

11. THE COVENANT AND OUR DELIVERANCE

When the LORD establishes his covenant with Abraham and his seed, he also foretells a time of trial for Abraham's descendants: "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions" (Gen 15:13, 14).

The Bible tells us that God disciplines us for our good, so that we may learn humility and trust. This is part of the relationship in the covenant of love. As it says in Hebrews 12:7-9: "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!"

The first major trial for Israel came during the period of its slavery in Egypt. What good was served by this particular trial? First, we should note that Israel was not always enslaved in Egypt. Initially there were good times, and Israel could multiply and become a nation. From a family they grew into a people. Second, the stay in Egypt was meant as a period of testing and spiritual growth, so that Israel would learn to rely on the covenant promises of the LORD. Third, in the deliverance from Egypt the LORD would reveal himself to Israel and the nations, so that everyone would come to know the God of Israel. The LORD would show himself as a God of faithfulness and strength, so that Israel would trust in him and obey him. And finally, these four hundred years were needed so that the "sin of the Amorites" (those who lived in Canaan) would reach "its full measure." Just as Israel had to grow into a God-fearing nation, so it had to become clear that the Canaanites by immoral and idolatrous ways had worn out God's patience and would be justly punished. They would be removed from the land which God would give to his people who feared him.

Therefore God's *grace* (towards Israel) and his *justice* (towards Egypt and Canaan) become evident through this mighty deliverance, the exodus from Egypt. It is one of God's greatest covenantal acts, to which the Bible refers time and again. It becomes clear that the way to glory goes through suffering and trial.

A time of trial is meant to bring out the strength and genuineness of faith. This is also the consistent teaching of the New Testament. "These [trials] have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Pet 1:7). And James writes these remarkable words, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance" (James 1:2, 3). In the covenant, we are tried for our own benefit.

Egypt, the super-power

Many historians believe that the Israelites came into Egypt during the reign of the Hyksos dynasty, a non-Egyptian, Semitic governing group. The Hyksos empire steadily grew in influence, and Egypt was considered one of the super-powers of the period.

Under Amosis I, the Egyptians rebelled against the Hyksos rulers and drove them out, establishing the Eighteenth Dynasty (1580 B.C.). Under the rule of that dynasty the Egyptian empire spread from the Nile to the Euphrates. Many fortified cities were built with the use of Israelite slave labour (Exod 1:11). Egyptian nationalism and feelings of superiority were at an all-time high when Moses appeared again on the scene. Against this background we can understand the refusal of the Pharaoh to let Israel go. As the "beloved" son of the great Egyptian deities, why should Pharaoh listen to some unknown, lesser god?

In the history of the covenant, the LORD often confronts the nations with his glory when they are at the peak of their power and might. This is the case here with Egypt, and it is later the case with Canaanites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks and Romans. God establishes his covenant people before the very eyes of the mighty nations. His covenant of love is more effective and powerful than any alliance which men might conceive. People build empires; God gathers his church.

Moses, the faithful servant

The LORD undertakes to deliver his people out of Egypt through the ministry of Moses, the mediator of the old covenant. The New Testament tells us that "Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house..." (Heb 3:5). We also learn that he "was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num 12:3). This combination of faithfulness and humility is what made him a true servant of the LORD.

From a human perspective, Moses was perhaps not the most suitable candidate for the task of confronting Pharaoh and leading Israel out of slavery. As a young man he had shown a great concern for the plight of his people, but had fled the land when it became apparent that his fellow-Israelites rejected him.

Meanwhile he had built up a good life in Midian, had married and received children. The reality of his people's slavery in Egypt lay far beyond his vision. When the LORD appears to him in the burning bush at Mount Horeb and calls him to go to Egypt to lead out God's people, Moses is unwilling and offers many excuses. He does not consider himself capable ("who am I?") and he is also afraid that Israel will have forgotten about God ("they will ask me: what is his Name?"). Moses still fears that Israel will not listen, despite the signs he will be able to do. "O LORD, I have never been eloquent...I am slow of speech and tongue" (Exod 4:10). Finally the LORD becomes angry with Moses, maintains his calling, and promises to send Moses' brother Aaron along with him as his helper.

