

RUF Bible Study – The Book of Exodus
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Exodus 4 – A Surprising, Scary Visit

One of my favorite shows on television, one that I think is for the good of our society, is Extreme Makeover Home Edition. They fix houses and change lives. Last Sunday, my family watched. Wife and six kids. The husband/father died on Christmas Eve from the mold in the basement of their house he was trying to fix.

ABC and Ty's team came in, tore down the house and built a beautiful new, altering these peoples' lives forever.

I noticed a few things with our theme of story and symbols in mind. They made a big point to show and tell that they built the home with a wood specially treated against mold. Symbolic of the acknowledgement of the tragedy and the work to keep it away. The wife/mother made sure that two symbols of her husband were kept in tact and functioning in her life. There were a dozen roses that he'd given her right before she'd died. These were preserved in a glass box on her mantel. And his fireman's helmet, which sat on her new bed's headboard. These spoke to her of his love for her and his life's work.

In the yard, the family had built a memorial to him, a little garden with sunflowers. They wanted to think of him every day, and watch the garden grow.

Signs and symbols. Things mean more than just what they are. A rose. A hat. A garden. A moment of silence. The firefighters in the town did something I'd never seen before. They had two trucks cross their ladders to honor him. A sign, a symbol. Everyone was crying at the profound nature of these moments and these things.

We have before us a strange text. It is the most difficult passage in the book of Exodus according to every commentator I have read. I honestly would rather skip it. But it is important for us to see what it says for us, to attempt to sort out its meaning, to look at what it teaches us about God, his world, his people and his ways.

We're wondering what the story of our lives is and what symbols we believe in. Do you know God? Do you know what he cares about? This text helps to tell us, and it's not what you'd expect.

Firstborn of God

We come to this passage directly on the heels of Moses' extended conversation with God through chapters 3 and 4. Moses has just been told what he's going to do, been given the signs to assure him, and even been given a helper in his brother Aaron. So off he goes.

He tells his father in law his plan, and asks for his blessing. He finds out that he's in the clear with those who had been out to get him. He packs his wife Zipporah and his sons, one of whom is Gershom onto a donkey (sound familiar?) and off they go to Egypt. He doesn't forget his staff, the staff of God. Check.

God tells him along the way something pretty important. We read: *21 And the Lord told Moses, "When you arrive back in Egypt, go to Pharaoh and perform all the miracles I have empowered you to do. But I will harden his heart so he will refuse to let the people go. 22 Then you will tell him, 'This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son. 23 I commanded you, "Let my son go, so he can worship me." But since you have refused, I will now kill your firstborn son!'*

Pretty strong stuff. The first thing we notice is how the Lord tells Moses what is going to happen, what we will later read in chapters 11 and 12. We'll save that for later.

The second thing that most likely hits you will be the phrase about the Lord hardening Pharaoh's heart. This too will be talked about later, but I want to mention now that no ancient reader would have had any problem with this. They would have instinctively understood that God uses secondary causes to accomplish his purposes. He did so in the first chapters of this very book. He even uses evil to accomplish good. And when you start to string all of these causes together, going back and back, you end up going all the way back to the first cause. You go back to God himself. God uses all the causes along the way. It's important to remember that Pharaoh was being judged for his actions, not for the hardness of his heart. Remember what his people had done? Remember what Pharaoh is and what he represents? Don't forget this, this evil. What we have in this interplay of God hardening Pharaoh's heart and in Pharaoh hardening his own heart is the doctrine of God's sovereignty and human responsibility. I cannot explain this to you. You are responsible. God is sovereign. This, as many have stated, is not a puzzle to be solved but a mystery to be adored.

We next need to point out that the occasion for all the upcoming judgment and action we're about to see is Pharaoh and Egypt seeing and rejecting the miracles of God. The signs were for the Egyptians too, but they will have the reverse effect.

