each Israelite family was to take a lamb, and slaughter it as a sacrifice.

**(Ex 12.7)** *Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses... That night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast...*

**(v.10)** *Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. 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.*

**(v.12)** *On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the*

*houses where you are, and when I see the blood I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt."*

Although people often read or think of the Exodus story as God playing favorites – the command here to the Israelites – shows us that just like the Egyptians, the Israelites had **a choice** to make – would they bow in reverent fear and obedient faith and be saved, or would they place their faith in something or someone else...?

Yes, throughout this story, God makes a distinction between how He deals with Egypt and Israel, but in both there is **a way that leads to destruction** and **a way that leads to life...** And so the Israelites, just like Pharaoh, has to make a choice to bow in worship and trust to YAHWEH.

**Imagine how the Israelites** must have felt as they went about the holy tasks of that night?! [**Imagine if that was you!**]

*There must have been an excitement in the air* – knowing that the next morning **they would be free**. Knowing that **the next morning**, after 430 years of slavery in Egypt, they would march out of Egypt, the land of their suffering, as free women and men. That their grandchildren would not be born into slavery... That on the other side of this **dark night** would be not just a new day, but the beginning of a new life.

**Oh, they must have been so excited.**

And yet, their excitement **must** have been tempered by **reverent fear**, by the knowledge that **if not for the grace of their Holy God, and**

**the sacrifice of this lamb**, they too would be losing their firstborn son that night.

That **if not for the grace of their holy God, and the sacrifice of this lamb**, they too would be on the receiving end of the just and holy wrath of God.

→ **It's hard to imagine.**

But one thing *I can't help but imagine* is those mothers and fathers slaughtering a lamb with tears in their eyes and bewilderment of this profound mystery...

That, in the mystery of God's justice and mercy, the blood of the lamb would mean life for them and for their children...

**Ok, but why?** Why did the Israelites have to sacrifice a lamb to be saved? Why couldn't Yahweh have just saved Israel? Why was the sacrifice of a lamb necessary for the Israelites to be saved? Why didn't or couldn't God just save them?

**Because Yahweh, Israel's God, is Holy – and so, just** as for Egypt, He cannot let Israel's evil, rebellion and sin go unaddressed...

His holiness requires justice.

**But thankfully that's not all his holiness requires...**

**If it was** - Israel would have been experienced the wrath of God that night alongside the Egyptians.

But as the Passover reveals, and all the more so, as the cross of Christ reveals, Yahweh, the Living God of the Universe **is not just Holy**.

He is **Holy love**. A love so holy that it burns against injustice, and holiness so loving that it fights for our redemption...

In Exodus we learn that God's Holiness means **holy love**.

His holiness calls for our judgment, but His love longs for and seeks our salvation. (*Just as YAHWEH sought to rescue the Egyptians through the plagues!*).

His holiness calls for our judgment, but His love looks for a substitute – a Passover lamb.

And so, in **Exodus 12, Yahweh, in** his holy love for Israel, instructed them to take a lamb and offer it as a sacrifice ... a substitute ... whose death would mean life for them.

Not that the death of a lamb is or ever would be sufficient to atone for the sins of men and women. It wasn't. But God accepted it, **knowing** that there would come a day when God Himself would send His **own divine Son** to be our perfect sacrifice – **our Passover Lamb**.

***That through the mystery of God's justice and mercy, and the blood of the Lamb, we would be saved...***



Too easily we read the Bible or think about God without reference to His Holiness, and stories like the Exodus, the Passover and the Cross just come across as **confusing** and **unnecessary**.

But when our eyes are **opened** to the reality of the holiness of God, *the Beauty of God's Holiness*, and with that, to the truth of our unholiness, injustice, idolatry and sinfulness – *the story of the Passover cannot but inspire us to bow before God in reverent fear, humility, thankfulness and worship.*

**And all the more so**, when our eyes are opened to the reality of the holiness of God, *the Beauty of God's Holiness*, and with that, to truth of our unholiness, injustice, idolatry and sinfulness – *the reality of the Cross of Christ, the grace-given sacrifice of Jesus as **our Passover lamb** cannot but inspire us to bow before God in reverent fear, humility, thankfulness and worship.*

For as John the Baptist said upon seeing Jesus (**John 1:29**), "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*"

***Oh Jesus, in your justice and mercy, take ours... take mine  
– my sin, my rebellion, my idolatry and injustice..  
that I might be saved.***

And so, on the night that Jesus was betrayed, he gathered with his disciples – his betrayers – to share in **the Passover meal** - to share in this holy re-enactment, celebrating the Holy Love of God, and what this Holy God had done for Israel all those years before...

But as they ate the Passover today, the gospel of Matthew tells us,

**(26:26f)**

*While they were still eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying,*

*"Take and eat; this is **my body**."*

*Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying,*

*"Drink from it, all of you. This is **my blood** of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."*

Take and eat – for **I am your Passover Lamb...**

Take and eat – drink from it – all of you...

That by the mercy of God's justice, and the blood of the Lamb, we too may be saved...

→ Friends, let us come and take the Lord's Supper today – the symbol of God's holy sacrifice for us – in response to the invitation of our Saving God...