

## **Lesson 7: Out of Egypt (Exodus 12:29 – 17:7)**

### **Crossing the Red Sea**

The tenth and final plague is when the angel of God comes down and passes over (hence, the Passover) Egypt and kills the firstborn son of each family that has not fulfilled the prescripts of the Passover meal.<sup>154</sup> At midnight those who did not have the blood of the sacrificed, unblemished lamb marking their door suffered the death of the family's first-born male. This was, as we already explained, a condemnation of Egyptian idolatry and a way to break the Israelites from their own habits of worshipping Egyptian gods. This is a reminder that the context of the plagues is more spiritual than political. God wants Israel free, not so they can necessarily have their own political system, but so that they are free to worship the one, true God.

With the death of the firstborn, there is now no denying the power of Yahweh and the consequences of disobedience. If Pharaoh doubted Moses before this night, he now fears Yahweh. Literally over night, he changes from enslaving the Israelites to expelling them from his land out of fear for what Yahweh might do next. The hardness of Pharaoh's heart led to extreme measures by God to set His people free to worship Him. The last plague, while severe, softens Pharaoh's heart, if only temporarily. In this we see the pedagogy of God. He does not first inflict a harsh penalty on Pharaoh, but only after Pharaoh rejects Moses. The same is true for us. God will lead us, but it is up to us how He leads us. Will we trust Him when He speaks to our hearts, or are our hearts so hardened that God is forced to use tough love to draw us into His divine plan? There is a principle in philosophy that states: "Things are received according to the mode of the receiver." Because of the hardness of our own hearts, sometimes it is necessary for God to be firm with us. It is important to understand that it is not God who is being difficult, but we are the ones who need the tough love.

So Moses and the Israelites leave the captivity that they lived under for four hundred and thirty years. Not only were they leaving slavery but the Scripture tells us that the Egyptians loaded them down with silver and gold.<sup>155</sup> The Egyptians must have felt the power of Yahweh and hoped to appease Him with gifts to His people. In fact, Pharaoh even asks Moses for a blessing.<sup>156</sup>

Shortly after Pharaoh let the Israelites go, however, his stubbornness returns and he sends a large army out to conquer Moses and the Israelites. We can imagine the scene; Pharaoh sees his cheap workforce leaving and begins to panic about how he will keep the Egyptian economy strong. And so Pharaoh sends his entire army out after the Israelites.<sup>157</sup> When the Israelites reach the Red Sea it seems they are trapped. Thousands of armed soldiers are fast approaching their defenseless position. (Remember, the Israelites left Egypt without any provisions or weapons.) As they wait the arrival of the

---

<sup>154</sup> Each celebration of the Passover meal is to make present the memory of the saving event. See CCC, #1363.

<sup>155</sup> Exodus 12:33-36

<sup>156</sup> Exodus 12:32

<sup>157</sup> Exodus 14:9

Egyptian army, the Scripture says, “and they were in great fear.”<sup>158</sup> This could be the understatement of the Old Testament. The Egyptian soldiers had just suffered the death of their own firstborn sons and are probably something less than understanding of the situation and out for the blood of the Israelites, armed with deadly weapons. This is the first test for the Israelites. They had just been freed from slavery by the “strong arm” of Yahweh and yet now they find themselves in even greater danger. They must now ask themselves just how much they trust Yahweh.

In response to the fear that is overtaking the Israelites, Moses says, “The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be still.”<sup>159</sup> Imagine the scene. The bloodthirsty Egyptian soldiers are bearing down on the Israelites who are trapped against the Red Sea, and the answer to their troubles is simply to be still? This must have sounded like crazy talk to the Israelites. It is such desperate situations that we find out who we really are. It is easier to be virtuous in good times, but when things get difficult we find out our real inclinations. God allows the Israelites to experience this seemingly hopeless situation so as to show them the true nature of their soul and their lack of trust in Him. The same is true today; difficulties show us who we really are. It is easy to be easygoing and generous when things are good, but the real test is how we are when things are not so easy.

For the Israelites they fail the test. They immediately complain to Moses and wish they were back in Egypt. “For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”<sup>160</sup> This is a dramatic failure in trust. God has shown His love for them by bringing them out of slavery and they turn around and basically say, “We don’t want you God, we prefer our old life living as Egyptians.”