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For this series, I used commentaries on Exodus from Cole, Ryken, Childs, Pink, Cassuto, Motyer and Currid, as well *A House for My Name* by Leithart, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* by Alexander, and *The Gospel According to Moses* by A Dickson. I listened to sermons from Tim Keller and Les Newsom. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

“The miracles of Jesus Christ had the same effect: According to God’s sovereign will some believed and were saved, while others doubted and were condemned.”²

We often think that seeing miracles would engender faith in every heart. But that’s not true. It wasn’t true in Jesus’ time. It wasn’t true in Moses time. And it wouldn’t be true in our time if it were to happen. Miracles do not produce faith. God does. No one seeks God.

The real emphasis here is what God says about his people. *This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son.* We’ll also return to this theme, but it’s really important to see that it’s being set up for us right here. In fact, this has already been a theme the Bible has brought up back in Genesis, particularly in the story with Abraham and Isaac.

In these cultures, all of them, the first born son was the son of great privilege. He had the right of headship of the family when the patriarch died, and he had the right of double portion of inheritance. He would get twice his share and then the others would have to divide what was left. His was a position of prominence and preeminence. He represented the family in every way. In these cultures, each person wanted the good of the family more than his or her own personal good. If the family did well, they all did well. If a person did poorly, the whole family was implicated.

Our individualism makes this a strange concept for us, but we need to realize that most of the world has behaved this way for most of its history. We are the strange exception to this familial concept. And the first-born is the representation of this.

Here’s what God says – the firstborn is mine. He belongs to me. As such, he represents your whole life and future. All your prospects are in my hand.

We will see later that God sometimes calls in his accounts, and wants the physical life of these firstborns. Payment has to be made for them.

But for now, look at what he says – you, Israel are my firstborn son. You are the apple of my eye. You are the delight of my heart. You are where I set my hope and affections.

What transpires from this point is the story of a father’s love for his children. I like kids a fair amount. They’re mostly fun, cute and interesting. I enjoy being friends with them. But my own kids – well, they’re different. I would die for them, I think. I doubt I’d die as willingly for the Jewetts or the Spears or the Wahkinneys but I hope I would. I *know* I would for my own. I will protect and defend them. I will care for them and teach them.

They’re mine. Pastor Phillip Ryken writes, “These two verses disclose the very heart of the exodus.”³ Sonship. Daughtership, if you will. You have to understand that if you are a Christian, you are his child.

God says that this little band of slaves are his children. They were dirt in the eyes of the Egyptians. Nothing. Nobodies. And you’d have to agree. There wasn’t anything inherently special about these people. They had little to be proud of. In fact, God seemed to have abandoned them.

But that’s not true. He loves his children. They are his children.

Do you realize how amazing that is? All of these people are his creation. They were all created in the image of God, even Pharaoh. But he is saying he has a special love, a different love for his children than the rest of all people. He has a covenantal love that is not the same as his general love for mankind.

I love women. Women are awesome. I love my friends that are women. But I love one woman more than the others. Not because she is inherently better really. But because she is mine, my wife, my helper and lover, my covenantal bond. I would do things for Julie that I would not do for other women. That’s the way a covenant works.

This is a powerful thing. It should move you in some way. Are you a child of God? Are you in covenant with him? Does he see you in a different way than all the rest?

When you have your own children you will understand this better. Trust me.

God’s Sacraments – Serious Business

Now we enter into a rather large mystery. In one of the strangest passages in the Bible, we read Exodus 4:24-26 and it says: *24 On the way to Egypt, at a place where Moses and his family had stopped for the night, the Lord confronted him and was about to kill him. 25 But Moses’ wife, Zipporah, took a flint knife and circumcised her son. She touched his feet with the foreskin and said, “Now you are a bridegroom of blood to me.” 26 (When she said “a bridegroom of blood,” she was referring to the circumcision.) After that, the Lord left him alone.*

The questions here are numerous and I don’t want to delve into all the specific arguments along the way. The basic issues are who is the “him”? Who is the Lord wanting to kill? And regardless of whether it is Gershom or it is Moses, why is the Lord doing this? What happened to the warm, happy feelings of being the children of God? Did God suddenly snap here? And then what did Zipporah mean when she circumcised her son and touched his (whose?) feet and said gobbly gook that we don’t know what it means? And why was that a satisfactory thing for her to do, resulting in the ending of God’s wrath?

