

Signed In Blood

1 – Strength for the Journey

Exodus 12:1-14

Psalms 148

Romans 13:8-14

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I

It is the month of beginnings. “This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.” September is here. Time to get to work. Time for football, our most holy season of the year here in Alabama. The end of summer, the beginning of school. Back to work. Back to school. Back to creative labor, for which this Labor Day holiday was established, to honor the working person and their contributions to the prosperity of the nation. For God’s People it is time to prepare and move out on the other side of Rally Day!

Yet this September there is a sense of heaviness upon the nation. A sense that all is not well in our land. Government is not working right. We are out of balance between what we spend and what we owe. Rising national debt, continuing high unemployment, lingering effects of a painful recession, fear of a double dip, political partisanship at an all-time high, with gridlock in Washington, most recently even about what night the President will address a joint session of Congress this week about getting people back to work and reducing our high level of unemployment. Back home in Alabama, a fear-inspired ill-advised immigration law that even the Birmingham mayor and the sheriff and the police chief say is unenforceable, a law that has put the spotlight of the world upon us in a way this good state certainly does not need any more of. Across the greatest nation on earth we face a vast web of problems. Are we up to seriously working to resolve them?

It is obvious we need help from above. This is more here than we can handle in our own strength, wisdom or ingenuity. We need God to step onto the scene and help us live up to our better selves. We need God to come and live and work and dwell among us. “O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down,”¹ Isaiah prayed. We need, as Paul writes to, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” We need to prepare to be the disciples we need to become in faith and in life patterns. We need the blood of the lamb, painted over our doorposts and over our lives, that we might be delivered, dressed and ready to move out, pants on, shoes tied, walking sticks in hand, eating the sacrificial meal quickly, so we will be ready for the journey of a lifetime God calls us to embark on.

II

Exodus is a book about this. Exodus recounts God’s deliverance of his people Israel from slavery to freedom. From oppression in Egypt to freedom in the promised land, giving them strength for the journey. Along the way God tries to get Pharaoh’s attention with extraordinary signs, ten plagues. Yet only the last most horrendous one, the slaying of the firstborn son of

every household in Egypt gets his attention. Then for forty years this extraordinary deliverance continues, the sweeping back of the Sea through which Israel shall pass, the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai, the manna bread provided on the ground each day. Exodus is anything but ordinary, anything but routine. God is at work in behalf of his Chosen People. Chapter 12 instructs about the Passover, when God passes over and delivers his beloved children. Passover was not a one time event for that first generation only. Chapter 12 of Exodus is written with you and me in mind. A perpetual remembrance, a perpetual ritual, a perpetual renewal so that we are there and God is here to carry us over. It is September and we pray “Oh God do it again! Come and save, come and deliver us.”

God’s Passover is a deliverance from evil. The persistence of evil throughout the generations to our time requires little demonstration. Pharaoh’s descendants have multiplied and still are at work enslaving and oppressing. We are a week away from the 10th anniversary of 9/11 the heinous attack upon this nation by 19 Middle Eastern thugs, part of an extremist group called al-Qaeda who brought death and destruction to 2,996 innocent people-traveling, at work, and rescuers rushing to help. Our response as a nation, though not without error, has overall been commendable for this nation’s security and for the stability of the world.

Now across the Middle East has come what is being called the Arab Spring as dictator after dictator has been toppled by his own people. Egypt itself has had a revolution, overturning its modern Pharaoh Mubarak. And recently Gadhafi, the murderer, possibly worst of the worst, has been toppled in Libya. I saw a picture in the Charlotte Newspaper a week ago after Gadhafi was ousted from Tripoli. Entitled “What a difference a year makes.” From a year ago the picture portrayed a smiling group of four dictators at the Arab-African Summit last October, Tunisia’s Ben Ali, (now ousted), Yemen’s Saleh, (about to step down), Libya’s Gadhafi (ousted), and Egypt’s Mubarak, (ousted). The Arab Spring has raised hopes across the lower Mediterranean and across the world of new freedoms and opportunity and democracy. Encouraging signs, but difficult to maintain.

What is happening in these nations, as they are casting off their dictators reminds us that evil does not well perpetuate itself over the long haul. As the hymn “Once to Every Man and Nation” puts it,

“Though the cause of evil prosper, Yet tis truth alone is strong;
Though her portion be the scaffold, And upon the throne be wrong.
Yet that scaffold sways the future, And behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow Keeping watch above His own.”ⁱⁱ

The Bible tells us God is still at work. Was at work with the Hebrews and is at work with us. But if evil does not well perpetuate itself neither does good. Every generation, every family and individual, every congregation, must renew ourselves personally in the core truths of our identity. This Passover celebration offers us that opportunity. In its original version God brought forth the Jewish people. In its new version Jesus Christ brought forth in his own body and blood, “The Passover of gladness, the Passover of God,” for the whole world, all races and nations.