So, what happens? “Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided.”<sup>161</sup> God parts the Red Sea and the Israelites pass to the other side while the Egyptian army gets trapped and is wiped out.<sup>162</sup> God acts in ways the Israelites could not have imagined. If there was any doubt as to the sovereignty of God among the Israelites, God proved His power and care with this saving act. God could have abandoned the Israelites for their failure in trust, but He instead remains faithful and shows His love and power once again. God wants the Israelites to believe in Him and so gives them an experience of who He is. The Israelites might have thought that this is the end of the story, but the truth is, as we shall see, that the story is just beginning.

This is a lesson for us today. God is more powerful than we can imagine; we must simply learn to trust in our heavenly Father and peacefully face the difficulties of life. This is a meekness based on humility that is a radical dependence on the Father and abandonment to Him in trust. Meekness allows us to be calm in the face of trial so the

---

<sup>158</sup> Exodus 14:10

<sup>159</sup> Exodus 14:14

<sup>160</sup> Exodus 14:10-12

<sup>161</sup> Exodus 14:21

<sup>162</sup> Exodus 14:23-31

Holy Spirit can enter the situation. Saint John of the Cross said, “Take care to keep your heart peaceful, that no event of this world disturbs it...even when everything down here collapses and all events go against us, it would be useless to worry ourselves because this worry takes more from us than it gives to us.” Without this docility to God, we become unable to follow the impulses of the Holy Spirit. When we live in difficult times, the effort we make to stay calm is very useful because truly saving this peace will make it possible for us to respond to a situation not in fearful, rash or wrongheaded way leading to a bad decision. Rather, listening to that which the Holy Spirit can suggest to us, we can respond in a way that will allow God to work everything in our favor. The prophet Isaiah makes this point in a resounding fashion, “By waiting and by calm you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength.”<sup>163</sup>

### **The Wilderness**

As we said earlier, the Israelites’ departure from Egypt and slavery is not the end of the story but the beginning. After God’s saving action through the Red Sea the Israelites begin their journey to the Promised Land through the desert. The three-months journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai was not carefree, either for Moses or the Israelites. During this period they face at least five major crises that will test their faith.<sup>165</sup> Through each of these episodes a key Hebrew word is used to describe the experience, *nasa*. This word means “to prove or to put to the test.” Through each event God is putting the Israelites to the test. God does not test us to know us, since He knows all things. Rather, God puts us to the test so that we will come to know ourselves, our weaknesses and our disordered desires that lead us away from God. With this knowledge of the truth we can then cooperate with God to pursue Him above all things and trust Him in all things rather than living a life enslaved to the world. *Nasa* is the same verb used to describe God’s putting Abraham to the test concerning Isaac.<sup>167</sup> Abraham had wanted an heir more than anything else in the world, yet God knows that a son will not satisfy Abraham’s deepest longing. God, then, tests (*nasa*) Abraham so that he will find happiness in God alone. This is a micro-story of the story of redemption. Redemption is not about easy street. It is about converting the soul to trust our Father with our whole heart.<sup>168</sup>

How does Israel respond to the tests? They complain and “murmur” against Yahweh.<sup>169</sup> The Hebrew expression to “murmur” suggests a frame of mind in which they believe God is insufficient to make them happy. After everything that God has done for them the Israelites want to go back to Egypt, even after experiencing God in a great way. Why? There are many possibilities, but it all comes down to the reality that while *it is easy to get Israel out of Egypt, it is very difficult to get Egypt out of Israel*. Whatever the reason, they fail to trust in God’s plan for their lives.

---

<sup>163</sup> Isaiah 30:15

<sup>165</sup> We can identify at least five: 1) the bitter waters at Marah (15:22-27); 2) lack of food (16:1-36); 3) lack of drinking water at Rephidim (17:1-7); 4) the attack of the Amalekites (17:8-16); 5) and the exhaustion of their leader, Moses (18:1-27).

<sup>167</sup> Genesis 22

<sup>168</sup> Saint Paul teaches us how to understand this testing in the wilderness in Hebrews 2:10-3:19; 12:1-11.

