

Last week we left off around 1800 B.C. with Jacob, renamed Israel, and his twelve sons and how they and their descendants would become the twelve tribes of Israel. He also had one daughter, Dinah. If you remember, Jacob had two wives, Leah and Rachel, though he loved Rachel more. Leah, his first wife, bore him six sons - Rueben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulon. Four more sons were born by his concubines – Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. That's ten. But Jacob really wanted a son with Rachel. So when at last she did have her first child, a boy, they named him Joseph - yes, the one who received the ornate coat of many colors, because he was Jacob's favorite. And Jacob let that be known to all the other sons. Then years later, Rachel had another boy, and named him Benjamin. There's the twelve!

Now each of the tribes of Israel had their own territories and their own identities. For example, the descendants of Levi, were called Levites, and they became the priests and were responsible for God's temple and worship. Moses was a Levite. The tribe of Judah was the tribe of Kings. King David was part of this tribe. And guess who else? Jesus and his mother Mary. Now the tribe of Benjamin also played many roles in Israel's history. The first king of Israel was Saul, a Benjaminite, and hundreds of years later, so was the Apostle Paul. So when you hear these names and others in the Bible, you know where they come from.

Speaking of names, have you ever wondered why God's chosen people have been called Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews? Today we use them rather interchangeably, but the word Hebrew at first was used to describe just the patriarchs and their offspring, those who left their homeland and initially settled in Canaan. One belief as to its origin of the word 'Hebrew,' is that it's derived from the word “eber,” meaning the “other side,” referring to Abraham who crossed into the land of Canaan from the other side of the Euphrates and Jordan River. Then, later, through God's blessing on Jacob by giving him the name Israel, they ultimately moved into the promised land and became known as Israelites. But, of course, there were still the various twelve tribes, which over time broke up into a northern kingdom called Israel with its capital Samaria, and a southern kingdom call Judah with its capital, Jerusalem. Thus the name, Jew, came from Judah.

Let's get to Joseph. Perhaps it was the very last straw, but with that magnificent coat of many colors that Jacob gave Joseph, the ten older brothers had finally had enough. So they plan to get rid of Joseph by killing him. But interestingly, one of the brothers, Judah comes up with a plan to instead sell Joseph to some itinerant merchants. It was Judah who spoke up to his brothers saying, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Let's sell him to the Ishmaelites, and don't put our hand upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." So they sold Joseph to the Ishmaelite traders for twenty shekles of silver. Now this is an example of what makes the Bible a singular masterpiece. For in the Gospels, we find Judas Iscariot, described as 'one of the twelve' as well, acting out this same role, as he betrays Jesus into the hands of the conspiring religious leaders for thirty pieces of silver. I think you'll start to see how events and plot lines between the Old Testament and New Testament are in many ways connected, so that God's ultimate divine plan and purpose come into being, and is fulfilled.

Now eventually the Ishmaelites arrive with Joseph in Egypt, considered by the way, as one of the most advanced countries of the world that time. There they sell Joseph to an Egyptian officer named Potiphar. The next twenty or so years can probably be described as periods of both agony and ecstasy for Joseph. He becomes Potiphar's household slave and succeeds so well at running the house, that he quickly becomes the most trusted person on the entire staff. This proves dangerous because it brings Joseph into all too frequent contact with the wife of Potiphar. She's hungry for attention, apparently Potiphar is working too many night shifts, and when Joseph resists her approaches to come to her bed, she falsely accuses him of being the aggressor. Not only does he lose his job, but he ends up in prison. Yes, sometimes bad things do happen to good people. However, the Bible says, "While Joseph was in the prison, the Lord was with him." So for that reason the warden puts Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and again Joseph proves his dependability and trustworthiness. Now one of the attributes that Joseph had was the ability to interpret dreams. And he did this for two of the prisoners, one who happened to be the Pharaoh's cup bearer, the person whose duty it was to pour and serve drinks at the royal table. One day, after the cupbearer had been released from prison, he was serving the Pharaoh a fine Italian Chianti and making some small talk. The Pharaoh mentioned to him some dreams he had: about seven sleek and fat cows, and seven ugly and gaunt cows, and about seven heads of grain, healthy and good, and after that, seven other heads of grain, thin and scorched. This jogged the cupbearer's memory, and he mentioned Joseph's name to Pharaoh. The rest is history. Joseph appears before the Pharaoh, tells him the dream means that Egypt will have seven years of plenty, and then seven years of famine. Joseph recommends building storehouses during the years of abundance so that

there will be food during the scarce times. Pharaoh is impressed, saying, “Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom lives the spirit of God.” He gives Joseph his signet ring, making him second in command of all of Egypt, and gives him garments of fine Egyptian linen that probably made his childhood coat of many colors now seem somewhat shabby.

