

The Bones of Joseph

Exodus 13:17-22

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus and to the 13 chapter. Tonight we begin the journey out of Egypt. It's an exciting story and even though you are very familiar with it, I hope to kindle something of your excitement and maybe even point out some things that you have missed in the past. But most of all, we need to remember that this is not merely an exciting story of history, it's not even exciting Bible history. This is simply not meant to inspire us, or interest us. This word that we are going to begin studying tonight, this divine revelation is meant for our instruction.

Perhaps before we get to Exodus 13, we need to start in I Corinthians 10. Turn with me there to I Corinthians 10 and we'll look at the first six or so verses and then verse 11, where Paul says something about the section of Scripture in particular that we are going to begin studying tonight. And of course his statements refer to the whole of the Old Testament in general, but he's specifically talking about these events that we're about to begin studying in I Corinthians 10. Beginning in verse 1, Paul says this, "For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved." And then skip forward to verse 11, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come."

Now, I want you to note three or four things that Paul says about the Exodus experience. He is speaking directly too the exodus experience, but what he says here by extension actually applies to the whole of Old Testament, especially Old Testament narrative of God's work of redemption, but to the whole of the Old Testament. Now, look at three or four things that he says. First of all, if you look at verse 6, he says that the Exodus and the wilderness experience of Israel happened for us. Now there are a lot of things that we could deduct from that truth. One is, of course, that only a sovereign God could order history so that it would function for a people who would live thousands of years after it. This is

how sovereign God is, that He orders the events of history for our benefit, for our growth in grace so that we may be grounded in Christ, that we might grow as Christians. This experience happened for us. It's no surprise, is it, that the wilderness not only is an Old Testament pattern set forth about growth in walking with God, but it's a New Testament pattern, especially in the book of Hebrews. The wilderness is a pattern in the believer's sanctification, is it not?

Secondly, I want you to note something else, notice verse 11. This passage says that these things not only happened for us, but that these things were written down for our instruction. God went to the trouble of writing these things down in His word for the churches' growth in wisdom. In other words, the Exodus experience happened for new covenant believers, if I can put it that boldly. The Exodus experience happened for you. You are a new covenant believer; you're a post-Pentecost believer in the living God. You are a member of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ, and this happened for you, the Apostle Paul says. It's amazing. This is far more than an interesting story or an intriguing drama. It happened for you, it was written for you, that's the second thing.

The third thing I want you to see, however, is this, Paul says that this passage speaks of Christ. Look at verse 4, "They all drank the same spiritual drink for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them, and the rock was Christ." Now, we're not going to try and unpack that one right now, but get at least this point. The Exodus story is a story about Christ. That's not something that uneducated, fundamentalist preachers read back into the text of Exodus. That's something that Paul, you know, the inspired Apostle Paul, the one who was carried into the heaven of heavens and saw things that are not allowed to be spoken to men. That Paul says, this experience is about the Lord Jesus Christ, and so we are not sort of spiritualizing, or allegorizing when we see Christ in the Exodus, we're simply following what Paul in the New Testament tells us.

And one last thing about this passage, note that God's purposes are, as Paul indicates here, largely negative and moral. Go back and rehearse verses 1 through 6, and then look at verses 7 through 10 of I Corinthians 10. Over and over Paul talks about what the children of Israel did that they shouldn't have done and says, we are to draw the conclusion from that, that we shouldn't do that. Now when you see the children of Israel running after idols, "Ah ha, remember don't do that. Ok, mark that down in my book, remember, don't do run after idols." Over and over it's negative instruction. You go back and you see what Israel did that they shouldn't have done and you as Christians, don't do that.

The instruction is largely negative and moral as Paul lays it out here in I Corinthians 10: 1 through 11 and that's important for you too see, because there is a school of interpretation and preaching today that says that the only function of Old Testament historical passages is to highlight redemptive history. All they are to show us is God, and what God is doing in His work of redemption. They are not to give us moral instruction, they're not to give us practical advice for day

to day living, and we are told by those who practice this approach that we are not to moralize these passages as we apply them to Christians. Now, all I want to say is this, that philosophy, that theory directly contradicts Paul's explicit statements here in I Corinthians 10. Yes, God is the main character in the book. I hope you get that from my messages. God is definitely the main character, I don't want to diminish that in any way, and yes, His self-revelation is a prime concern. He wants us to know who He is and what He's like. And yes the story of His redemption of His people is center stage, but with those things granted, we are still given ethical instruction through these Old Testament stories. Ethical instruction that is not only relevant to us, but ethical instruction that Paul says is based on events and on a record of those events that were explicitly, divinely, intended to train us in the way of righteousness as Christians.