<sup>169</sup> Exodus 16:2-3

For us, Egypt represents the bondage to sin and our old life. It is easier to get out of our old life of sin than it is to get the old sins out of us.<sup>170</sup> Why is this so difficult? We too “murmur.” We fail to trust that God’s ways will lead to the happiness and fulfillment for which we long. We falsely think security and fulfillment are found in relationships and things of this world. We become attached to these and fail to abandon ourselves to the Father. Our initial conversion to the faith is often easier than pursuing the perfection of our faith the sanctification of every aspect of our lives. This is why it is important to live the Exodus (especially through the season of Lent) personally so that we might purify our souls from attachment to love God above all. The wilderness is about the purification of the Israelites and each of us so that we might be attached to God first, who is our true happiness. We must first be emptied of our attachments in order to have the capacity for God before we can receive Him. This is the purpose of the Exodus.

The testing of the Israelites in the wilderness is explained later in Deuteronomy, which is a book from Moses explaining to the Israelites the purpose of the desert wandering just before they enter the Promised Land. “And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep the commandments, or not. And he humbled you and fed you manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.”<sup>171</sup>

### **Christ and the Holy Spirit in the Exodus**

As we have pointed out a few times already, the Old Testament anticipates Christ in many specific details. For example, Exodus describes the Passover night as “a night of watching kept to the Lord.” This can be seen as a “type” of Jesus’ night in the Garden of Gethsemane where he spent the night in prayer in anticipation of the true Paschal sacrifice of the first-born, himself on Calvary.<sup>172</sup> Similarly, Exodus says, “the Lord said to Moses, ‘Consecrate to me all the first-born,’” which can be seen to prefigure the presentation of Christ in the Temple.<sup>173</sup> So, it is fair to see that the Passover in Exodus is an event that anticipates and establishes the context for Christ’s own sacrifice. He is the firstborn that is offered to the Father as the Lamb of God (the new unblemished lamb of sacrifice).

That morning of the Passover, when Pharaoh let the Israelites leave Egypt, God led them with a “pillar of cloud” in the day and a “pillar of fire” at night.<sup>174</sup> These were physical signs used by God to reveal his presence to the people of Israel and to lead them in his divine will. While the Old Testament people did not have a concept of God as Trinity, looking at the New Testament, we can see that these signs of God’s presence as possible forms of the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit came down on the

---

<sup>170</sup> see Romans 6-8

<sup>171</sup> Deuteronomy 8:2-3

<sup>172</sup> Matthew 26:36-45

<sup>173</sup> Exodus 13:2; Luke 2:22-24

<sup>174</sup> Exodus 13:21-22

Apostles as tongues of fire.<sup>175</sup> The sign of fire connects the event of the Exodus with the events of the early Christian church. It is the same Holy Spirit that leads the chosen people of God out of slavery to freedom.

The theme of the presence of the Holy Spirit is an important interpretive key to understanding the biblical story. In Genesis, the spirit of the Lord overshadowed the waters and gave creation form. At Sinai God came to Moses in “a thick cloud” and delivered the Ten Commandments. Later the presence of God in the Ark of the Covenant and in the Temple was depicted as a holy cloud. To bridge the Old and New Testaments there is the image of the Holy Spirit “overshadowing” Mary. With her “fiat,” the presence of God is made real. This image of a cloud or shadow is why the Church often uses incense in the liturgy. It evokes the biblical image of the presence of God, as well as the rising of our prayers to heaven. The essential difference between the Old Testament presence of God and the New Testament is that in the Old Testament the Israelites were preserved from external evils, whereas in the New Testament grace preserves us from the greater and more deadly threat of internal and spiritual slavery to sin.

### **Baptism and the Eucharist**

God leads the Israelites out of slavery and the peril of the approaching Egyptian army through the Red Sea. This is an important image in light of New Testament baptism. The baptismal rite evokes the image of the Red Sea in that it was through the passing through the waters that the Israelites were brought out of slavery. A proper understanding of the waters of baptism is that it frees us from the slavery to original sin. Just as the Israelites were delivered from slavery through the waters of the Red Sea, the Christian is taken out of the slavery to sin through the waters of baptism.<sup>176</sup> We approach the Promised Land by passing out of slavery to freedom through the waters of baptism, just as the Israelites escaped slavery through their passage through the Red Sea.