And sure enough, the famine came. Not only in Egypt, but throughout all that area. But because of Joseph’s foresight, Egypt had a sufficient supply of food. Now here's where the plot thickens. Joseph's father, Jacob, having no knowledge of what’s happened to Joseph, sends his other sons to Egypt in order to buy some grain. The brothers don't recognize Joseph, but he recognizes them. At first, Joseph does test them to measure their sincerity and integrity. But ultimately all is forgiven and he reveals himself. “I am your brother Joseph, who you sold into Egypt.” And then listen to what he says, “What you meant for harm, God meant for good. Now do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves, because it was to save lives that God sent me here.” What a story – first about forgiveness. When we consider Joseph, and how he was able to forgive, is there really anyone in our lives that we can’t forgive? And second, it’s a story about how God works in our lives when we trust him. Joseph’s words to his brothers are echoed thousands of years later in St. Paul’s letter to the Roman church, “All things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose.” Now, eventually, Joseph brings his entire family to Egypt, where they multiplied, thrived, and prospered, yet still, their destiny is unfulfilled. But on his deathbed Joseph reiterates God's great promise to his family, “God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Thus, ends the book of Genesis.

Next, we move to the book of Exodus. Now the Hebrews did so well in Egypt, “that the land was filled with them.” And, after a generation or two, the Egyptians came to fear the Hebrews and eventually subjected them to slavery in order to control them. And the enslavement of the Hebrews lasted four centuries. And we can barely handle a year of COVID! It's at this point Moses enters the picture, about 1400 BC. Now because the Hebrews continued to multiply, the Pharaoh commanded that even more drastic measures be taken to control them. He ordered that every newborn male infant be put to death by being thrown into the Nile and drowned. Around this time a young couple from the tribe of Levi had a baby. To save him from the roving Egyptian patrols, the couple set their baby afloat on the river in a reed basket. And lo and behold, the Pharaoh's daughter, of all people, discovered the basket. She was overcome with pity and took in the baby for herself. Thus, the child named Moses grew up in Pharaoh's

court. But he never lost his kinship with the Hebrew slaves. One day Moses saw an Egyptian overseer beating one of the Hebrew workers, and Moses murdered the Egyptian. Did I mention God uses imperfect people? Word of his deed reached the Pharaoh, forcing Moses to flee into the Sinai desert. There he met a woman, Zipporah and married her, staying there as a shepherd for forty years. While out in the pastures one day, Moses sees a flame of fire in the middle of a bush. What was out of the ordinary was that the bush didn't burn. And what was extra-ordinary was the voice from the bush that told Moses to take off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground and encountering the One God, the One who called himself simply, "I AM." A name which will become even more significant when Jesus arrives. And so "I AM," or, Yahweh, using the Hebrew word, commands Moses to free his people from the Egyptians. Overwhelmed by the assignment Moses makes a desperate plea, "Oh my Lord, I pray, send someone else." Sadly, that sounds like some of us Christians at times, doesn't it? Let someone else do the Lord's work. But Moses, reluctantly takes on the job only if his golden tongue brother Aaron could be the spokesman. You see Moses apparently stuttered or had some other speech defect. Here's another good lesson – God doesn't care what physical ailments we might have. He wants and expects all of us to do our part of his work.

Now Moses goes back to Egypt and tries to convince Pharaoh to release the Hebrews. Of course, the answer is no, with the Pharaoh taunting, "Who is Yahweh?" And then there proceeds a long and difficult series of negotiations between the two. There were threats, and plagues, and more threats and more plagues, a total of ten altogether. Water turned into blood, frogs were everywhere, lice and fleas were everywhere, flies were everywhere, there was livestock pestilence, people breaking out with boils, hail, locusts, and darkness over the land. Nothing convinced the Pharaoh. Finally, God brings down the last plague on Egypt by sending the Angel of Death to kill all the firstborn children in the land. This is where the institution of Passover was created. God told Moses to order the Hebrew families to sacrifice a lamb and smear the blood of the lamb on the door posts of their houses. In this way the angel would know to "pass over" the houses of the Hebrews. This sacrificial Lamb of God would save them from death. And 1400 years later, Jesus would be the new, the ultimate, Lamb of God, who would be sacrificed, and whose blood would save us from death. Now this plague finally convinces Pharaoh to free the Hebrews. But even then he has some second thoughts. So he sends the Egyptian army after the Hebrews who are cornered up against the Red Sea. And, of course, here is described one of the greatest miracles of all times with the parting of the sea, so that the Hebrews could get across, but all the Egyptians who followed them die when the waters start to flow again.

