

reading the Bible with Luther



Session 9: You Shall Know that I Am the LORD Your God (Exodus 4 - 20)

by Virgil Thompson

The Bible tells the story of the Exodus so that “*you shall know that I am the Lord your God*” (See Exodus 6:7; 7:3; 16:6). It establishes the connection between the characters in the story and the “characters” who read the story. Beneath everything that may distinguish us as real “characters” in this life—gender, nationality, race, economic status, politics, education, class—we have one thing in common: we are destined to *know* who is God and who is not.

The Suspense of the Exodus Story

It cannot be said ahead of time how coming to know God as God will work out for each individual. Everything depends on what happens in the actual encounter with the God of the Bible. Pharaoh and the people of Egypt found out the hard way who is God and who is not. Their hard-hearted resistance to God and His divine will landed them in a sea of suffering, anguish and death (15:1–18). To make matters worse—according to the Bible’s telling—God Himself hardened the heart of Pharaoh. As the God of the story explains to Moses:

I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and I will multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt ... The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out from among them. — Exodus 7:3, 5

Understandably perhaps, readers frequently find this aspect of the Exodus story altogether disturbing. In fact, the mere telling of it sometimes hardens the hearts of hearers against God. They refuse to believe in a God who hardens hearts. But that refusal will prove for readers an inadequate defense against the reality of God, just as it proved for Pharaoh and his people to be a totally ineffective defense against God:

The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone ... At the blast of [God’s] nostrils the waters piled up, the floods stood up in a heap;

the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea ... they sank like lead in the mighty waters.

— Exodus 15:5, 8, 10

No question about it, the story of the Exodus addresses to the hearer a hard word. It only remains to be seen what this hard word of the Lord will do its hearers today.

Popular Theology Lives in Denial

Sometimes tellers of the story attempt to soften it by shifting the “blame” for the people’s hardness from God to the people of Egypt themselves. That version of the story no doubt fits more easily into the theology made popular by Adam and Eve (see Genesis 3). According to this popular theology, God offers salvation but humans do the choosing and deciding, accepting and rejecting. In popular theology, everything depends on human deciding. Since the days of Genesis 3, popular theology remains in bondage to the desire to be as gods. That’s just where popular theology runs amuck and is “*swallowed up in the flood of God’s great majesty.*”

There is no getting around the Biblical truth: God is the “decider.” God chooses! And He chooses solely on the basis of His own heart. As He declares to the people of Israel,

It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God.

— Deuteronomy 7:7–9

In other words, the only hope of deliverance from the God who hardens hearts is the self-same God. We can only pray that as He delivered Israel, He may also deliver us from our

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hardness of heart, from our desire to be as gods. We can only pray that He reconcile us to Himself, that we may live in peace and freedom, knowing who is God and who is not. Listen to the story of how it happened once upon a time that it may happen again.

The Unvarnished Story Plainly Told

We take up the story where we had left off in the previous session. Moses was at the burning bush, throwing excuse after excuse to dodge God's claim on him. It is not clear whether Moses had forgotten God when he had taken refuge from the law in the land of Midian. In any event, God had not forgotten Moses and now asserts His claim over Moses. "I have decided," God tells Moses in effect, "the time has come to liberate the people of Israel from their misery ... and I will send you to deliver the news to Pharaoh" (paraphrase of Exodus 3:7–12). The story does not say that Moses' heart was hardened against God and His decision. Nonetheless, similar to Pharaoh, Moses resists the claim and call of God. With some well-aimed excuses—"I am not and never have been very eloquent" (Exodus 4:10)—Moses seeks to escape God. But his efforts are to no avail. God succeeds in having His way with Moses (see Exodus 4:1–20). Moses packs up his family and returns to Egypt with the "staff of God in his hands" (Exodus 4:20).

Moses delivers the good news of God's decision, "Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you refuse to let them go, I will plague your whole country ..." (Exodus 7:16; 8:1–2; 9:1–2; 10:3–4). The Lord God delivers on His promise, and leaves no doubt in anyone's mind about who is God and who is not. If the misery of the pestilence and the frogs and the gnats and the locusts and the boils and the darkness had not been sufficient to drive home the point, then certainly the final plague was the straw that broke the camel's back. The story does not use the metaphor of straw, but it is highly appropriate. You recall that in his arrogance to demonstrate his power over the people of Israel, Pharaoh had increased their toil by the added burden of having to gather the straw with which to make the bricks to build Pharaoh's grand empire (Exodus 5). The idea was to break the Israelites' spirit and drive their faith into the ground. The added burden of the straw was effective. Under the weight of the impossible burden, the people of Israel, from Moses down, accuse God of not delivering on His grand promises, leaving everyone in the lurch and making matters worse (Exodus 5:22–23).