Often baptism is considered only in its life-giving character. To fully understand the sacrament, however, we must not forget that it is also connected to death. To receive the life of grace offered in the sacrament of baptism, we must die to sin. This is why Saint Paul said that if we wish to live, we must enter into life through the cross.<sup>177</sup>

As they wandered through the desert without food or water the Israelites were certain they would die of starvation. They did not trust that God would continue to provide for them. To satisfy their need for food, God sends “manna” from heaven to sustain them on their journey. They were only to collect enough to feed everyone for that day, except in preparation for the Sabbath when they were allowed to collect enough for another day so they would not labor on the Sabbath. At first they did not know what the new and strange food was so they asked, “What is it?” which is what manna means in Hebrew. Isn’t this how we often respond to God’s will in our own lives? It is not according to our plans so we question God.

---

<sup>175</sup> Acts 2:1-4

<sup>176</sup> see 1 Corinthians 10:1-5

<sup>177</sup> Romans 6:3-4

We also see in the manna an anticipation of the Holy Eucharist.<sup>178</sup> God fed the Israelites with bread from heaven, which is what we receive in the Blessed Sacrament.<sup>179</sup> Under the appearances of bread we receive spiritual life well beyond our natural capacity to understand. We need only receive the gift in trust that God desires to give it to us.

Unfortunately, as we discover, the Israelites were still an idolatrous people who did not trust the Lord. They increased their complaining to Moses to go back to Egypt. They longed for the days when they worshipped with the Egyptians and lived lives of sin. Their wandering in the desert proved that they did not yet trust in Yahweh. God did not desire the Israelites to be lost wandering in the desert. He desired to purify their hearts so that they might interiorly possess God.

This often happens in our own lives. Times of trial and difficulty are the moments that reveal who we really are. Why is it that we find ourselves confessing the same sins over and over again? It is often because we have yet to detach ourselves from these sins; we need to be purified more. Our suffering can be that which purifies us if we allow it to remove sin from our lives and persevere in the faith.<sup>180</sup> God allows us to be tested not so much for us to prove our love for him, but for us to learn who we really are. How do we respond to trials? Do we live with the knowledge that only God satisfies and that everything that we have is ultimately given to us by God, or are we attached to the things of the world and try to find satisfaction in them?

### **Detachment**

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, based the spirituality of his community on interior freedom for the love of God. At the beginning of his “Spiritual Exercises” he says:

Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. And the other things on the face of the earth are created for man and that they may help him in prosecuting the end for which he is created. From this it follows that man is to use them as much as they help him on to his end, and ought to rid himself of them so far as they hinder him as to it. For this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things in all that is allowed to the choice of our free will and is not prohibited to it; so that, on our part, we want not health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, long rather than short life, and so in all the rest; desiring and choosing only what is most conducive for us to the end for which we are created.

This is a difficult principle to live, but it strikes at the heart of what it is to entrust oneself to the love of the Father. God desires our heart, and we must make our heart free to love him fully by detaching ourselves from physical goods to pursue the goods of the soul.

---

<sup>178</sup> see John 6

<sup>179</sup> see CCC, #1094

<sup>180</sup> see Hebrews 2:10-3:19; 12:1-12

Whom will we serve, God or ourselves? This is the question and lesson of the wilderness. In the end, however, loving God is not contrary to satisfying ourselves. We see the Israelites are dying of thirst and God gave them water from the rock.<sup>181</sup> This is an experience to teach them that only God can satisfy their thirst. At times it is a painful lesson to learn, but only when we learn to trust in God do we live as children of the loving Father.

God desires to pour Himself into our hearts, but our hearts must first be made capable of receiving His love. This whole life is a stripping away of created loves to enlarge our hearts to receive the love of God. In the Gospel of John, when Christ invites those who are thirsty or hungry to come to him, we see that Christ satisfies our desires, but unless we are detached from lesser goods we will not be free to pursue Him.<sup>182</sup> The lesson of the Exodus and the wandering in the desert is that we must detach ourselves from sin to receive the love of the Father.

---

<sup>181</sup> Exodus 17

<sup>182</sup> e.g. John 4:7-42; 6:27-35, 48-51; 7:37-39