Moses and Christ

Moses is enabled by the LORD to become his faithful servant who perseveres in his service. Perhaps no one, besides Abraham, was so close to the LORD as Moses was. He was allowed to draw near to God on Mount Horeb, where God showed him how to make everything required for worship. When he came down from the mountain, his face shone with such radiance that a veil was needed to cover it (Exod 34:29-35).

Hebrews 3:5 testifies that "Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house...." And yet, also in his relationship with Moses the LORD remained strict and just. Moses did not himself enter the promised land, because on one occasion he had not done what the LORD had commanded. This was a source of great grief to him: "At that time I pleaded with the LORD: 'O Sovereign LORD, you have begun to show to your servant your greatness and your strong hand. For what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do the deeds and mighty works you do? Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan – that fine hill country and Lebanon.' But because of you the LORD was angry with me and would not listen to me..." (Deut 3:23 -26).

God's refusal to let Moses cross the Jordan is a sobering message for all God's servants. He demands full and total obedience in his service. This is not different in the new covenant. Paul writes to the Corinthians with respect to office-bearers: "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Cor 4:2). Still, God allowed Moses to see the land from the top of the mountain, and he assured him of the blessing over his work. Moses could die, his task completed, resting in God's grace.

Moses was faithful in his work, but he was not the ultimate mediator. In Hebrews 3:3 we read: "Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself." Moses was

faithful as a servant, but Christ was faithful as a son over God's house. Moses, who has been called the mediator of the old covenant, had to step aside for Christ, who is the "mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance" (Heb 9:15).

"I have heard them crying out..."

Why did the LORD come into action after four hundred years to deliver Israel? When Moses came back to the Israelites, they were serving the idols of Egypt. They did not deserve to be rescued. "And I said to them, 'Each of you, get rid of the vile images you have set your eyes on, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.' But they rebelled against me and would not listen to me; they did not...forsake the idols of Egypt" (Ezek 20:7f.). And Joshua had to tell the Israelites, shortly before his death and after the land of Canaan had been conquered, "Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the river and in Egypt, and serve the LORD" (Josh 24:14). Did the testing in Egypt really bring about faithfulness and perseverance?

We know that in Moses' days many Israelites still feared the LORD. Think of the midwives who saved Israelite infants despite the danger to their own lives: "The midwives, however, feared God..." (Exod 1:17). Joshua also says later that the Israelites "cried to the LORD for help" (Josh 24:7). And Moses reminds the people: "Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression" (Deut 26:7, 8).

But Moses also fears, when he is called, that the Israelites will not even know God's name anymore (Exod 3:13). And while we do read that "the Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God" (Exod 2:23), it does not say that this crying was directed to the LORD. It came before him, and he heard it, but was it also consciously brought before him? Perhaps it was only a remnant that still called upon the LORD.

Yet God came to deliver his people. Why? We read in Exodus 2:24, 25: "God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them." Time and again God delivers his people because of his covenant, to which he is faithful. Were it not for this covenant, there would be no salvation. God is true to himself and to his given word, and therefore to his people. "He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever – holy and awesome is his name" (Ps 111:9). This truth may never be forgotten, lest we think that our deliverance is based upon our own activity or worth. The history of God's covenant shows us that it is God who delivers. He deals with us in grace and love.

The Exodus and the need for atonement

God brought many judgments upon Egypt. These plagues were signs of the judgments which will come over the world in the last days, leading to the day of

Christ's return. See, for example, Revelation 15 and 16, where plagues are announced which are similar to those visited on Egypt, but also more severe. In both Exodus and Revelation, divine judgment leads to death. This is the end of all who reject God and persecute his people.

When the LORD prepares to bring his final judgment upon the Egyptians – the death of every first-born – it becomes clear that Israel is not better than the people of Egypt. Atonement must be made for the people of Israel, so that the LORD may pass them by in this night of severe judgment.

This is the sense of the Passover, instituted by the LORD on that night. Every household of Israel is to take a lamb, slaughter it, and put the blood on the “sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs” (Exod 12:7). As God passes through the land in judgment, he will pass by (pass over) those houses where the blood of the Passover lamb is evident. The blood is the blood of atonement (see also Leviticus 17:11, “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar...”).