When you open the section of Exodus that we are getting ready to open up, you are opening up a section of Scripture that Paul says God wrote for you, that you might grow in grace. Does that not cause the hair to stand on end when you think of that? Paul says, God especially wrote this for your instruction. So let's turn to Exodus 13 and we'll read verses 17 through 22.

Now it came about when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near; for God said, "Lest the people change their minds when they see war, and they return to Egypt." Hence God led the people around by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea; and the sons of Israel went up in martial array from the land of Egypt. And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, "God shall surely take care of you; and you shall carry my bones from here with you." Then they set out from Succoth and camped in Etham on the edge of the wilderness. And the Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.

Amen. This is God's word, may He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thrill to hear this story of You and of Your redemption, and our souls are even more greatly stirred when we contemplate the fact that these things happen and were written down for our benefit for our growth in grace. So, by Your Spirit help us to grow. Not only in our sight of you, but in our response to You. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.

As Moses begins to tell the Exodus story in this passage, he sets before us truths about God. He does it even in telling you historical details about how the Exodus came about. In this passage, Moses is going to tell you three things about God and he expects us to respond to those three things in particular ways. First, he's going to remind you of God's providence, then he's going to remind you of God's

promise, then he's going to remind you of God's presence. He expects you to respond to God's providence with awe and appreciation, realizing that God orders the course of history for the sake of His people. He expects you to respond to God's promise with trust, believing that God will fulfill what He says and He expects you to respond to God's presence with comfort and with courage.

I. The Providence of God.

So, let's study this passage together tonight beginning with verses 17 and 18 where Moses gives us some comments on the divinely chosen escape route of Israel out of Egypt. Now, as this story begins, the very first thing that Moses tells you, after telling you that Pharaoh let the people go just like God said that He was going to let the people go, the very first thing that Moses tells you in verse 17 is the way that the Lord took Israel out and why? Now, Moses didn't tell you that because he was really fired up about geography and he wanted you to be fired up about geography too. Moses tells you this because he wants you to understand something about the providence of God. God knows His people and He rules mindfully of their needs, our sovereign God who rules everything in this universe, Moses is telling you, takes into account your weaknesses, your vulnerabilities, your circumstances, your fears, your desires. He takes into consideration His people as He rules the world.

We don't know the exact route of the Exodus itself. There are many different speculations on that, but isn't it interesting that we do know which way it was. It wasn't the way of the sea, it wasn't the way of horse, it wasn't the way of the land of the Philistines, and the reason we know it wasn't that way is because Moses goes out of his way to show us here. Look at verse 17, "God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines." Notice the stress here on God's leading of His people. This doesn't deny that God used the instrumentality of Moses and of many other great leaders in helping Israel out of Egypt, but this shows the directness of the leadership that God takes in bringing His people out of Egypt. And in verse 17 again, "He did not lead them the way of the land of the Philistines." That way, my friends was heavily garrisoned by the Egyptian army, furthermore, just a few hundred, or less than a couple of hundred miles up the way, they would have run into other nations which would have warred against them and would have taken Israel quickly in the conflict.

And then in the second half of verse 17 you find out why God didn't take them up the way of the Philistines, "Lest the people change their minds." Now, this statement is not here for Moses to try and prove that the future is somehow contingent, that even God's divine plans are somehow contingent upon our choices, that's not the point at all in the passage. The point is to say, that God is so kind and merciful in His providence that He takes into account our weaknesses as He plans the way that we should go. In light of these concerns

about God's people unreadiness for warfare, God deliberately leads His people by the way of the wilderness. We know that from many years later, because Thutmose III's army was able to go, in about ten days, from Egypt into Palestine, or into Canaan through this route. It's only about one hundred and fifty miles. Now, even assuming women and children and a very slow moving crowd, we can assume that Israel could have been in Canaan in under a month going that way, but God chose to lead them a different way. He does so because He knows the weakness of His people.

