

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
Moses: Passover and Flight | Exodus 13-16**

Today is special in part because of the first grade Bibles and the reason the first graders got Bibles is because of something that happened 500 years ago. Five hundred years ago this month, a movement started called The Reformation. It's the 500th anniversary of that. The Reformation was the idea that people wanted to go back and see what the very first church was like. What was it like when they began? So they picked up Bibles and taught people how to read them. This was so important because for a thousand years prior to that, the only thing people heard about Christianity was what the priests said. Now, because of The Reformation, people were encouraged not just to listen, but to take the Bible and read it. Today we put a Bible in the hands of our first graders and say, "We want you to know the story of God for yourself." Now, guys, in Israel all the way across the world, there are little kids just like you who also are hearing stories from the Bible. I don't know if you know this, but in Israel they have the same show—Sesame Street—it's true! And one day on Sesame Street they asked people your age to talk about a story from the Bible. So in one minute and six seconds, I want you to see what they know about the story of Moses. [Video shown from Shalom Sesame]

I'm not sure I want to ask how many of you parents could explain the story of Moses to these five-year-olds like that. The reason they know the story as well as they do is because they've heard it again, and again, and again. It sinks in and it goes from their ears to their heads and from their heads to their hearts. That's what we want to have happen here, so that means we need to repeat it again and again.

Every year at Easter we have a very special service that a couple hundred people come to on the night before Easter. It's called the Watchnight service, and when people come in the whole Sanctuary is dark. It's as dark as we can make it, and the only light comes from where the pastor is reading the story from the Bible. We put it up on the screens and go back and forth talking about the story—from Genesis when the world began all the way to Revelation—all inside of an hour. We tell the whole story and intersperse Bible readings and songs to let it come into our hearts. It's a powerful time and this story we're going to talk about today is used every single year because it's so important. So, I'd like us—like at Watchnight—to read it together.

This comes from a part of the story where God has used Joseph. Remember the coat of many colors? Joseph saves the people of God when there's a famine by bringing them into Egypt, and for 200 years the Jews are treated like kings and queens. But, during the next 200 years they become slaves, and the Egyptians are both afraid of them and ruthless to them. The Bible says, "God heard the groaning of His people in slavery, He remembered His promises to Abraham, and He had compassion on the Jews. God

came in a burning bush, and He called Moses to bring His people, the Israelites, out of slavery in Egypt.” So, I’d like for us to read this part together. It says:

Leader: God sent Moses and his brother, Aaron, to speak for Him to Pharaoh with a command, “Let my people go!” But the Pharaoh wouldn’t agree. So, God sent plagues to Egypt—day became night, rivers turned to blood; frogs, and gnats, and flies and locusts infested the land; the livestock died; people got boils all over them; hail came down from the sky, but Pharaoh’s heart was still hard against God and the Israelites.

People: Then the Lord said to Moses, “I will bring one more plague on Egypt, and then Pharaoh will let you go.”

Leader: And that very night God killed every firstborn in Egypt, including Pharaoh’s son. But the firstborn of Israel were all saved because God “passed over” their homes, all that were marked with the blood of a lamb. And Pharaoh gave in, allowing the people of Israel to leave. So the Israelites herded their flocks, and baked their bread without yeast, unleavened bread, because they had no time to prepare food.

People: When Pharaoh let the people go, God led them around the desert toward the Red Sea. By day the Lord went ahead in a pillar of cloud to guide them, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light.

Leader: Then the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he sent his entire army after the Israelites.

That’s the story today. Last week Melissa talked about the plagues and the Passover. Today we want to talk about how the people of Israel escaped the Egyptians when they chased them. In Exodus 13 it says: When God let the people go, God didn’t lead them on the road through the territory of the Philistines, even though that was shorter. God said, *If they face war with the Philistines right away they might change their minds and run back to Egypt*, so God sent them by a different way. Now the important thing here is that God has a plan. God was not surprised that Pharaoh changed his mind. God was not surprised that the Israelites didn’t know where to go. God knows that sometimes we need to be reminded that He has a plan. And actually, God knows that sometimes you and I need to be shaken up before we settle down. We need to be shaken up before we settle down and seek God, otherwise we’re just running around like the Israelites. God has a plan we don’t see. And in the part that you read it says, “God guided them through the cloud by day and fire by night.” God guides us and wants to lead us. We don’t get the clouds and fire, but we believe that God sends His spirit, His Holy Spirit, and when we quiet down, God will guide us.

