

## Exodus 13

### Take a moment to think ahead

I suspect you've heard about how Derbyshire police recently went rather over the top in their zeal to enforce the Lockdown regulations. **Two women**, apparently, went for a walk together, keeping due social distance, but because each had a cup of coffee they were then fined for having a picnic! I heard that the fine was later rescinded, but ... even so ... !

But it does make you wonder, doesn't it, about the amount of common sense that sometimes seems to be lacking, when it comes to the interpretation of rules? We've had things in the news this week about precisely how far we're allowed to travel in order to take exercise during Lockdown. Some people have suggested that it should be specified as so many miles. Did **Boris Johnson** travel too far on his bike? Would it have been OK if he did a more circular route which *didn't* take him *seven* miles from home - even if he drove and cycled precisely the same distances in each case?

But human beings have always suffered from this kind of problem, when it comes to "the letter of the law". We've got something in the passage we read earlier that, you might know, has been taken extremely literally by some people.

***"And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth."***

(Exodus 13:9)

Now is that meant to be literal, or is it meant to be metaphorical? That's certainly one point that I'd like us to spend some time thinking through as we consider this passage together. It's really worth thinking this through, or our worship will be skewed away from what God intends it to be. We could end up totally missing the main point, and **majoring on minors**.

But we'll get there when we get there. It's not the only lesson to take from Exodus 13. Because what we have in this chapter, I think, is the nation of Israel, poised on the brink of existence as a separate nation. But not an independent nation, because they need to keep remembering that they are dependent upon God. God has just intervened spectacularly to liberate them, and it would be all very easy to just get caught up with the cry of ***Freedom!*** But instead, instead of being let out to play like **kids for the summer holiday**, they're told to stop and listen and *think* ahead.

What do you need to do, with that freedom, in order to make sure you properly appreciate it, and use it best? What things do they need to *think*, and what things do they need to *do*, so that that freedom will be the blessing *God* wants it to be for them?

In fact, in that way, they're exactly the same as us. We're told that we, believers in Jesus Christ, we have been liberated:

***So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."***

(John 8:31-32)

***... the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.***

(Romans 8:2)

***He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.***

(Colossians 1:13-14)

See there you've got more of the imagery of Exodus, too. A change of kingdom and ruler. And the word "redemption", too - the legally established right of re-purchase by the rightful owner. But with this liberty comes responsibility, too. And it can be abused. Not just "don't waste it", or "don't get ensnared again" - although that's important, too:

***For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.***

(Galatians 5:1)

But there's the possibility of going too *far*, too, rather than just slipping back:

***For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.***

(Galatians 5:13)

But we need to get back into Exodus now, and see where this all fits in its context there. *That* will give us a much better idea of how we should be getting our heads around this and applying it. Exodus 13 is a kind of a pivot point in the book, when, **on the verge of leaving Egypt, God's people are told how to ensure they remember the key lessons of their rescue.**

But since we started this book on Sunday evenings, last year, we need to do a quick look back to the first 12 chapters, to get our initial bearings.

Creeping captivity  
Competition for control

How do you need to think *now* about what has happened?  
How do you need to plan for the future?

And a couple of snippets that we'll probably save for this evening, since we need to spend those extra initial moments this morning getting our bearings.

The forefather's faith  
Protection for the journey  
The theme of the *firstborn*

- **Catching up**

So we go back to Genesis 12, and the start of the concept of a people for God. God calls one man, and gives him the promise of a nation and a land:

***Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."***

(Genesis 12:1-2)

He starts off with neither - and not a lot of prospects, either. But through the rest of the book of Genesis, you hear of this family growing ... slowly, but definitely. By the end of the book, three generations later, it's up to 70 people, and, because of the various shenanigans between the twelve sons of Jacob, this family group moves *en masse* to Egypt. Which is where Exodus picks up the story.

***All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt.***

(Exodus 1:5)

And then we are **fast-forwarded**. And the **creeping captivity** grows, as decades and even centuries roll past in just a few verses. The tribe grows.

***Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.***

(Exodus 1:6-7)

But the past, with Joseph as a hero of the nation of Egypt, is forgotten.

***Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.***

(Exodus 1:8)

And that family that filled the land starts to be viewed as a threat.

***And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us."***

(Exodus 1:9)

A threat that needs to be contained, suppressed.

***“Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens.***

(Exodus 1:10-11)

But the stakes rise. The descendants of Jacob *thrive* and grow, despite the opposition. Containment will not work. A sustained policy of infanticide that will, over decades, become, in effect, genocide, is put into place. The Hebrew midwives are commanded,

***“When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.”***

(Exodus 1:16)

Not a clever move. There was something else that God had said to Abraham, 500 years earlier:

***“I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”***

(Genesis 12:3)

You touch these people, you take on God himself. *Not* a clever move! Now it becomes **competition for control**. Because ...

***During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel — and God knew.***

(Exodus 2:23-25)

And God did more than “just know”. He takes action - but by what at first appears to be a roundabout route. The very means by which Pharaoh commands death becomes God’s means to get one particular Hebrew baby within the royal palace.

***Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her young women walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it. When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby was crying. She took pity on him and said, “This is one of the Hebrews’ children.”***

(Exodus 2:5-6)

***When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, “Because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.”***

(Exodus 2:10)

Moses, who, when by our standards an OAP, is sent by God to Pharaoh to demand liberty for his people.

***“And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.”***

(Exodus 3:9-10)

I’ve called it a **competition for control**, but it is a path that Almighty God has already determined. This is not a battle that Pharaoh can win.

***“But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go.”***

(Exodus 3:19-20)

Those “wonders” are what we call those *plagues* of Egypt, ten of them. The stakes are raised until *deadly* force is warned of.

***‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.” If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.’”***

(Exodus 4:22-23)

If that seems extreme, remember that clear warning is given here. And remember that although the earlier attempt at genocide failed, there were still a number of very small graves of Hebrew male babies for which a reckoning was still required.

So Exodus chapter 12 now zooms into the deadly conclusion of that **competition for control**. What was to be called “the Passover” and its associated “feast” are instituted.

***“It is the LORD's Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgements: I am the LORD.”***

(Exodus 12:11-12)

But a distinction is to be made between the Hebrews and the Egyptians. The blood from the slaughtered lambs, if applied to their homes’ doorposts and lintels:

***“The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.”***

(Exodus 12:11-13)

And yes, that finally does it. Pharaoh does not just finally *permit* the Hebrews to leave; he *orders* them to. And the whole Egyptian nation backs him.

***The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste. For they said, "We shall all be dead."***

(Exodus 12:33)

A century of conflict reaches a sudden conclusion, with a ridiculously hasty exit:

***And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.***

(Exodus 12:39)

Their first stop could not have been very far.

***And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children.***

(Exodus 12:37)

But that is where we find them, at the beginning of chapter 13 - because at the end of that chapter we're told that ...

***And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness.***

(Exodus 13:20)

They're not even properly out of Egypt yet, which was probably marked in practical terms by that edge between farmable land and wilderness. In some senses they are rather like us, and our relationship to this world we live in. We are no longer citizens of Egypt ... but we're certainly not *home* yet, by any stretch. We are in an in-between time, a situation which could be described as neither one nor the other. We cannot return to Egypt ... but the path ahead is nothing like clear to us in anything like as much detail as we might prefer.

But it is at this point that we see the Hebrew people, straddling those two existences, told to *remember* in two or even three directions. They are to take a moment, amidst this sudden shock that this moment has finally, eventually arrived ...

- **Looking back, around, and forward**

**How do you need to think *now* about what has happened?**

There's one thing that is pretty obvious, but it is worth stating. In fact, it's repeated almost shamelessly in this chapter, and you'll hear echoes of it later in the OT, too. God is mighty.

There has been this conflict brewing through the early chapters of Exodus. I think I read that there was supposed to be some Egyptian inscription they have found, boasting about their Pharaoh's "strong hand". Folks, however powerful a monarch might be, how powerful a nation might be ... no matter how powerful a multi-national organisation might be ... it is no match for the mighty hand of the Living God. Listen up, and be reassured, as you read through the chapter.

***Then Moses said to the people, "Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place."***

(Exodus 13:3)

***"For with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt."***

(Exodus 13:9)

***"... you shall say to him, 'By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery.'"***

(Exodus 13:14)

***"It shall be as a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes, for by a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt."***

(Exodus 13:16)

Don't just rush headlong out of Egypt. Mark this moment. Seal it in your memory. This is what the strong hand of your God can do.

And what are we going to look back to? It's the same mighty God whom we worship, but we have something greater than the escape from Egypt to look back to. We look back to the defeat of death.

***But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.***

(1 Corinthians 15:20-22)

***The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.***

(1 Corinthians 15:56-57)

But look, it's not just a question of realisation, and of reorienting your thinking in accordance with the facts. That last verse is followed by a "therefore":

***Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.***

(1 Corinthians 15:58)

That triumph of Jesus Christ makes your work and efforts significant. If you believe that the world is just random, meaningless and purposeless ... why bother? But the undoubted presence - proven by his intervention in history - of the God who is really there gives *our* lives meaning and direction and purpose too. And it's the

same back in Exodus: what God has done spills over with implication for our lifestyle. Each of those verses from Exodus 13 I quoted, mentioning that “strong hand”, have a “for” or a “therefore” hanging from them. Here’s the first one, with an injunction not just to “remember” in the abstract, but remember by specific actions.

***Then Moses said to the people, “Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten.”***

(Exodus 13:3)

That’s going to have continuing implications, looking quite some distance ahead into the future, too:

***“Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. And when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, ... you shall keep this service in this month.”***

(Exodus 13:4-5)

That’s not tomorrow, that’s fifty years into the future. And if you put your faith in Jesus today, *expect* implications through the rest of your life. That’s why taking him as *Lord* will imply.

So it’s not just about “How do you need to think *now* about what has happened?” It’s also, “**How do you need to plan for the future?**”

There are some things that are foreseeable, and there are some things that are necessary, and you might need to prepare yourself in different ways for both of them.

