

Session Five: God's Divine Rescue

But the LORD said: I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry against their taskmasters, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them up from that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Exodus 3:7-8)



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HOW DOES GOD DEAL WITH US?

Session Introduction

We have seen that God created Adam and Eve, and through them the whole human race, to live with him forever in joy and harmony. When our first parents rebelled against God and turned away from his goodness, God's commitment to his creation did not end. He planned from the beginning to find a way to rescue wayward humanity, to offer a road back to any who were willing to lay down their arms and return to friendship with him. The mysterious and magnificent way he put his rescue plan into operation is what Christians call "salvation history." We are familiar with that history, at least in part. We may know the names of Abraham and Moses, of David and Solomon; we may remember stories from the history of the Israelites, like the Ten Plagues and the Exodus from Egypt, or of the Jewish exile and return to the Promised Land. The point of this session is not to recount that history in detail; instead, it is to try to see the big picture of God's rescue plan as a whole so that we can discern its deep meaning, and to see more clearly how God acts with us. The better we understand God's ways and intentions, the better we can cooperate with him as he acts in our own lives and the lives of our families.

As we dive into this, it will help to point out some patterns that can guide us along the way, some interpretive keys concerning the way God has worked to save humanity.

First: God never leaves us alone. In his infinite wisdom and knowledge, God had plans for us from the start, and he was thinking of our rescue even as we were rebelling against him. He always has the end of the story in view, and he is working in every age to bring that end about.

Second: God works over the long haul. God created the world through time, and he is re-creating the world through time. It has been 4,000 years since the days of Abraham, and each successive generation has seen a new step in God's plan. He is apparently not interested in a "quick fix." He is unimpressed by splashy, immediate results that go viral. He began the human race with two people, and in the slow workings of time he has brought forth from them many millions of people. In the same way God initiated his plan for saving humanity with one person, Abraham, and from that man and his wife – accomplishing his work over time – God has brought forth millions of renewed humans.

Third: God operates on a communal and family principle. God calls individuals to do important things, but he does not save individuals alone; he saves families, peoples, and ultimately humanity as a whole. He honors the communal nature of humanity even as he deals with us individually.

Fourth: God is not egalitarian. At least not if that is understood to mean that everyone has the same experiences and the same opportunities and gets treated the same way as they go through life. God is universally just and loving, but he deals with peoples, families, and individuals uniquely, according to his own will and his own design. He has written a different script for every man.

Fifth: God prefers to work through non-obvious instruments. Abraham was not the most powerful or the most noteworthy man of his day, and the Israelites were far from being the most numerous or culturally potent nation of their time, nowhere even close. Every figure from salvation history had personal flaws and sometimes committed serious sins. Yet the fortunes of humanity were riding upon what God was doing with them.

Sixth: God teaches us by writing his purposes into history. In dealing with the Chosen People, God was writing the history of humanity in microcosm. What happened to the ancient Israelites is not just an interesting ethnic history, a national story among many others. Their unique experience was a shadow – less substantial but easier to see – of the deeper but hidden work that God would be accomplishing among every people, and even in each individual soul. We go to the history of the Jewish people to see ourselves and our own history shadowed in a poetic form.

Seventh: God often shows us the meaning of what he is doing through the use of types. A type is a visible image that reveals in space and time the inward and invisible workings of history. Such types are real in themselves, but they are also symbols of yet deeper realities, realities often only later to be revealed. Thus, David is a type of Christ; Jerusalem is a type of the Church; the human enemies of the Israelites are a type of our demonic enemies; freedom from Egyptian slavery is a type of the freedom Christ brings from death and the devil; and so on. Much of salvation history is made up of such types. They are like shadows that are awaiting their fulfillment in coming events. Salvation history moves forward among people and events whose significance can only become clear once the realities that they prefigure have taken on their true shape.