Many biblical scholars debate the genuineness of all these plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. Were they really divine signs and miracles given by God to answer Pharaoh's taunt "Who is Yahweh?" There have been many natural explanations; such as a red tide algae turning the Nile river red and toxic. Thus, the frogs left the river and died in the streets. Therefore, there is an overabundance of lice and mosquitoes and flies which frogs eat. The parting of the Red Sea could have been incorrectly translated as the Reed Sea, a shallow lake in Egypt. With a strong east wind blowing, a dry corridor through this lake would result, permitting the Hebrews to cross. Like I said, some might debate these matters, but there is no doubt that the Hebrews were slaves, and they ultimately won their freedom through the leadership of Moses.

So here I'm going to digress a moment and talk about leadership. As we all know, any form of human suffering, whether it be ill health, or poverty, or physical or political oppression, can, in time, break the human spirit. A person, or a people, or a nation, can get so accustomed to their pain and deprivation that they believe it to be their one and only lot in life. And, so it takes God, and a leader like Moses, to reverse this kind of thinking; to inspire others, and to encourage people toward a new, different and brighter destiny. And Moses stands as an exemplary figure of leadership. Because not only is Moses one of the most important figures in Jewish history, this Old Testament figure has also played a significant part in our own history. Look at the pilgrims and the Mayflower. Leader William Bradford compared their journey across the Atlantic and the establishment of the Plymouth Colony, with that of Moses leading his people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Thomas Paine compared what the Pharaoh did to Moses to what King George III did to the colonists during our revolution and our quest for freedom. The major crisis in American history, the Civil War and the issue around American slavery is ripe with imagery about Moses. President Lincoln was referred to by the slaves as "their Moses." One of the greatest African American spirituals goes like this, "*Go down Moses, Way down to Egypt. Tell old Pharaoh, Let my people go. Let my people go*". Martin Luther King Jr. referred to Moses in his, "I've been to the mountaintop" speech. The face of Moses appears in Congress, the Supreme Court, and numerous other locations in our nation's capital. According to J. Ellsworth Kalas, a stranger to the United States might conclude, that Moses was one of our founding fathers along with Washington, Adams, and Jefferson.<sup>1</sup> Kalas also says, "The subject of quality leadership has received an aura of reverence in today's world of business, politics, sports and religion. Books on leadership are always on the bestsellers list." So what shall we say about a leader called Moses, who transformed a

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<sup>1</sup> Heroes, Rogues and Rest, J Ellsworth Kalas

family of freed slaves into a nation. Well, the Bible describes Moses this way: “The man Moses was humble, more than anyone on earth.” Personally, I believe all of the best leaders in human history have been men and women with that special gift of humility. And doesn't this description point out the difference between a politician and statesman. Politicians are concerned with the next election, that is, themselves, while statesmen are concerned with future generations. And what better example of humble leadership than Moses, for consider – ancient nations and powers are now relegated to history book. But the Jewish nation and their influence continues throughout the world today!

So finally, the Hebrews, the Israelites, are free, wandering about the desert, the wilderness, for some forty years before God allows them to enter the Promised Land, which, surprisingly is Canaan again: a narrow strip of land about the size of New Hampshire. Much happens in the desert – they are tested by God, and yet they also witnessed the glory of God. They are led by pillars of clouds they follow during the day, and pillars of fire by night. Then there's no food, but by some miracle every morning, manna is sent down from heaven. They complain, “What's this?” I can just imagine Moses, like those grisly chuck wagon cooks you see in old westerns trying to put something together out on the range with just a few supplies, or a ship's cook trying to provide a meal during a raging storm; I can just imagine him saying, “That's what God's serving today, like it or not. Eat it!” There is also no water, but Moses strikes a rock with his staff, and water gushes forth. Despite the difficult circumstances, blessing upon blessing they receive. Yet so quickly they... we... forget. And when they... we... forget, we always turn away to our other gods. The Israelites built a golden calf which really got God angry. But Moses intervenes, kind of like the Holy Spirit, our advocate, does for us on a regular basis. In addition, there are family arguments and a host of other issues that create anger and guilt and self-doubt, and worse, doubts about God. Times haven't changed. Because isn't this the basic theme repeated over and over again in human history, in the lives of individuals and in the lives of nations. There's always this state of unrest, do we trust and follow God, or do we not.