So imagine that scenario, based on the verse we were just looking at:

***“Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. And when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, ... you shall keep this service in this month.”***

(Exodus 13:4-5)

An annual celebration, with some prescribed elements of ritual. You can bet that on occasion, perhaps particularly when the kids are at the **Why?** stage, a question is going to arise. In which case, you need to have an answer ready!

***And when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery.’”***

(Exodus 13:14)

Folks, what kind of questions can you see your family, or your friends, or your neighbours, or your workmates sometimes wanting to ask you? What’s doing the rounds that people want to talk about ... are perhaps struggling to get a handle on?



Does the Bible have any input on that? Does a *Christian* have anything to contribute at that point? When the **One Show** has an item enthusing about quickie no-fault divorce, as it did on Wednesday this week ... have you thought about anything constructive you could stir into the pot?

And yet, for all that it might seem attractive to just chill and wait for those spontaneous moments to just naturally arise, there will be times to take the initiative, too. There are some things that need to be said, whether you are invited to speak up or not. If it's *your* home, it's *your* place - and your responsibility - to do so. Instead of *responding*, you can take the initiative and *tell*:

***“You shall tell your son on that day, ‘It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.’”***

(Exodus 13:8)

Just like with Ecclesiastes, times for *both*.

***For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time ..., and a time ...***

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-2)

Maybe this evening we can spend a moment discussing the wisdom of which is which, when to be proactive, and when to be reactive.

But when you have something like the wording here in Exodus 13, how are we to respond to that?

***“And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt.”***

(Exodus 13:9)

Are we talking literal hands here? Or does “hand” mean everything you do? Does “between your eyes” mean a literal something stuck or painted on your forehead, or does it refer to everything you see?

As I hinted at the start, you know that Orthodox Jews interpret this in terms of wearing little boxes with Bible verses on their bodies ... but doesn't that risk people thinking that they have *done* what that says - the box is ticked! - when you might not have even started thinking about whether there are any lifestyle applications to the person on the *inside* that God is actually far more interested in your making.

On reflection, I think the Jewish ritual interpretation here *must* be seriously missing the intended mark here, because of the final phrase. If “on your hand” is to be taken literally ... what's the correspondingly *literal* understanding of “in your mouth”? A spiritual gob-stopper? A **tattoo on your tongue**? As soon as you start thinking in terms of “the words that you speak” being an expression of your faith in

God, you've shown that you instinctively know that the literal-only approach is missing the point.

I'm not saying that the *literal* strapping Scriptures to our bodies is *wrong*. No more than having **little plaques on our walls with Bible verses on** is totally missing it. But it can be, as some of those less successful contestants on **Bake-Off** are sometimes guilty of, it can be a question of "style instead of substance".

Tonight I think it might be worth thinking through this tendency we too often have of responding to God's word by creating some external religious rule or ritual ... which can distract from our thinking through, day by day, the *principle* that God is wanting to become part of the real us, deep down inside.

Folks, we need to aim for the *substance* of considered obedience, not just the show. We need to do our own thinking, our own application, to our own lives and circumstances - even if that means risking that we might not all arrive at precisely the same conclusions about matters that are not specified by Scripture itself.

And just before we finish, can I flag up a couple of other

- **Significant snippets**

That we can think through this evening - because we're nearly out of time now.

#### **The forefather's faith**

***Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here."***

(Exodus 13:19)

What a guy Joseph must have been, to insist that his funeral was going to be his final act of faith - even if that faith had to look forward over a period of centuries.

#### **Protection for the journey**

***And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.***

(Exodus 13:21)

What was that for? And what did that *mean*? Perhaps even, what did that look like? - though that's the least vital of the questions.

And finally,

#### **The theme of the *firstborn***

That word crops up constantly through these first few chapters of Exodus. Think back to

***“Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, ...’”***

(Exodus 4:22)

And we also have to remember a principle about the OT. It’s not just interesting stories from the depths of history. It’s relevant to us. It’s about the things we’ll be reading about over the next few weeks that Paul wrote:

***Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.***

(1 Corinthians 10:11)

And when it comes to this “firstborn” theme, that’s specifically about Jesus. Remember the aftermath of the Herod stuff that we read over Christmas. Joseph takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt - and perhaps already we should be thinking in terms of vicious ruler ... murdered children ... hey, I’ve seen this story before! And Matthew sees the life of Jesus in precisely those terms:

***This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”***

(Matthew 2:15)

And yet what we have is greater, and, initially, perhaps rather bewildering. Israel - the “firstborn son” - set free with the *literal* first-borns of Egypt die - and protected from death by the blood of *literal* lambs.

Whereas for us ... God’s firstborn, in the fullest sense, does *not* escape death. He is the firstborn son ... *and* the lamb that dies ...

***“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”***

(John 1:29)

And he is the high priest who makes the offering. He is the prophet greater than Moses, bringing us not just laws to obey:

***For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.***

(John 1:17)

And that is what we’re about to remember, and celebrate, as we break bread together.

***For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.***

(John 1:16)

Folks, let's not just think and theologise, now or this evening, even those have an important place. Let's also make time to wonder and worship.