Wow. It’s a lot in a short paragraph. Believe me, I didn’t wake up today excited to tell you about circumcision and foreskins.

² Ryken, 128

³ Ryken, 129

But it's in the text, and my job as a minister of the gospel is to teach you how every text tells us about Jesus. How the Bible is understandable and gives you life and hope in the world today.

We know this – that Gershom hasn't been circumcised, and Zipporah saves the day by her quick flint-knife work to do the deed. Regardless of whether Moses or Gershom is the one in danger, God is taking the circumcision very seriously.

Doesn't this seem a little odd to you? I'm guessing that circumcision isn't, or shouldn't be, the topic that occupies your mind all day every day.

God commanded it in Genesis 17: 9 *Then God said to Abraham, "Your responsibility is to obey the terms of the covenant. You and all your descendants have this continual responsibility. 10 This is the covenant that you and your descendants must keep: Each male among you must be circumcised. 11 You must cut off the flesh of your foreskin as a sign of the covenant between me and you. 12 From generation to generation, every male child must be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. This applies not only to members of your family but also to the servants born in your household and the foreign-born servants whom you have purchased. 13 All must be circumcised. Your bodies will bear the mark of my everlasting covenant. 14 Any male who fails to be circumcised will be cut off from the covenant family for breaking the covenant."*

To be in covenant with God, to be considered as a part of his family, every male had to be marked by a sign. You can wonder about the placement and the painfulness of this sign (perhaps so he would see and think of it every day of his life and it would be connected to his most intimate places and the perpetuation of his family?). You might also wonder as to the timing of this sign. God said it was to be administered on the eighth day. He left the choice out of it. He said, this is the way it's to be. The sign is for you and your children. It is serious business.

Not doing this is not okay. Moses, as the covenant representative, has been slack in his duties. His first-born son is in danger. He may very well be taken this very moment. Moses' life might be forfeited for the lack of circumcising his son. His son's life might be taken out right now, as God has the right to do. We don't know why they hadn't done it. They were too busy? They were too transient? They were too lazy and didn't think it was that big of a deal?

We're not sure. But Zipporah realizes the mistake, circumcises Gershom herself (yikes) and then the danger has passed.⁴ Whew.⁵

Okay. What can we gain from this?

First, let's mention that this is a sacrament. Circumcision is "the distinguishing mark of God's people, a sign indicating membership in the covenant community, and thus it served as the proof of sonship in Israel."⁶ This is an Old Testament sign and symbol of God's grace to his people. What is a sacrament? The Westminster Shorter Catechism says: *What is a sacrament? Answer: A sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.*

The Heidelberg Catechism asks: What are the sacraments? Answer: *The sacraments are holy visible signs and seals, appointed of God for this end, that by the use thereof, he may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel, vis., that he grants us freely the remission of sin, and life eternal, for the sake of that one sacrifice of Christ, accomplished on the cross.*

Now many of you would ask – hey, wait, why would God *make* you be in covenant with him? What about choice? Shouldn't these people be allowed to make a decision and ask Yahweh into their hearts and then get the sign (ouch)?

This isn't the time and place to get into a debate on this, and you are more than welcome to come and disagree, but I have to point out to you that – well, he didn't do that that way.

Think about this: If you're born in Norman, Oklahoma, what clothing will you get and be wearing in the first few days of your life? Without any choice of your own, you will wear crimson and cream. You will hear about, watch about, read about and be immersed in an OU football culture. It will not be by your own choice. No one worries about that. It just happens. And, if at a later date, you will want to choose to reject that culture, we'll all shake our heads and wonder about your new orange clothes and why you think they look good. But hey, it happens.