Now obviously, the high point of their time in the wilderness is when Moses goes up into the clouds on Mount Sinai and received directly from Yahweh, the Ten Commandments. And consider for a moment just how compelling those Commandments are. For example, Yahweh had a claim upon the Israelites because he had delivered them from their oppression. Obviously, the only proper response to his love and care would be a pledge of obedience to his will. So the first commandment, “I am the Lord thy God, thou shall have no other gods before me.” And murder, adultery, theft, lying, and covetousness

are not holy attributes of God. Thus, “thou shall not kill, thou shall not commit adultery, thou shall not covet, thou shall not steal.” And Moses taught them other laws as well. In addition, just as Yahweh had been concerned to protect the powerless Hebrews in Egypt, they in turn would have to guarantee justice for the orphans, widows, resident aliens, and any other disadvantaged persons in their society. God also instructed them as to how to build the Ark of the Covenant. This was an ornate, gilded case to house the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written, and was to always be carried with them. The Ark of the Covenant was the physical manifestation of the very presence of God to them, and was therefore considered holy and mighty. When the Israelites crossed the Jordan River into the promised land, the Bible says that the river stopped flowing the moment the Ark bearers set foot in it. Where is the Ark today? Well it was lost in the fall of Jerusalem and people are still searching for it today.

Now we're at the end of Exodus, and the next books are Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, which completes the Torah. These are books many people today frown upon because of their harshness. They contain laws for almost every detail of daily life. About what to eat and not eat. About what to wear. There's a lot of stoning going on in these books for things like blasphemy, adultery, rape and bestiality and homosexuality. On the other hand, these were laws put in place to bring order to a nomadic community wandering in the desert. And here is where we learn to read the Bible contextually, not literally. And not picking and choosing certain verses that suit our agenda. Because when Jesus came, he changed many of these laws. Often he teaches, "You have heard it said... this. But I now say... this. And he changes the law. To laws of love, compassion and forgiveness. There's no greater example than the woman about to be stoned for adultery, and he changed the law right then and there. That's much of the book of Leviticus. The book of Numbers gets its name from the census which was implemented as the new nation made its way through the wilderness. In Numbers, the Israelites get close to Canaan and they send out a committee of twelve, one from each tribe again, to look over the promised land. The spies bring back pomegranates and figs and grapes and claim it to be a land of milk and honey. Finally in Deuteronomy, Moses gives his farewell address, so to speak, and blesses the people. Among all the things he said, two things resonate with me. First, he said, “You shall also love the foreigner, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt.” Most of us, or our parents or grandparents or great-grandparents, were foreigners. They made this nation great, and we need to remember that. And the second thing is his warning to us, “If a nation walks with God, they will be blessed; if they disobey the laws of God and the covenant that binds them to God, they will be cursed.” Sometimes, I think we, as a nation, are straying from that walk and I have some concern about what the future may bring us. We people of

God have a lot of work yet to do. Now as Deuteronomy ends, Moses ascends a mountain to a high place where the Lord shows him the entirety of the promised land. Regretfully though, God won't allow him entrance to the land. He had disobeyed God at one point, and that was his punishment. But the author of Deuteronomy tells us that God himself saw to Moses' burial. He was 120 years old and obviously lived a very full life.

Okay, the next few books of the Bible are going to be summarized very quickly. The book of Joshua. Joshua succeeds Moses. He crosses the Jordan into the promised land and prepares for military action to take over the land. Entire cities are wiped out, one, the pagan city of Jericho, with the help of a prostitute named Rahab, who just happens to be in the bloodline of our Lord Jesus. All the death and destruction just puts an exclamation point on the fact that the Bible is not a feel-good book, it is an honest book like I said last week, reflecting both the good and bad we are all capable of doing. Judges comes next. The writer of the book of Judges puts it's succinctly: "The people worshipped the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua. Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and worshiped Baal." The theme of this book goes like this: Israel prospers, then they forget God, they worship other gods, their enemies overwhelmed them, they cry out for help, God rescues them and they prosper again. And the cycle repeats itself. If this sounds somewhat familiar to you, I'm not surprised, because most of us have known something of this cycle in our own walk with God. During this time in Israel, there was no king, so those who led were referred to as judges. They were part-time leaders who the people gathered around at times of war, and whose role was really to settle disputes. In Judges you find those memorable characters like Samson and Delilah. The book of Ruth is set in the time of Judges. It is a beautiful example of human relationships and self-giving love during a time of national disunity and religious and moral decay. Next come the books of first and second Samuel. While still a boy, Samuel was caring for his aged mentor, Eli, when God speaks to Samuel. This is where he finds out he's a prophet. So when Israel got tired of the system of judges they were using, they asked Samuel to anoint for them a king. And they received a person of great promise, Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin. Saul was great, and won many victories for Israel. He reigned for forty years. But then his pride took over, and dramatic was his fall. It became clear someone was needed to replace Saul. So God sends Samuel to a small farming family to anoint their youngest son, a shepherd boy as King. The shepherd boy becomes the slayer of the giant Goliath, writes many Psalms, and God declares David to be "a man after my own heart." Lots of exciting things happen during King David reign, and this is where we will pick up next week. Amen.