“KNOW THAT I AM THE LORD”

Exodus 5:7–7:7

Key Verse: 7:5

“The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them.”

Have you ever wondered what God is doing? This question comes to mind especially when things seem to be going from bad to worse. Why does God allow it? Is he even real? What could be his purpose? These questions come from deep pain and confusion and are not easily or quickly answered. In today’s passage we see something like this happening when Moses first returns to Egypt. He tries to do what God tells him but things get worse. Why is this even part of the story? What is God trying to tell us here? The clue seems to be in the expression, “know that I am the LORD.” In the midst of even greater suffering God promises the Israelites that they will know that he is the LORD. He also promises that through many more experiences, the Egyptians, too, will know that he is the LORD. How will this happen? Why is it so important that we know him? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

In 4:18–31 the author has just introduced us to some major themes in Exodus: God’s holiness, God’s sovereignty over all people, and God’s purpose in saving, that we may serve him. Now we see an even more fundamental theme in Exodus: God wants us to know him. But how? It would be nice to just read a brief paragraph explaining who he is. But that’s not the “knowing” we’re talking about. It’s knowing through experience. This is a deeper “knowing” that sticks.

Read 5:1. This is the first of many of their encounters with Pharaoh. They say, “Thus says the LORD…” It sounds like no big deal. But this word “the LORD” is important. We saw it when God first called Moses. Moses asked what his name was, and God answered, “I AM WHO I AM” (3:14a). In Hebrew, each of these words correspond to a letter: YHWH, “Yahweh” or “Jehovah.” It repeats the verb “to be,” something like “BE I BE.” Through his name God is basically saying, “I exist.” And because it’s in the future tense, he’s saying, “And I always will be.” He’s the unique, eternal, unchanging God, the Creator God and Lord of all. Still, this expression is hard to understand. So, after using it, God explains it to Moses. He tells him to tell the Israelites, “The LORD… has sent me to you” (3:15). This is the expression Moses and Aaron speak to Pharaoh: “Thus says the LORD…”

And what happens? Look at verse 2. “But Pharaoh said, ‘Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.’” He sounds so arrogant and stubborn. But there’s a note of sadness and even tragedy here. Pharaoh does not know the LORD. This is the problem of all his bad behavior. In fact, it’s the problem of all humanity who’ve been cut off from God by sin. In life there are many things we’re actually ignorant of. Some of them don’t matter so much, but other kinds of ignorance can really be a problem. Worst of all is being ignorant of God. Why? Because God exists, he’s real, and he’s the most important part of all reality. Without knowing God, we can’t really understand anything, not even ourselves.

The author develops this idea throughout this passage. Through the Exodus God wants the Israelites to know that he is the LORD (6:7). It’s also a bit surprising that God wants the Egyptians also to know that he is the LORD (7:5). Why don’t the Israelites, his own people, know him? Of course they already know many things about God, like how he judges between people (5:21). But they don’t really know him, it seems, as it says in this passage, because of their broken spirits and harsh slavery (6:9). This happens to us, too, when our own problems blind us to who God is. And why don’t the Egyptians know him? It’s because of their wealth, their pride, their human power, and, their confidence in many other gods. Through the amazing event of the Exodus God is going to show both groups who he is.

We see in chapter 5 how the initial encounter with Pharaoh backfires. Instead of letting the people go, Pharaoh makes their lives worse. He demands that they still make bricks, but now they have to scramble to go get their own straw, which is a lot more work, with no change in their daily quota, no extra time and no grace given (4–12). The Israelite slave foremen get beaten (13–14). Then they turn to Pharaoh, and then, against Moses and Aaron (15–21). Finally, even Moses accuses God of doing evil (22–23). It’s a brutally honest story.

What’s the point? It’s showing how weak the Israelites are, and how strong the Egyptians seem to be. The Egyptians, beginning with Pharaoh, can boldly mock God, flagrantly ignore his commands, and viciously abuse his people. And beginning with Moses and Aaron, the people cower. After Pharaoh’s first rejection, Moses and Aaron beg him, “Please let us go…” (3). The Israelite foremen say to Pharaoh, “Why do you treat your servants like this? No straw is given to your servants…” (15b–16a). They’re calling themselves Pharaoh’s “servants.” And the people, though they are “many” (5a), don’t fight back against this new policy; they just complain. Confronted by the foremen, Moses is so quick to even question his calling and join in complaining to God (22–23). What kind of leader is that? Honestly, Moses seems kind of pathetic.