The signs and the symbols of our culture are placed upon you. You will be raised in caring about Yahweh, in hearing the Scriptures read, the Psalms sung, the sacrifice of the lamb on your behalf, the story is *your* story.

So it is in the church. The signs and the symbols are placed upon you. They are for you, like OU clothes.

Wait. I've made a subtle transition here. I've slipped into talking about the now, not just the then.

⁴ "The Hebrew word is used in the Old Testament not only to refer to a bridegroom, but to a son-in-law, a father in law and even a mother in law. It is used of Jethro in 3:1 and 4:18 to describe his family relationship to Moses. The basic idea of the word stresses that a person has been made a part of a family, that he or she has become a blood relative through a covenant relationship. Thus, Moses' son has been circumcised as a symbol of his entrance into the covenant community/family.

Zipporah then takes the blood of the foreskin and places it on the child's feet. On occasion the term for feet can be used for genitals (Judges 3:24, 1 Sam 24:3), and that is perhaps where Zipporah smeared the blood of the circumcision. This act may serve as a precursor or preview of the forthcoming exodus event, in which God passes over the houses of his people who have smeared blood on their doorposts. The blood, in both cases, serves as a protective sign against Yahweh's wrath." Currid, 116

⁵ Personally, I think it makes the most sense of the surrounding context of Genesis and Exodus as a whole to think that God is going to kill Gershom here, making more of the firstborn son. Otherwise, Moses is about to die for disobedience. I can explain that, but it doesn't make as much sense to me. However, 19 of 20 commentaries I read said that it is Moses who is in danger.

⁶ Ryken, 132

There are two sacraments that Jesus instituted. What are they? Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Now think with me, what would a New Testament Jewish believer think about these two signs? Do they have any Old Testament antecedent? Are they completely new things?

No, in fact they aren't. They come from something. They are transformed, but not new. Baptism comes from circumcision. In Colossians, Paul makes this connection for us. *Colossians 2: 11 When you came to Christ, you were "circumcised," but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature. 12 For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead.* It is fuller, it is better. It is bloodless and it is for boys and girls, men and women. It is the placing into God's covenantal family. It is a sign for you to believe in. And we have seen that signs have power, they make meaning for us. They are not the thing themselves (a "falling rocks" sign is not the same thing as rocks falling on your car). Jesus makes us one with God. But baptism is the sign for this.

What is the Old Testament antecedent for the Lord's Supper? We'll leave that for a later date, but it is here in Exodus.

We're going to make application to this and I'm sure you're wondering why or how.

Let's leave it now in saying "The physical symbol of those who are in covenant with Yahweh, and are his first-born, is circumcision. Moses' son now bears the sign of belonging to Yahweh."⁷

The Plan Starts

We need to just mention that, once this danger is averted, that Moses finds Aaron and all of God's plan begins. Aaron tells the elders what God has said. Moses performs the signs of God's authenticating miracles so they can see for themselves and they, unlike Egypt, believe him. Believing him led to what action? Bowing and worship. In hearing the preaching of God's word by his messengers, in seeing the demonstration of God's power, they believed and worshipped God.

Why This Matters

The night before RUF large group, I was talking by email with my friend Cathy, who was at home recovering from an illness, filled with prescription drugs. I asked her to look at this passage in her drugged-up state and she came up with this profound application – Don't mess with Z woman, or she'll jack you up. Interesting analysis. Not exactly what we're going for.

Now, what does all this mean? Let's think about that.

Many of you have grown up in Christianity. Many of you have checked it out for years. And many of you are bored to death. It's not working. It doesn't capture your imagination. You're stuck. You're quitting. Maybe you've quit and you're coming back.

Let me suggest to you that this text has something to say to you. Not everything that will "fix" your problems, but enough to perhaps get you moving.