I. Opening Prayer

Pray together as a group:

*O Lord Jesus Christ,
open the eyes of my heart that I may hear your Word,
and understand and do your will. Do not hide your commandments from me,
but open my eyes, that I may perceive the wonders of your Law.
Speak to me the hidden and secret things of your wisdom.
On you I set my hope, O my God, that you shall enlighten my mind and understanding
with the light of your knowledge; not only to cherish those things which are written,
but to do them; For you are the enlightenment of those who lie in darkness,
and from you comes every good deed and every gift.
Amen.*

II. Reading Scripture

Read aloud as a group the following passages.

After reading each passage, answer the question(s) as a group in order to draw out some of the key ideas. In this session there are seven relatively short passages. These are fundamental passages from Sacred Scripture and it is possible to spend your full time on each one. During this session, the idea is not to do a deep study of each one, but to get a broad sense of how God worked through history to reveal himself and his plan.

Some key ideas and context for each passage are listed in the back of this book to help with your discussion if needed.

1. Genesis 12: 1-4;
(The initial call of Abraham)



- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- What was demanded of Abraham? What was promised to him?

2. Exodus 3:4-15
(Moses and the Burning Bush)



- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- How does God reveal himself to Moses?
- What does God want Moses to do? What feelings does God express toward his people?
- What is Moses' reaction to God's appearance and what God wants him to do?

3. Exodus 19:16-20 (The Giving of the Law on Sinai)

- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- Imagine the setting: thunder, lighting, earthquake, and a trumpet blast. What was the effect on the Israelites?
- Moses is a "type" of Christ. In what ways might he be a shadow of what was to come in the person of Jesus?

4. Deut. 30: 15-20 (The Blessings and the Curses)

- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- What are the provisions of the Covenant? What is promised, and what is threatened?
- Why would God lay out the consequences of being faithful or unfaithful to the Covenant?

5. 2 Sam. 7:5-16 (The Kingship of David)

- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- What is the context of this promise by the Lord to David?
- What does God promise to David?
- How might David be a “type” that is fulfilled in Jesus?

6. 2 Chronicles 36: 15-21 (The Exile and Destruction of the Temple)

- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- What is the cause given here for Jerusalem’s fall and the exile?
- Why is the destruction of the Temple such a significant event in Israel’s history?

7. Jeremiah 31:31-34 (The Promise of a New Covenant)

- Describe in your own words what is happening in this passage.
- What is different about this promised new covenant from the old covenant?

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 59

In order to gather together scattered humanity God calls Abram from his country, his kindred, and his father’s house, and makes him Abraham, that is, “the father of a multitude of nations.” “In you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”

III. Applying Scripture

Based on your reading, discuss the following questions as they apply to your life. Depending on how much time you have available, you may not be able to discuss all of these questions. If necessary, choose one question to discuss in a significant way.

1 The men God calls to be a part of his plan all feel a sense of being unworthy and not the right man for the job, and they are not wrong. If you read the full stories of people like Abraham, Moses, and David, you will find that they have their own flaws and tragically sin. But God still works through them and with their cooperation, drawing them deeper into relationship with himself and allowing them to enact his plans on earth. Many men today have a deeply rooted feeling of not being good enough, whether at work, as a father, as a husband, as a friend, or as a son. Our society typically expects men to hide these parts away behind an outward confidence. **When you consider that God might be calling you to specific purposes, do you feel, like Moses, inadequate or unable to live up to God's calling? What are the areas of your life where God might be asking you to trust in him instead of relying on your own strength? How might you and your relationships be different if you were to firmly trust that you are an important part of God's plans?**

2 God chose Abraham, Moses, David, and the other men of the Old Testament and asked them to lead others on his behalf. Despite their flaws and differences, each of them as leaders direct their people to God and often stand before God on behalf of their people. When they are leading well, it is never about themselves and their own desires, it is always about God and his plans. **What does today's society tell us good leadership is? In what ways is it different or similar to the leadership God asks of us? Who are people that you would consider good leaders, whether in your own life or in history? Are you being asked by God to lead others at this time? How might you model your leadership on the examples from Scripture?**

