

Sermon – September 29, 2024  
“Take a lamb for each family”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Exodus 12:1-14

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Bless those who hear them, fan the flames of our continuing transformation into Christ's image with them, and lead us out into fruitful labor in Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you and brings us together in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! “I was glad when they said to me.” “Let us go to the house of the Lord!” Great job. I think we might be ready for a new scripture to learn. “This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!”

A couple of weeks ago, Sam shared with us that about 67% of Gen Z (those born between the years 1995-2012) have no knowledge about God. They are a generation where more than half do not know Jesus and the steadfast love of God. I pray that that news breaks your heart as it does mine, and I assure you, if it does, you are not alone. While Kay and I were at the New Room Conference last week, we heard some reports of how Jesus is at work in Gen Z, and I want to share some of those reports with you so that you might be encouraged. The New Room Conference, for those who don't know, is not only a place for learning and growing and worship. While all of those things happen, it is primarily a place to meet with Jesus. Kay and I were blessed to be there and to experience the fullness of Jesus as Holy Spirit was poured into the hearts of so many who came. One of the purposes of Seedbed beyond the New Room event is to equip the Church for awakening, and the people of Seedbed have a heart for an awakening to sweep Gen Z into the kingdom of God. Some of us may recall that last year we gathered on some Sunday afternoons and prayed for the presence of God that occurred for 16 days at

Asbury University. Let me share with you that what happened at Asbury has not ended but seems to be springing up in many places. I want to take a few moments and share with you some of the reports that were shared with us at New Room. Stadiums on college campuses are being filled, not with college students planning to party and watch football, but with those who have come seeking the truth, and they are responding to the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, who is the truth in the flesh. I think there have now been about six events on different campuses where a stadium is rented, invitations to learn about Jesus are sent out, and the stadium fills with students. Part of what is being experienced by those who are accepting Jesus as their Savior at these events is a desire to be baptized, so the organizers of the stadium events arrange for a place in a local fountain or pond for students to be baptized. I believe at this point they have baptized several thousand students. God is at work stirring the hearts of Gen Z and drawing them to the cross as they find the emptiness in the false promises of the world and are seeking the truth.

We also had reports of Gen Zs seeking out pastors because of dreams they are having that are about or related to Jesus. One young woman shared that she dreamed she was reading Luke 19 in a Bible, and she awoke to find a Bible on her nightstand opened to Luke 19. She read Luke 19 and is seeking and finding truth in Jesus. A pastor from Australia shared how COVID reduced the numbers of those worshipping in their church, but how that has begun to change as they also are experiencing the presence of God in their worship services, similar to the experience at Asbury, and young people are coming and giving their lives to Jesus.

Gen Z is not the only group being drawn to the truth in Christ. A New York pastor shared that they are seeing a growing number of the Sons and Daughters of Abraham, that would be our Jewish brothers and sisters, coming to their doors seeking to know the truth through Jesus. They come with a desire to know who Jesus is and what that means for their lives. Pastors are also seeing growth in the number of Muslims and people from the LBGQTQ+ community coming to their doors, drawn to the steadfast love of God and the person of Jesus Christ. Similar reports were shared from a pastor in London, sharing how they are seeing a growing number of Gen Zs coming to what for years had been a small remnant of worshipers. None of these instances is a global move of people or an entire generation to the truth of Jesus Christ, but there are growing numbers of small fires of the Spirit popping up all over the globe as people are being drawn to Jesus. The presence of God at Asbury may have been but a taste of what is coming. Let me encourage us to pray for the lost, to pray that God will stir the hearts of the lost with fresh wind and fire from heaven. It is as if an exodus from sin and death is beginning in places where it is so needed. That exodus may not yet be a blazing fire but seems to be little fires growing in frequency all across the globe, fires that are fueled by the prayers of Jesus'

followers for awakening and for the lost to respond. Let me encourage us to again join the fervent prayers of God's people across the globe who are crying out for awakening, who are seeking truth, and whose hearts are stirred to find Jesus. Let us pray first that we will wake up to Jesus' love and come to know the depth of Christ's love and cry out for that love to be given to the lost around us and across the globe.