We note here the unity between old and new covenant. The New Testament tells us that the Passover lamb represents Christ in his sacrifice on the cross. When John the Baptist sees Jesus walking towards him, he says, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). The apostle Paul refers specifically to Jesus as “Christ, our Passover Lamb” who “has been sacrificed” (1 Cor 5:7). Peter writes that we were redeemed not with silver or gold but “with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Pet 1:19). The book of Revelation refers many times to the Lord as a Lamb that was slain but is now standing, and is worthy to receive all honour and praise (see Rev 5:6 ff.).

I also point to the fact that Jesus in the night when he was betrayed celebrated the last passover with his disciples and then instituted the Lord's Supper, speaking of the “blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28). In the version of Luke 22, the Lord speaks of the *new* covenant (vs 20), indicating that the atonement made visible in the Passover of the old covenant is now found in the outpouring of Christ's blood. Old and new covenant are one in character: atonement is only by the blood of the paschal lamb. We again see the unity of the Holy Scriptures.

The Exodus motif in Scripture

Israel's deliverance in the Exodus is presented in Scripture as God's great covenantal work of deliverance. By this feat he instantly made a name for himself in Israel and among the nations. The Bible does not cease to speak of it. Let us note some of the references made to the Exodus.

When Joshua as one of his final acts renews the covenant at Shechem, he reminds Israel in the LORD's name, “When I brought your fathers out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued them with chariots and horsemen

as far as the Red Sea. But they cried to the LORD for help, and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians; he brought the sea over them and covered them. You saw with your own eyes what I did to the Egyptians” (Josh 24:6, 7).

In the book of Judges we read that after Joshua’s death, the Israelites time and again forsook the LORD “who had brought them out of Egypt” (Judg 2:12). They then again became a slave nation, until they cried out to the LORD, and he once more delivered them.

In his farewell address, Samuel reminds the Israelites of what the LORD has done in the Exodus and beyond. “It is the LORD who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your forefathers up out of Egypt...” (1 Sam 12:6). At the dedication of the great temple, Solomon also refers to the “covenant of the LORD that he made with our fathers when he brought them out of Egypt” (1 Kgs 8:21).

The prophets had the duty to call Israel to repentance and reformation and to warn the people of the impending exile to Assyria and Babylon. They make numerous references to the great Exodus. How could Israel ever forsake the LORD who delivered them and gave them freedom and abundance? Israel’s apostasy will lead to their banishment from the land given by God. Yet the prophets also speak of God’s covenant faithfulness. Israel must believe that the LORD, who once delivered his people from the slavery of Egypt, will bring them back out of the land of exile to the land of their fathers. In Ezekiel 20 we read how the LORD, who delivered Israel out of Egypt, will again restore his people so that they will serve only him. “You will know that I am the LORD, when I deal with you for my name’s sake and not according to your evil way and your corrupt practices, O house of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD” (Ezek 20:44).

It is no wonder that in the book of the Psalms, in which Israel is taught to praise the LORD for his wonderful work of deliverance, numerous references are made to the great Exodus. It is the core of Israel’s history and of God’s self-revelation as Israel’s King. Some of the Psalms recount the entire history of the Exodus, e.g., Psalm 105 and Psalm 106, while in other Psalms numerous references are made to the Exodus. Surely this was an event which shaped the destiny of Israel and was never to be forgotten.

The Exodus in the New Testament

In the New Testament we again find the Exodus motif. Already at the very beginning of the New Testament we hear Mary saying, “His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation ...” and “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble” (Luke 1:50, 52). This is what happened in the Exodus of old. God remembered his people and brought down their oppressors.

Zechariah speaks even more clearly: “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David...to show mercy to our fathers and to

remember his holy covenant...to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear..." (Luke 1:69, 72, 74). The rescue (Exodus) leads to new service (Leviticus).

The apostle Paul makes an elaborate reference to the Exodus in 1 Corinthians 10:1: "For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea." The sea is here obviously the Red Sea.

Paul then warns the New Testament church not to fall into immorality and idolatry as once Israel did at Baal Peor during the sojourn in the wilderness. He writes how the Israelites (in the Exodus) received essentially the same blessings as does the New Testament church. They were all under the cloud, that is, they had God's direct guidance and light. They all passed through the sea, which is presented as a kind of a baptism into Moses and the cloud. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank from the same spiritual rock. This is clearly a reference to the Lord's Supper. They shared in Christ. Yet because of their idolatry, God was displeased with them.