3 From the beginning of Scripture through to the end, God gives a picture of the fundamental choice every man needs to make. In the midst of life's complexities, Jesus tells us that there are ultimately only two roads in life. One road turns us from our rebellion to obedience and love and leads us to God. The other road is marked by pride and selfishness and leads away from God to a terrible end (Matt 7:13-14). Even though it may not be obvious on the surface, every man is walking on one or the other of these roads. There is no "in-between" place that does not lead anywhere. Our world denies this truth and prefers to think that there are an infinite number of roads and that everyone can choose the road he wants. **Have you made a clear decision that you will walk the road that leads to life and refuse to walk the road that leads to death? Are there parts of your life that you have compartmentalized, thinking that they are not affected by the life of faith? Are there things that you would need to sacrifice in order to fully commit to following the road to life?**

4 The story of God's rescue announced step-by-step in the Old Testament is one of great hope. Though it involves much that is tragic and difficult, and demands battle and the readiness to suffer, all of that is nothing compared to the wonderful hope it provides. The Jews called the Messiah "the hope of Israel." The whole of God's plan is a story of hope in the midst of darkness. **In the tragedies of your own life, are you able to maintain a sense of hope because of God's promises? Have there been times in your life that you have lost hope? Is hope a virtue that our world today cultivates? What are ways of maintaining hope, especially during difficulties or suffering?**

IV. Call to Action

Write down for yourself one concrete way that you are going to apply today's Scripture Study to your life.

Example:

Choose one of the men from the Old Testament that you most related to. Go back to their story in the Bible and read more about how they responded to God's call in their lives.

V. Closing Prayer

Pray together:

*Lord God, let us keep your Scriptures in mind
and meditate on them day and night,
persevering in prayer, always on watch.
We beg you, Lord, to give us real knowledge of what we read,
and to show us not only how to understand it,
but how to put it into practice,
and to obtain spiritual gifts
enlightened by the teaching of the Holy Spirit,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
whose power and glory will endure throughout all ages.
Amen*

COVENANT

A supplemental note for further study

If we are to understand the way God has intervened in human history, we need to have some notion of the concept of “covenant.” It is not a commonly used word in modern English, but in Biblical times it was a widely understood idea. A covenant was a pact between two parties, a promise of relationship that came with privileges and duties for both sides, and with penalties attached if the covenant were broken. It might be an alliance between two nations, like a mutual aid treaty. It might be a bond between a man and a woman: marriage was a kind of covenant. It might be a pact between friends: David and Jonathan made a covenant of friendship with each other. God took this well-known idea and used it to order all his dealings with humanity. When we speak of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, “testament” is only another word for covenant. The whole of God’s history with us can be spoken of as “a Tale of Two Covenants.”

In fact, it is not quite that simple. God made a covenant with Noah, and then he made a covenant with Abraham. He would later make a covenant with David and his descendants. But it was on Mt. Sinai that God drew a whole people into a covenantal relationship with him. He gave them a law to follow, and he promised them protection, prosperity, and his own presence among them. Their covenant with the God of the Universe was the pride of the Israelite people. And God promised that he would enter into a new and better covenant with his chosen people, one that would fulfill the first covenant because it would be written on human hearts rather than just in stone.

This new and better covenant was established by Jesus. At the Last Supper, Jesus spoke of “*the new covenant in my blood*” (Luke 22:20). Christians are thus in a covenant relationship with God. We are his people, and he has promised us forgiveness for our sins, freedom from the devil, and eternal life. On our side, we agree to love the Lord with all our hearts and minds, to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to keep the commandments of God.

God’s use of covenants to respond to the rebellion of humanity is yet another example of his readiness to lower himself to save us, and of the dignity he wants to give to his creatures. God is the source of all, and everything belongs to him by right. Yet he has freely made promises to us, promises we have no right to demand of him, but that he has taken upon himself to fulfill. Every time we celebrate Mass, God is present to renew the covenant of mercy he made with us in Christ’s sacrifice, and we are present to remember God’s promises and to renew our commitment to belong to him as his people and to follow in his ways.