That is a vitally important point for us to contemplate for just a few moments. God is showing His knowledge of, and care for, and providence over His people even in planning the route of the Exodus. He doesn't send them the shortest way. Now, Israel is going to get into the wilderness and you know what's going to happen. They are going to complain against God because of the lot that they face. "Lord you've left us out in the wilderness to die." In light of that isn't this an amazing statement? That the reason God took them that way that they considered to be so hard, was to make it easier on them.

I want you to think about this because we sing beautiful hymns like, "How Firm A Foundation," and we really do believe God helps us in time of trial, but do we ever pause to think that however hard the trial we're going through right now, that God in His wondrous providence has ordained not to put us through another trial which would be unbearable for us. But this trial that seems so unbearable to us, that we are tempted to question His wisdom and His kindness and His goodness, does it every occur to us that He has sent His son on the hard way and that the way that we are on is far easier relative to the way that He has sent His son?

Moses is telling you at the outset, however hard that wilderness way is going to be for the people of God, and Moses is not going to discount the hardness of it, it's going to be a hard road, it's not as hard as the way that God could have sent His people. But in His fatherly kindness, He's thinking of our weaknesses, He's thinking of our infirmities and He's making sure not to lay on us something that we cannot handle. You see, he starts off and he says, look at God's providence, see how He cares for you, see His wisdom and be comforted by that. God has His reasons for the strange paths that He sometimes leads us in, and if He does not lead us in the shortest way, He does lead us in a way which is simultaneously best for His glory and for our good. That's a very hard thing to believe when we're bearing up under certain trials in this life. Very easy to say isn't it, but thank God He's teaching us that in His word.

II. The Promise of God.

Now, there's a second thing I'd like you do see here as well. You'll see it in verse 19. We saw the providence of God in verses 17 and 18, then the promise of God in verse 19. This is a very strange account. It's the account of the exhumation of

Joseph's body. In verse 19, Moses does something strange, well it's not strange if you remember Genesis 50, but it seems strange if you don't remember Genesis 50. Moses, while everybody else is getting ready to leave Egypt, while everybody else is plundering the Egyptians, Moses is exhuming a body, Joseph's body, and then you remember, 'Oh yes, I remember something back in Genesis 50 where Joseph made the sons of Jacob promise that they would take his body out of Egypt and into the land of Canaan.' You're right, you do remember that; it's in Genesis 50 verses 24 through 26. Why don't you look with me there for a few moments.

What's going on here? Well, as Moses exhumes the mummified body of Joseph the patriarch and prepares to carry it to Canaan at least two things are happening. First of all, a commitment is being fulfilled. Joseph had extracted a commitment from the sons of Jacob that they would take his body out of Egypt. Look at Genesis 50 verse 24, Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you and surely bring you up from this land, to the land which he promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." Joseph had made the sons of Jacob swear they wouldn't leave him in Egypt, that they'd bring him out of Egypt. And this isn't just sentiment, you know, this isn't just, "I've been living in exile in New York and when I die carry my body back to Mississippi and bury me with my kin folk and with my ancestors before me." As sentimental as this is, and let me say, it wells up within you, you have to remember, Joseph is the beginning of the Egyptian sojourn of the people of God. It's with Joseph and with an inter fraternal struggle between him and his brothers that he's sold into slavery down into Egypt, and thus begins the sojourn of Israel in Egypt. And it's four hundred and thirty years before Israel comes out of Egypt and when Joseph comes out of Egypt he is well dead. He leaves his land never to return and there is something incredibly sentimental and moving about the body of this man being taken up out of Egyptian soil to be transported to the land of Canaan where finally Joshua tells us, he'll be buried at Shechem.

It's a glorious thing to think of, but you see, the reason that Joseph asks this is not because of sentiment, this is an expression of his belief in the promise of God. He's saying, "Brothers I know God is going to bring you out of Egypt, therefore when He does, you pull my body out of the ground and you take me with you." This is an expression of the faith of a patriarch. You say, "O Ligon, you're reading that into that." Oh, no, I'm not, look at Hebrews 11:22, look at Hebrews 11:22. The author of Hebrews says this, "By faith, Joseph, when he was dying made mention of the Exodus of the sons of Israel and gave orders concerning his bones."