Let’s go back to the story and read this part together, it’s the start of chapter 14.

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites to turn back and camp by the sea. Pharaoh will think, ‘The Israelites are wandering around in confusion, trapped between the desert and the sea.’” [Exodus 14:1-3]

Now that sounds fairly simple, but what’s happened is this. The Israelites lived inside of Egypt, which was a huge country. If we put Egypt on a map you would see that the Israelites lived in a part of Egypt called Goshen. Goshen is near the border of Egypt, so

when the Israelites left, they ran out into the wilderness and headed south. They were just trying to get away and they got to a place called Etham. That's where what you just read happens. God said to them, "Go back. Go back the way you came, all the way to Baal-zephon." Now the problem is that Baal-zephon was like a dead end; it was a geographical dead end. When you get to Baal-zephon you've got no place to go. You're trapped by the mountains to the north. You're trapped by the desert to the south. You're trapped to the west by Goshen and the fortress city of Egypt that you just came from, and worst of all you're trapped by the sea on the right. This was called the Sea of Reeds back then and we call it the Red Sea. The part that they're trapped in is up against the Gulf of Suez and they are shut in between the water, the mountains, the desert, and the enemy. They're trapped between a rock and a hard place OR as it is said, they are trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea—that's where that comes from—the Israelites were trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea. It would be similar to you and a friend running away from some bullies who are chasing you and you said, "Let's go right." You turn right and *oh no!* It's a dead end alley and the bullies come running after you and you're trapped. God has told them to do this, and all of a sudden they're trapped. The reason we tell this story is because when God is involved you've got to wonder, who's really trapped? The Israelites who ran away or the Egyptians?

We tell this story to first graders because God is still looking for boys and girls and men and women who are willing to go out where there's danger, who are willing to do the hard thing when it's right, who are willing to trust God and follow Him. So it says, "The Israelites followed Moses where God told them. Then they looked up and saw the Egyptian army coming at them and they had no place to hide." Okay, let's read this next part together. All the first graders open your Bible, and if you brought your Bible and you're in elementary school, you open your Bible too and turn to page 90. Page 90 is Exodus 14 and we're going to read from verses 10-16. This is the scariest part of the story! It starts out this way.

When they saw the Egyptians approach, the people were terrified (the Israelites were terrified) and said to Moses, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert." Moses answered, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today." Then the Lord said to Moses, "Raise your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea." [Exodus 14:10-16]

When you are trapped, when things go wrong, how do you respond? You're afraid. Who wouldn't be afraid? Of course the Israelites are afraid when they see the Egyptians coming, and it says, "They cried to God." As a matter of fact, it's the first time in the Bible when the people all together cried out to God. We don't know what they said to God, but it's more like, "God, what have you done?! Get us out of here! Help us!" God wants to hear from us even when we yell at Him. What's the response of human beings to bad news? First, we are afraid. Second, when we're afraid we want to run away—whether it's at school, at home, at work—we want to run away. Third, when we're afraid we find somebody to blame. The Israelites blame Moses, of course! He got them into this mess. We tend to find somebody to blame. And finally, when human beings get afraid, we obsess. Now first graders, when you obsess you can't think about anything

else. It's all you think about, it's all you talk about. This is how human beings react to bad news when they don't trust in God.

Now, Moses has been learning to trust in God and he reacts very differently. First, Moses says to the Israelites, *Please, take out your Bibles* . . . wait, the Bible wasn't written yet! Moses says, *You know, it says in the Bible, God helps those who help themselves*, right? No! It doesn't say that anywhere in the Bible. In fact, "God helps those who help themselves" comes from a guy named Algernon Sidney—what a great name! Algernon Sidney wrote it down and Benjamin Franklin read it. Ben Franklin said, "God helps those who help themselves" and it became part of the American culture, but it's wrong. God helps the helpless that cry out to Him. Moses answered the people,

¹³ Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. [Exodus 14:13]

God says, "Don't be afraid." If you first graders read your whole Bible you'll see that this is the most often repeated command of God in the whole Bible. I know it's a scary world. God says, "Don't be afraid. I am with you." Your parents need to remember that as much as you do. Don't be afraid. Don't run away. Stand still. Watch me act. Don't say *what can I do?* See what God can do and keep looking because if you look long enough, you will see how God acts and how He does what you cannot.