This tells us that you can't just come to God in whatever way you think. So many of you, so many Christians on this campus, so many Christians in our country today, operate under the assumptions of external only and internal only "Christianity."

You cannot be a good enough person. The law condemns you. You cannot do it. You are not righteous, no not one. Many of you know this, and you are embarrassed by it. You are ashamed. But you hide. You don't come to God because you don't think that he will love and accept you – ever. Others of you know this if you really stop and think about it. Deep down you're aware of this sort of hypothetical sin in your life. But you most often think on your good works. Your string of quiet times. How many groups you attend and how cool those groups are. Your service in your sorority. How long it's been since you cussed last. Your virginity. Your righteousness. Your mission trip record. Your theology.

This sort of Christianity focuses on the external. There is no real regard for the heart at all, for faith.

However, there is another kind of problem – that of the internal only. Many of you care most about sincerity. You care about when you asked Jesus into your heart. You care about your heart, your faith, your experience, your worship. But there is a huge problem in this. How do you know you're sincere enough? Is your faith faith enough? Is your worship experience really true worship?

An internal only approach focuses on the self.

In both of these types of living, you are under the divine wrath not fulfilling the covenant or keeping the law. You are guilty. You have no hope. You have thought you were a Christian all these years, but you're not. You're trusting in your church, your righteousness, your prayers, youth group, your pitiful little Jesus. That's why it's not working. It's not real.

God's wrath must be turned aside and his payment is blood. We read explicitly in Hebrews 9:22 what is said all throughout the Scriptures: *Without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness.*

Blood must be shed. Blood saves us. It saved someone in this passage. In circumcision, we are brought near – as a sign – with the shedding of blood. But no longer. Jesus is now our substitute. His blood is shed on our behalf. His blood for

⁷ Currid, 117

ours. We no longer celebrate our being brought in or close to God with a bloody sign but a bloodless one. This is good news! Remember your baptism! Do not neglect it! God takes it seriously.

He does not come to you any which way you want. He doesn't come to you by the raising of your hands and repeating verses over and over. He comes to you by his means of grace. By baptism, the Lord's Supper. By his Word rightly preached by preachers. By true fellowship and deep prayer. It is not on your terms, but on his. You cannot go around his means and think you are hearing him. You must attend to them diligently. It will change and form you over time. This is the way he works. Do you long to hear a good sermon where the Bible and the gospel are explained to you? Do you look forward with earnest anticipation the next time you can see the gospel, taste and smell it by the rightly administered Lord's Table?

These signs and symbols point to the cross for you. And they should draw you in. They should change you. God takes them seriously, after all.

It is the gospel for you, which is not in the form or way that you want or expect it.

This is your story. If you are baptized, believe in the what your baptism points to.

Paul told us this exact thing in Galatians: *1 Think of it this way. If a father dies and leaves an inheritance for his young children, those children are not much better off than slaves until they grow up, even though they actually own everything their father had. 2 They have to obey their guardians until they reach whatever age their father set. 3 And that's the way it was with us before Christ came. We were like children; we were slaves to the basic spiritual principles of this world.*

4 But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. 5 God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. 6 And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, "Abba, Father." 7 Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir.

Do you realize what this is saying?

This is the gospel for you. God's covenant is for his people. He loves his children.

Are you in slavery? Are you thinking you're no good, useless, used up and tossed out? Are you obsessed with yourself and your good works? Are you wrapped up into your image, your grades, your body, your test scores, your future, your faith?

God has changed all that. He declares that you can have freedom to hear, believe and worship him. That blood has been shed on your behalf. Don't look into your heart. Don't look at your faith. Don't look at what you've done or not done. Look to the cross. Look to the bloody sign, the blood that washes away sin and pays for your. That redeems your life, that sets you as a firstborn son, a most cherished child of the King of Kings. That is your hope.

Live in that hope, and you will escape the punishment of death. Jesus is your life.