THE NAME OF GOD

A supplemental note for further study

When God comes to Moses in the burning bush and sends him to free the Israelites, Moses asks him: *"If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"* God answers Moses: *"I AM WHO I AM."* And he said, *"Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"* (Exod 3:13-14). Here are two things to note about this interchange. First, in the ancient world a name was not just a convenient and arbitrary tag. A name said something about the nature and identity of the person who had it. The name "Eve" meant "mother of all the living," because that is who she was. Jesus gave Simon the name "Peter," meaning "rock," because it signified Peter's place and role in the Church. The name "Jesus" means, appropriately, "God saves." Names could also have potency, especially divine names. And to call someone by their true name was a sign of intimacy in relationship. So it was no small thing for Moses to ask to know God's name. He was assuming a close relationship between God and his people, he was seeking divine power, and he was looking to understand God's nature and identity.

Second: the name by which God revealed himself to Moses was: "I AM." Three thousand years later we are still plumbing the depths of the significance of that name. God is, in a sense, the only one who exists. He is existence itself. Everything else in existence only exists because God has allowed it to participate in his existence. St. Catherine of Siena once recorded a mystical conversation she had with God. "Catherine," God said, "It is important that you know who I am and who you are. I am the one who is. You are the one who is not." If God were not holding Catherine in existence moment by moment, she would snap right out of existence. She could only "be" because God created her and held her in being. This was the unfathomably great God that was speaking to Moses. Jesus shocked many of his hearers who were bragging about being children of Abraham. *"Jesus said to them, 'Truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM'"* (John 8:58). They took up stones and tried to put him to death for making himself equal to the God who is existence itself.

God's name has spiritual potency. *"The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe"* (Prov 18:10). The Apostles baptized, healed, and cast out demons "in the name of Jesus." (Acts 3:6; 8:12; 16-18)

The four Hebrew letters representing God's name, the so-called "Tetragrammaton," transliterated into English as "YHWH," was considered by both Jews and most Christians to be too holy and powerful to speak. Whenever God's name has been read aloud in the Scriptures it has usually been replaced with the term "the Lord" and typically most Bibles will have it written out in small capital letters the LORD.

Additional Readings from Scripture

These optional readings build on the themes discussed in this session. You are encouraged to read and pray with them on your own in between this meeting and the next.

Gen 9:8-15 *“When the bow is in the clouds, I will look upon it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth.”* This is an account of the covenant God first made with Noah after the flood.

Gen 17:4-13 *“Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.”* This passage gives the terms of the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants.

Gen 22:1-18 *“God will provide the sheep for the burnt offering.”* The binding of Isaac is the scene of the great testing of Abraham’s faith as well as a type, an image, of God offering up his own Son, Jesus.

Exod 40:17-38 *“So Moses finished the work. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.”* The greatest blessing of the covenant was the presence of God with his people.

Psalms 78 This is only one among many of the Psalms that tell of the establishment of the covenant on Sinai, of the constant failure of the Israelites to keep their part of the covenant and the consistent faithfulness of God despite their unfaithfulness.

Psalms 89 This Psalm celebrates the promises God made to David and the hope that those promises bring to his people. *“My steadfast love I will keep for him forever, and my covenant will stand firm for him. I will establish his line for ever and his throne as the days of the heavens.”*

Isaiah 24:1-10 *“The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.”* The prophets often speak of the coming judgment of God because of the breaking of the covenant. This will ultimately bring about the exile from the Promised Land and the destruction of the Temple.

Ezek 37:21-28 *"I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."* The prophets also spoke consistently of the Lord's faithfulness to the covenant despite his peoples' unfaithfulness. He would make a new covenant that would touch their inner hearts and lead them to follow him.

Rom 9:4-5 *"They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed forever."* Here St. Paul is speaking of his own people, the Jews, and his grief that so many of them had not received Christ. He recounts the glory of the first covenant.

Heb 8 *"Christ has obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises."* The whole of the book of Hebrews is an extended commentary on the relationship between the Old and the New Covenants.