This brings us—this part when they're all scared—to the most important part of the story. It's in the Old Testament. This is what happened with the Jews. Why would people who know about Jesus care about what happened to the Jews? Well, the apostle Paul was a Jew and he was a rabbi. He learned the story of Moses when he was just a little first grader, just like Jesus heard this story when he was a little first grader. Paul tells the followers of Jesus, "This is an important story." As a matter of fact, when he writes to the church in Rome he says,

⁴ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance (when we hang on) taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide (the Scriptures are supposed to encourage you) we might have hope. [Romans 15:4]

This story is an example of living in hope. The crossing of the Red Sea is to the Old Testament what the resurrection of Jesus is to the New Testament. It's the most important story that there is in the Old Testament, so when the prophets and the writers of the Old Testament wanted to show how you can trust God, they looked again and again at how God delivered the slaves. In the same way, when somebody in the New Testament wants to show how you can trust God, they point to how God raised Jesus from the dead. This is a story that gives hope. Let's read it together.

²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, ²² and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. ²³ The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. ²⁴ During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. ²⁵ He jammed the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

It's a miracle. And then the part that you read might be the most important part.

²⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen."
²⁷ Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward^[c] it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. ²⁸ The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived. [Exodus 14:21-28]

I think that's one of the hardest paragraphs in the whole Bible because it shows very clearly that in the end there are only two kinds of people. There are the ones that run to God and there are the ones that try to run away from God. One is saved and one perishes. That's why this story was so important to the Jews and to the Christians. It said to the Jews: don't worry when you don't know what to do. Sometimes it takes hard times. Listen to this: sometimes it takes hard times to break bad habits.

We're going to spend the next five weeks talking about Moses and showing how even when God's people left Egypt, Egypt didn't leave God's people. Even when they got out of Egypt, they were still slaves to Egypt. I'm going to suggest today that you guys live in Egypt. Like Moses, you've probably rubbed shoulders with people that live in "Egypt" most of your life. You work with Egyptians. You think like Egyptians. You read Egyptian newspapers. You listen to Egyptian music. You see commercials for promises of success for Egyptian entrepreneurs. You're in the competitive world of Egyptians, so it's only natural that you think like an Egyptian, right? It's a dog-eat-dog world. Ever since you were born you've been taught by all the other Egyptians in the American empire that "God helps those who help themselves", instead of "God helps the helpless who cry out to God." Sometimes it takes hard times to break bad habits. Sometimes we can't learn to trust God till we don't have any other choice.

The other reason the Jews tell this story every single year is to remind them that God doesn't own a watch. God doesn't own a clock. You and I look at our clocks, at our watches, look at our calendars and say, "God needs to do this by then", and nothing happens. "God needs to act by then", and things get worse. "God needs to do this now!" And instead, God uses hard times partly to teach us how to wait and how to trust. God doesn't bow to our schedule. God doesn't jump to our alarm clock, but God is there.

We're going to close this by looking at what happened when the Israelites all got across the Red Sea. They looked back and they saw whoosh! Let's read together.

30 That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians. 31 And when Israel saw the great power of the Lord, they put their trust in Him.

1 Then Moses and the Israelites sang a song to the Lord: *The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea. 2 The Lord is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise Him, my father's God, and I will exalt Him.* [Exodus 14:30-31, 15:1-2]

Please pray with me.

Lord God, remind us of this story when we're afraid. Teach us again how You acted back then so we can see the way that You act now, and God, just the way that You put the blood of the lamb on the door so that those people would be safe, we thank You that Jesus has become the Lamb for us who saves us, and forgives us, and leads us forward like a good Shepherd. We ask You today to teach us to see You at work and when we see You at work, God, we want to say, "Thank you." Hear us now as we sing our song to You. Amen.

* Great thanks to Chuck Swindoll for his book on Moses, from which I liberally borrowed for this sermon – John Crosby

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.