The faith of the patriarchs was that God would fulfill His promise, and I want to ask you something my friends, what more important truth did Israel need when embarking into the unknown region of the wilderness than that God keeps His promises. And here, the body of Joseph, the mummified body of Joseph, at the head of the host as they lead out of the land of Egypt and into the wilderness

serves as a physical reminder that God keeps His promises. That's the first thing that's going on here.

And of course a second thing follows. A promise is coming to pass here, a promise from God. If we went back to Genesis 50 verse 25, we read these words, "Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear saying, God will surely take care of you and you shall carry my bones up from here, so Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt." This passage not only expresses the faith of a patriarch; it stresses the promise of God. God's providence is over His people, even in the way they come out of Egypt. God's promise assures His people that they might trust Him in the hardships that they are going to face in the wilderness.

III. The presence of God.

Finally, if you look at verses 20 and 22, Moses shows us something of the presence of God. This is a description of the extraordinary way in which the Lord manifested Himself in Israel, even to the senses of the Israelites. We learn here that God is near His people in the wilderness. In verse 20, Moses is indicating to us that Israel is standing on the very boundaries of the wilderness as they passed those cities of Succoth and Etham. Ahead, the unknown. In such a circumstance, what did Israel have going for her? Well, she had a vivid memory of what God had just done in Egypt. She had seen God's power displayed. You know how an event can burn itself onto your memory don't you? I think some of you have had some events in the last few days that have been burned on your memory that will be with you for the rest of your life. Well, they had seen the power of God displayed in the plagues, in the defeat of Pharaoh, they were going to see it in ways that would boggle their minds in the days to come, so they had those vivid memories of what God had done for them.

What else, what else did they have going for them? Well, they had the reminder of God's promises in the bones of Joseph. There they are, they're looking up at Joseph in his coffin, and they are remembering promises that had been made hundreds of years ago to their ancestors, long before Joseph, remembering that God had amazingly fulfilled His promises. After four hundred and thirty years, surely there would have been some in Israel who doubted whether God was going to fulfill His promises and just in case, any doubter would be told, "Look at the box, look at the box, Joseph's in that box, just like he said he would be, just like he said God would do. God's taking us out of Egypt." Any questions, look at the box.

But God had given them something else too. Moses tells us in verses 21 and 22 that the something else that God gave them was Himself. He not only showed them His providence, He not only gave them His promises and assured them, but He gave them His presence. In the twin manifestation of the pillar of cloud and

the pillar of fire, His powerful presence was made known to them day and night. Verse 22 indicated the continuous nature of this presence. It was always there, and you know that the cloud and the fire are symbols often associated with God in the Bible. You can go back to Genesis 15 and the covenant with Abram and remember the smoking oven and the flaming torch, and here the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire and it continues in the New Testament. If you were to turn with me to Acts 1:9, what was Jesus received up in? A cloud. In Acts chapter 2 verses 1 through 3, how was the presence of God's Holy Spirit manifested upon the disciples? Tongues of fire. So, over and over theophanies, manifestations of God in the Scripture, are connected, are used.

Images of the cloud and the fire are manifestations of God's nearness to us. We don't have time to do justice to it, but my friends, Jesus makes it clear in John 14 and in John 16, and Paul makes it clear in I Corinthians 3 and in Ephesians 3, that the manifestation of God's nearness to us now as new covenant believers is not less spectacular than, but greater than the manifestation of God's nearness to the children of Israel. Because, Jesus says in John 16, that the reason that He sent His Holy Spirit, the comforter to us was in order that we might enjoy the continual comfort and presence of God Almighty. And in Acts, and in I Corinthians, it is made clear that the Shekinah glory of God, manifested here as the pillar of fire and cloud which manifested the dwelling of God in the tabernacle, now takes residence in your heart through the Holy Spirit. That's how near God is to you. It's not only the incarnation of the Son, in which He draws near to us to show us His presence, but it's the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in which He makes God to be present within you, comforting you, strengthening you, guiding you, stabilizing you, giving you peace where there is no earthly reason for peace.

What do you need when you're getting ready to go into the wilderness? You need the providence of God and you need the promise of God and you need the presence of God and look what Moses says that God gave Israel before they went into the wilderness. Let's pray.

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