The main elements of the old Exodus are presented in a Christological context, so that we must conclude: the people of the old and new covenant share in the same blessings in Christ. In the old covenant the connection with Christ was not as clear as it is in the new, but the heart of the matter is the same: there is only one covenant of love, manifest in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.

A remarkable aspect in 1 Corinthians 10 is the connection between the (Red) sea and baptism. Paul writes in Romans 6:3, 4 that "all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

Israel's going through the Red Sea is like undergoing baptism. The apostle draws a line from the old to the new covenant people. Baptism signifies that we leave the old life of slavery to sin behind and begin a new life in freedom in Christ. Therefore the Belgic Confession can speak in Article 35 of "the precious blood of Christ [which] is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, that is the devil, and enter into the spiritual land of Canaan." The work of deliverance is the prime evidence of God's covenant of love.

Various passages in the New Testament speak in a more general sense of rescue (or deliverance). I think, for example, of Colossians 1:13 and 14: "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

We, New Testament believers, have also had our Exodus, and we must appreciate it. We are to live not as slaves to sin, but as a free people under Christ. "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love" (Gal 5:13).

The wilderness miracle

If the Exodus was the great work of deliverance, Israel's survival in the desert for forty years is also to be seen as a miracle of God. In his covenant love God took responsibility for the people he had led out of slavery.

In the wilderness the LORD protected Israel from all their enemies. He gave them water to drink, and provided for them their daily bread in the form of manna. The LORD reminded Israel of his care for them: "During the forty years that I led you through the desert, your clothes did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet. You ate no bread and drank no wine or other fermented drink. I did this so that you might know that I am the LORD your God" (Deut 29:5, 6).

For the sake of his name and covenant, the LORD God maintained his people, despite their many sins and rebellions. He also punished the sins of his people: not one of the generation who passed through the Red Sea crossed the river Jordan, except Joshua and Caleb. This judgment the LORD had declared when the people rebelled after the spies returned from Canaan (Num 14:29, "In this desert your bodies will fall – every one of you twenty years old or more...who has grumbled against me").

The protection of Israel in the desert, their crossing of the river Jordan, and the take-over of the land of Canaan all flow from the act of deliverance in the Exodus. The wilderness miracle shows that the LORD can and will, for the sake of his covenant, protect and nurture his people even in the most difficult circumstances. This is implied in the covenant of love, in the relationship between God and his people.

Christ in the wilderness

In the New Testament the element of the wilderness miracle is not lacking. Elijah, the well-known prophet of old who would come as a herald of the Christ (Mal 4:5), required a period of time in the wilderness, protected by God when Ahab sought to kill him for calling a drought upon Judah (1 Kgs 17). John the Baptist, who is identified by Christ himself as the Elijah who was to come, is characterized as a voice crying in the wilderness (Isa 40; Luke 3). The true Word of God may hardly sound forth in Israel, but the God sees to it that his faithful servants are prepared and protected for their task. The wilderness again serves as a place of refuge and solace.

We read that the Lord after his baptism was driven into the desert by the Holy Spirit. The purpose of this stay in the wilderness was that he might be tested (Mark 1:12, 13). We know that Christ was in the wilderness for forty days, which we may take to mean one day for each year that Israel was in the wilderness. During this time Christ did not receive any sustenance. Having fasted for forty days, he became hungry, thirsty, and weak (Matt 4:1). During his stay in the wilderness, Christ did not enjoy the benefits Israel received. Yet he did not rebel or murmur

against God, but remained faithful. Even in his weakness he withstood the powerful temptations of the devil.

He taught us to believe and obey the Word of God. We are not to look to Israel's actions in the wilderness, but to follow Christ's obedience. Christ showed us how covenant children ought to act in times of trial and temptation. We may be sure when we follow him that the Lord will always preserve us.

In this connection I may also refer to Revelation 12:14, where the woman "was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she should be taken care of for a time, times and half a time." The woman is the church of Christ. The wilderness is a place of refuge for the last days which God provides. It shows that God will gather, defend, and preserve his church until the end. The church of the New Testament also may experience the miracle of survival, because of God's covenant faithfulness.