And blood is essential. The blood is serious business under girding in this foundational story. Blood is the fluid of life. No blood no life. For life to continue in joy and freedom and purpose as God intended it, requires blood. Because Pharaoh was so entrenched in evil, so unwilling to give way with compassion and allow the slaves their freedom, God had to impress Pharaoh in an unmistakable way. Nine plagues did not do it. Neither pollution of the Nile, nor frogs in every house, nor gnats so thick you could not see your hand in front of you, nor flies, nor disease upon all cattle, nor boils nor thunder, nor hail, nor locusts, nor darkness. None of these convinced recalcitrant Pharaoh to release the Hebrews. Pharaoh did not listen until death came to his own house, his own son and all the first-born sons of Egypt. Only with the shedding of much blood were the Israelites released. And while the angels of death worked their way through every household of the Egyptians that night the Israelites were protected from destruction, passed over because of the blood of the lamb they had painted over their doorways.

Moses and Aaron are instructed, tell the Israelites to prepare a solemn meal of deliverance. Slaughter the lamb at twilight, painting its blood on your doorposts. Roast it whole and eat the lamb that very night in haste, ready to depart from the evil empire. “This is how you shall eat it; your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the Lord.”ⁱⁱⁱ This is the decisive moment of identity for Israel.

1,200 years later Jesus is seated in an upper room of Jerusalem with his disciples preparing to commemorate these same events, when he takes that Passover bread and gives it new meaning saying, “This is my body.” He takes that Passover wine and gives it new meaning saying, “This is my blood.” By his sacrifice, shedding his blood on the cross, Jesus will cover over the sins of the whole world. This new Passover is our decisive identity.

III

When God calls us to prepare a meal and get ready for a trip the other side of a national disaster, God shows us a way through. This whole event of Passover and Cross and Resurrection is a God thing. Moses and Aaron did not dream this up. Peter and Paul and the early Church did not dream this up. Neither Moses and Aaron, nor the early Apostles, got together and thought through how they would one night concoct a plan whereby their small bands of powerless nobodies would overturn the immense god-like power of Pharaoh or Caesar. It took God himself to intervene, God himself to present a plan so powerful, so painful that the oppressors, could do nothing other than let them go. This movement from slavery to freedom under the guiding hand of God is Israel’s story. It is the Church’s story. It is our story. God told Moses, say to the Israelites,

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.”^{iv}

The story of Israel and the story of Jesus is about freedom gained through obedience. God comes to overturn all that is evil and oppressive, to release us from half life to real life, abundant

life, life that is whole and complete, and in turn calls for us to surrender ourselves fully to this God who has loved us so much that he came to shed his own blood for us and our deliverance.

Blood was required for the Israelite slaves to be delivered from the tenacious evil grip of Pharaoh. Blood, sad to say, has always been required for the people of this earth to be delivered from the oppressive grip of every evil Pharaoh and Caesar and Dictator. In the long run a lamb was not enough. So God sent a part of himself in the person of his own Son Jesus as the lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world.

The Epistle to the Hebrews in the 9th chapter recognizes the necessity of blood. “Indeed under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”^v But that annual offering of animal blood itself was never enough. So God sent Jesus, one for all “once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.”^{vi}

Deliverance from Egyptian slavery was serious business. The lamb was to be prepared just so. The blood was to be painted over the doorposts just so. The meal was to be eaten in haste with travel clothes on, just so, the people ready at any moment to depart. It was and is the Lord’s Passover.

IV

We are still called to make ready. To find our core identity in life as Jesus’ disciples. When we eat this bread and drink this cup we are not simply repeating a ritual. We are forming our identity anew. To participate in the ritual is to remember and become part of the story it celebrates.

Paul in Romans calls for us to simply love. “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” All the Ten Commandments are summed up in this. “Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” Paul reminds us it is past time to get started. It is late in the day, “It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.”

So get ready. Prepare the meal. Paint the blood over your doorframe. Put on your traveling clothes. Get your walking stick. God is coming to deliver us, to work in partnership with us as his love has its way. As Alexander McGrath put it, “For the Church to be the Church it must be concerned to transform as much of this world after the likeness of the homeland as it possibly can.”

God has prepared for us a homeland, living, dwelling in his presence for all eternity. Now here in the time we are given, for the time being, September 2011, it is time to prepare.

“Just as I am, without one plea, But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou biddest me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

Will you come?

ⁱ Isaiah 64:1

ⁱⁱ The Hymnbook 361, "Once To Every Man and Nation"

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 12:11

^{iv} Exodus 19:4, 5

^v Hebrews 9:12-22

^{vi} Hebrews 9:27