I will try to share more from our experiences at New Room in the weeks to come. Instead of turning to this morning's scripture, I am going to move that sermon to next week. This morning, I feel led to cover a couple of key background themes that are present in the Hebrews' struggle to escape from slavery in Egypt. The first theme is "knowing" God. If you have your Bible with you, turn with me to Exodus chapter 5 verses 1-2. The text is from the first meeting of Moses and Aaron with Pharaoh. Hear the word of God: "Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, "Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.'" ' But Pharaoh said, 'Who is the LORD, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go.'<sup>i</sup> " If Pharaoh had known God, he would have instantly done what God commanded him through Moses and Aaron. It will take ten plagues for Pharaoh to even begin to catch a glimpse of the one true God and to realize that he, Pharaoh, is not God. Knowing God for Pharaoh is connected to the idea of a hardened heart. Knowing God will also be an issue for the Hebrews. As they move from slavery in Egypt to freedom with God in the wilderness, they will struggle to know God as they seek to understand how to live in the new freedom they have with God. Like Pharaoh, they will struggle with what it means to know God, to follow Him, and to be obedient to His commands.

Note the theme of knowing God is not only in the book of Exodus but is also found in the New Testament. As followers of Jesus, we are to come to know Jesus Christ. Turn in your Bible to John 10:14-15. Listen to these words that Jesus spoke to his disciples: "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep."<sup>ii</sup> We are to know the good shepherd, one who will not leave us to the wolves but will lay down his life for us. As we begin to know Jesus, we also begin to know the Father. As we come to know Jesus, we begin to have the mind of Christ and, through Holy Spirit, we are enabled to live as Jesus would have us live. Paul also picks up this theme of knowing God and Jesus. In Ephesians 1:17-19, he offers a prayer for Jesus' followers to encourage them to come to know Jesus. Let me read that prayer for us: "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious

inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.<sup>iii</sup>” Paul encourages us to pray that we will come to know Jesus. Without knowledge of Jesus, without knowing him and recognizing his voice, we, like Pharaoh, will struggle to find and live out the truth and love of Christ in our lives.

Another background item we should not miss as we read Exodus is the hardened heart of Pharaoh. If we are reading Exodus, we will notice passages in the plague accounts when Pharaoh hardens his heart. Other times, we read that God hardens Pharaoh’s heart in order for God to demonstrate His power to redeem His people from slavery. How we read and understand these passages about hardened hearts will depend on our theological understanding of God and humanity. Our understanding comes down to whether we hold to humanity having free will to decide what to do and how to act or we believe that God predetermines every second of our lives and all of our interactions now and in the future. I will not try to resolve these two positions this morning, but will share that a clear case can be made for both positions from Scripture. How we understand hardened heart passages will vary with our life experiences, our knowledge of the Scriptures, and the depth of our own knowing of Jesus. I will share with you that what is going on with Pharaoh’s heart and God’s hand acting or not acting on Pharaoh’s heart has long been a question that I sought to find an answer to. As a seminary student studying Hebrew, I studied these passages in the book of Exodus, and I was excited to do so as I hoped that understanding Hebrew would help answer this question in my mind once and for all. What I learned as I grew in my limited ability to read Hebrew is that knowing the Hebrew words does not help to answer the question, as the Hebrew words provide no additional insight into what is happening to Pharaoh’s heart. While the Hebrew language was not helpful in gaining insight, I do have an approach to how I currently understand what is happening between Pharaoh and God. I have come to understand that Pharaoh’s hardened heart is his response to God and God’s actions in Egypt. As God acts to free His people, Pharaoh begins to “know God” but refuses to admit that he, Pharaoh, the most powerful person in the world, is not God and in response to God’s actions seen as plagues, consistently hardens his own heart in response to God’s actions in Egypt.