But the last plague, when and where the story is told according to the Bible's plain, fearsome report of it, leaves no doubt who is God and who is not. The story drives home Luther's point, which lies at the heart of theology: "...to flee from and

find refuge in *God against God*. Such is the *impossibility* that makes *theology* possible."

The Impossibility that Makes Theology Possible

According to the story, God declares to the people of Israel, "This month shall mark for you the beginning of months" (Exodus 12:2). Here God establishes the new beginning for theology, for humanity in relation to God:

It is the Passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood. I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. — Exodus 12:11–13

And this is exactly what the Lord does. God makes good on His promise. All the opposition in the world has been swallowed in the sea of God's mighty majesty. And the people of Israel, as they begin to make the journey toward the land God has promised them, can only sing God's praise:

Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders? You stretched out your right hand, the earth swallowed [your adversaries]. In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode. — Exodus 15:11–13

You might imagine that from the new beginning it would have been smooth sailing from the shores of the Red Sea to the Promised Land, but nothing could be further from the truth. The people quarreled and complained every step of the way—as though they were completely alone, and there was no God in heaven or earth, and their faith had been all in vain. But God was steadfast in His commitment to the people, every

Virgil Thompson

teaches New Testament at Gonzaga University. A prolific author and former pastor, he currently serves as managing editor of The Lutheran Quarterly.



step of the way. In His goodness, God heard every complaint as a plea for help and He was quick to answer. Even when the people accuse that God has “*brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger*” (Exodus 16:3), God remains true to His promise. He delivers them to the land He has promised. Along the way, God provides for their every need—food, water, shelter, protection and the community of neighbors, which makes it necessary to provide law and order among a people who selfishly incline toward ordering life around “me, myself, and I.”

The Ten Commandments of God’s law and order will never save us from ourselves, from our unbelief and self-worship. However, they do serve for the most part to keep us in the neighborly bounds of our sinful humanity until the day when everything is made new and good, when we die and rise with our Lord and say with the Apostle Paul, “*Who will rescue*

me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:24–25). This is the promise Paul holds out to Israel and to all people. It is the promise that runs through the story from Genesis to Revelation:

I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me ... All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.

— Romans 10: 20–21 (See also Isaiah 65:1ff..)

Looking Ahead:

A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey

In the next session we continue to travel with the people of the Bible through the wilderness into a land of their own, the land which God has promised to the people of faith, a land flowing with milk and honey.

reading the Bible with Luther — Bible study



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Bible Study and Prayer

Each installment of our series offers suggestions for reflection and discussion.

1. One of the central themes of the Exodus story is that God hardens the heart of Pharaoh to show who is God and who is not. By his hardness of heart, Pharaoh resists and opposes God’s will. Frequently, tellers of the story will seek to soften the blow of the story by shifting the “blame” for the hardness of heart from God to Pharaoh and the people. Why do you think that hearers of the story might prefer this “softer version”? Only God alone has the power to save us from his wrath. Discuss how the story of the Exodus confirms Luther’s dictum, that the impossibility that makes theology possible is fleeing from and finding refuge in *God against God*.
2. Moses had taken refuge in the land of Midian. It is not uncommon for people on the run from the law to put as much distance as possible between themselves and God. The promise of the Gospel is that God, like the good shepherd of Luke 15, refuses to give us up. He goes

searching until he finds every last lost sheep of the house of Israel that he might bear them home. Discuss this central theme of theology in terms of its promise to faith and its significance for the mission of the church. What would a church founded on such a promise look like in its outreach?

3. Luther knew that while tellers of the Biblical story found in Exodus 4 - 20 might be free to revise the story, they are not free to change God.
 - a. *What do I find most comforting, most disturbing about these chapters?*
 - b. *How do these chapters shape the missionary outlook of the church?*
 - c. *What do these chapters promise to faith?*
 - d. *What do these chapters demand of faith?*

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