Chapter 6 continues the story of their weaknesses. Later in Exodus we’re going to see the constant weaknesses and complaining of the people, but in this early part, the focus is Moses. When God tells Moses to let the people know his great plan and promises, they refuse to listen (9). So God switches and tells Moses to go to Pharaoh (10–11). And how does Moses respond? Read 6:12. Moses is again saying he’s bad at speaking (3:10), this time with the expression “uncircumcised lips.” Basically he's saying he feels so unqualified. Look at 6:13. God is patient with him but doesn’t change his plan. We see this repeated at the end of the chapter. Look at verses 28–30. God again tells Moses, “I am the LORD.” And he gives him clear direction: “Tell Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I say to you.” And again Moses says he's spiritually unqualified and asks, “How will Pharaoh listen to me?”

Read 7:1–2. God is repeating what he told Moses when he first called him (4:14–16). Despite all his weaknesses, God would make Moses “like God” to Pharaoh, as well as to Aaron. It means God would endow Moses with his own authority to speak his word. How would that work? Moses would only have to say what God said. This is a great lesson for us. How can we overcome our own weaknesses? How can we overcome the rejection even of fellow believers, and the hardness of heart in nonbelievers? We just need to listen carefully to God and say what God says. We let God do the rest.

God goes on to predict in more detail what he’s going to do. Read 7:3–4. This initial rejection of the people and of Pharaoh are no problem at all for God. In fact, he says for the second time that he’s actually going to “harden” Pharaoh’s heart (cf. 4:21). He’s going to multiply his signs and wonders (3b) and exercise “great acts of judgment” (5b), and still Pharaoh will not listen (4a). In other words, it’s going to be a great rigmarole, with Moses kind of caught in between God and Pharaoh. If God is trying to deliver his suffering people from Egyptian slavery, why is he going about it in such a slow, roundabout way, letting Pharaoh and the Egyptians win for the time being?

God explains it. Let’s read 7:5. Earlier, God said he wanted the Israelites to know that he is the LORD (6:7). He’s said it so many times, “I am the LORD” (6:2,6,7,8,29). Now, he wants the Egyptians to know that “I am the LORD” (7:5). What does it mean? As we’re going to see, in bringing the plagues on Egypt, God announces to Pharaoh: “By this you shall know that I am the LORD” (e.g. 7:17). He’s LORD of the Nile, LORD of the frogs (8:10), LORD of the flies (8:22), LORD of the hail (9:14), LORD of the thunder and of all the earth (9:29), LORD of life and death, LORD of his people (11:7), LORD even of his enemies (14:18).

But how do we come to know that he’s the LORD? Let’s read 6:6–8. The Israelites would come to know it as they experienced God’s outstretched arm to save them from such an impossible situation. We too need to experience God’s saving work in our lives very personally. It’s the only way to really “know” him. Exodus repeatedly uses the word “hand.” In 3:19–20 God told Moses: “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.” God uses this word “hand” again in today’s passage. Let’s read 6:1. Whose hand is he talking about? It’s God’s hand that’s going to compel Pharaoh to drive the people out of Egypt at last. Now let’s read 7:4–5. Once more, it’s God’s hand that both rescues his people and punishes the Egyptians who rebel against him (cf. 9:3,15; 13:3,9,14). 15:6 says, “Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy.” It’s through God’s hand that people know that he is the LORD. God’s hand of judgment and salvation is most clearly seen in the cross of Jesus, to which all of this points. In the cross of Jesus God’s mighty hand accomplished his greatest salvation; we just have to open our hearts, repent and believe it.

In many other ways in our daily lives God also uses his hand. Sometimes he reaches out his hand to tenderly pull us out of a desperate situation. Other times he uses his hand to discipline and train us. The more we discern God’s hand working in our lives, the better we come to know him. The problem is, in our culture we’re trained only to protect ourselves and take care of ourselves. We’re taught to play it safe. When we avoid risk, avoid pain and suffering, avoid putting ourselves out there to obey God, it’s hard for us to experience God’s hand. We need to open ourselves up to God, even in all our weaknesses. When we feel trapped or helpless, we need to trust his hand at work, take hold of his hand and even accept his hand of discipline for our good. As we let God’s hand work in our lives, we grow stronger spiritually. This is what happened to Moses. Exodus doesn’t gloss over Moses’ weaknesses; we’re shown them in full color. Yet Moses becomes a strong leader. How? Read 7:6.

We learned several things in today’s passage. Mostly, we learned that God is the LORD; more than anything else, he really wants us to know him. He doesn’t want us just to do many things, “do this” and “don’t do that,” but to really know him. We can know him as “the LORD” only through personal experience. We need to experience both his saving grace and his discipline. May God help us, even though we’re full of weaknesses, to listen to him, trust him, and do what he says, so that he can make us strong. May God use us for his purpose, to help many people today to really come to know him as “the LORD.”