As the plagues progress, those around Pharaoh begin to realize that the God of the Hebrews is acting. The magicians are the first to realize the Hebrew God is at work when they cannot do through their tricks what God does through Moses and Aaron. The magicians realize they are seeing the finger of God at work. Let me share an example from scripture. For those following in your Bible, this is Exodus 8:18 – 19, the plague of gnats. “Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and gnats came on humans and animals alike; all the dust of the earth turned into gnats throughout the whole land of Egypt. The magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, but they

could not. There were gnats on both humans and animals. And the magicians said to Pharaoh, ‘This is the finger of God!’ But Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, just as the LORD had said.<sup>iv</sup>”

The next group of people in Egypt who realize God is at work and is bringing Egypt to ruin are Pharaoh’s officials, the people who make up his court and advisers. As they see the plagues progress and the negative impact each has on Egypt, they begin to know God and they take actions to protect their interests when Moses tells Pharaoh of a coming plague that will impact their wellbeing. Let me share an example from Exodus 9:20, the plague of hail: “Those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the LORD hurried their slaves and livestock off to a secure place. Those who did not regard the word of the LORD left their slaves and livestock in the open field.”<sup>v</sup> Those who are beginning to know God and fear Him seek to follow His words and are spared the death and loss of their belongings. Those who do not yet know God, like Pharaoh, choose to ignore God’s word and suffer the consequences of their choice. While some of Pharaoh’s court begins to know God, Pharaoh refuses to accept their advice and warnings and continues to harden his heart to what God is doing in and to Egypt. We will also want to be those who are coming to know the Father and Jesus and to live in the love, mercy, and grace they have for us and not harden our hearts and suffer the consequences as Pharaoh did.

Let me point out one last theme this morning. This theme comes from my own misreading of the text and I think it is important to share. Each time Moses goes to Pharaoh and tells him to release the Hebrew slaves, or at least in those examples I reread this past week, when Moses goes into Pharaoh’s presence with a message from God, Moses tells Pharaoh to “Let my people go, so that they may worship me.” For some reason I have always read Moses’ words to Pharaoh as a question or request, as if Moses were asking Pharaoh to let Moses’ people, the Hebrews, be free from their slavery to worship God. Yet, none of these statements is a request. From the first time Moses goes into Pharaoh’s presence to the last, Moses does not share a request that God makes of Pharaoh. What Moses shares is a command from God to Pharaoh: “Let my people go!” God is not making a request for Pharaoh to consider but a command that Pharaoh is to follow: to release God’s people to go and worship God. If it is a command, then when God speaks this command through Moses the first time, the people of Israel are released from slavery. There is much work needed to get God’s people out of Egypt and to get Egypt out of God’s people. Part of that work is to convince Pharaoh he is not God, that he must obey God and release his slaves who are God’s people and do not belong to Pharaoh.

Pharaoh is struggling to come to know God and realize he needs to follow God’s command, so he hardens his heart. Just as Pharaoh needs to know God and respond to God’s will, we need to know

God and His will. There is an easy way to do this. We can repent, admit we are not God, and seek to follow him and live in His will. And there is a hard way to do this. We can choose to ignore God's commands, harden our hearts, and live in our own understanding. Pharaoh consistently makes the choice not to obey God and he and Egypt suffer the consequences of Pharaoh's hardened heart. Don't miss the parallel here to our own exodus from sin and death to the kingdom of God, through Jesus. God has commanded that His people are redeemed. Jesus has paid the price, and freedom from sin and death is now a reality for all people. But the redeemed need to come to know God through Jesus, obey Jesus' commands, and follow him. The command from God has gone forth. Christ has come. Christ has died on the cross. He has shed his blood and all of God's people have been redeemed. The ruler of the world may still have a hardened heart, the people of the world may have hardened hearts, or they may not have heard the Gospel in a way in which they can respond, but God has acted through Jesus, and God's people are freed from sin and death. God's command has brought near the kingdom of God to replace the kingdom of the world. We are free from Egypt, yet there now remains a need for us to get Egypt out of us and live as Christ has shown us how to live. We have been given Holy Spirit to empower us to live as we should. And Christ is working through us so that all people may come to know him. Let us seek to be those whose hearts are not hardened but are like soft, moldable clay that can be transformed by Jesus through the Spirit into those who know the Father and are at work in His kingdom. The word has gone forth; may God give us hearts to know Jesus and to love others as He loves us.

*Pray with me: Jesus, we come as those seeking to know you and the Father. Transform us into those who know you and are your witnesses. Help us not only to be delivered out of our Egypt but to remove Egypt from our hearts. We ask and pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Go forth into Jesus' mission.

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<sup>i</sup> Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 159). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ii</sup> Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3217). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>iii</sup> Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (pp. 3449-3450). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>iv</sup> Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 166). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>v</sup> Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 169). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.