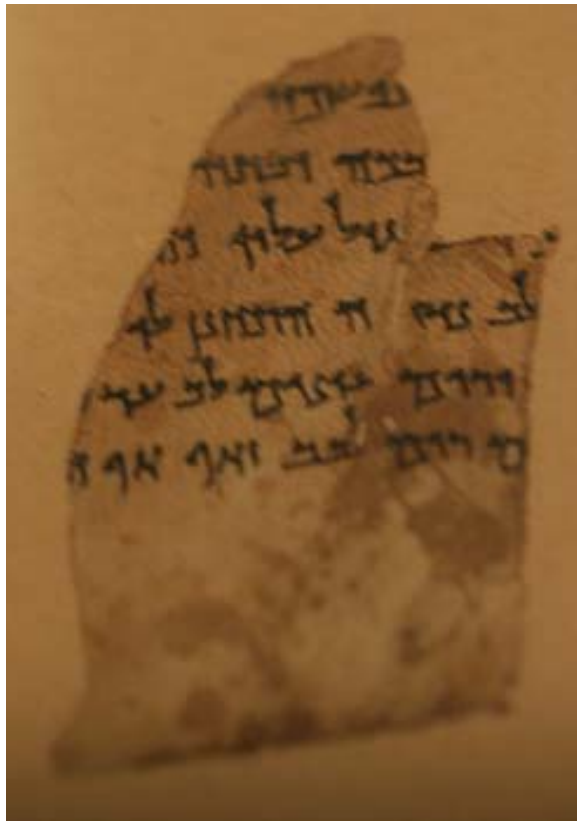


The Covenant Pulpit



EXODUS

Possessing the Promises

“INTEGRITY”
EXODUS 7-14

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When Nigerian military dictators tried to shut him up with death threats, African writer Chinua Achebe wrote in his diary,

“One of the true tests of integrity is the blunt refusal to be compromised.”

Surely BoYa ‘Lyowb would agree with that statement. Mr. ‘Lyowb lived a life of luxury somewhere in Southern Iraq. If *Forbes* magazine had been around then, he would have topped its annual list of the world’s richest people. No one has ever calculated how many palaces, or servants, or financial assets he possessed, but we do know that he had cornered the stock market of his day.

Not only was he fabulously wealthy, he had the perfect family with ten beautiful children. He adored his kids, but he didn’t pamper them. He was too good a man for that. Indeed, Mr. ‘Lyowb spent long hours on his knees at night, praying that his trust-fund babies didn’t let the lifestyles of the rich and famous lead them astray.

The British Lord, John Acton famously wrote, “Great men are seldom good men.” BoYa ‘Lyowb was both great and good; that rarest of persons who is rich and righteous at the same time. His impeccable integrity was the toast of the business world. His legendary wisdom caused top leaders to seek his counsel. The crème-de-la crème of society’s elite competed to be part of his inner circle. When BoYa ‘Lyowb walked into a room, everyone stood. When he spoke, they all listened.

Not only did ‘Lyowb reach the highest rung of the ladder of success, he earned the applause of heaven. Ex football star and U.S. Congressman JC Watts once said, “Character is doing right when no one except God is looking.” When God peered into the secret places of Mr. ‘Lyowb’s life, he saw no hypocrisy. This wealthy tycoon from Southern Iraq lived out the advice of the late Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone: “Never separate the life you live from the words you speak.” No wonder God even bragged to the angels that BoYa ‘Lyowb’s life was blameless.

Maybe that’s why, some 4,000 years later, his monumental collapse still causes us to ask, “How could so many bad things happen to such a good person?” In the space of a few days, his financial empire imploded, his children were killed, and he was left an invalid—his body disfigured with reeking, loathsome boils. By now you might be remembering BoYa ‘Lyowb by his more familiar name. BoYa is an ancient Semitic word which means “hated” or “persecuted.” It’s a name that later Jewish Talmudic writers gave him. The name ‘Lyowb is an earlier Jewish version of Jobé—or the later pronunciation: Job.

Most folks think that the storyline of Job is his amazing patience in the light of staggering suffering. But, if you scratch beneath the surface, you will discover that it is more about his **integrity**. Twice the word

“integrity” is used in the opening lines of Job’s story. Did you know that this is the first time in the history of literature that the word “integrity” is ever used? It’s appropriate that a book written by God should introduce the concept of “integrity” to the world. God says this about BoYa ‘Lyowb when he talks to Satan in Job 2:3: “He still maintains his *integrity*, though you incited me against him to ruin him without reason.”

Later BoYa’s wife has an emotional meltdown. Can you blame her? After burying her ten children she is forced to watch helplessly while her husband suffers horrific agony. She endures this while standing up to her neck in the ruins of her shattered life. We can sympathize when she lashes out at her husband, “Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!” (Job 2:9) There’s that word *integrity* again. What does it mean? We get a hint when BoYa responds in Job 2:10, “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” Job is saying, “It doesn’t matter whether it’s good times or bad, my faith is still the same. It never changes with the circumstances.” Job’s words remind me of something penned by writer John McDonald: “Integrity is not a conditional word. It is the inner core of your being that doesn’t blow in the wind or change with the weather.” Integrity is consistency.

The Hebrew word for integrity in Job’s story is powerful. It’s used to describe fabric or cloth. It means to be a complete or whole; cloth that is one piece, seamless, without rips or cuts. Integrity means that your life is undivided. There’s no division between how you think, what you say, and how you act. Job would say, “You can’t have one faith for the good times, and a different one for the bad times.” King David was thinking about integrity when he begged God in Psalm 86:11, “Give me an undivided heart.”

There are words that define a lack of integrity: double-minded; schizophrenic; split-personality; two-faced; inconsistent; incongruent; not walking the talk. In an 1809 speech, President Thomas Jefferson said, “I have never believed there was one code of morality in public and another in private.”

What is integrity? Mark Twain wrote, “It is to live in such a way that you will never be afraid to sell your parrot to the town gossip.” May I give you my definition of integrity? **It is to believe, to say, and to do the same thing.** Job never wavered in his core beliefs about God. He lived by the same faith in his sufferings as he did in his successes. This is critical for all of us who are called to an Exodus.

As surely as Moses led God’s people out of their land of bondage, Jesus wants to take us from our slavery to sin to the Promised Land of grace and holiness. But here’s the catch: our Lord says that no one can follow him unless they take up their Cross and die daily to self. There are some scary potholes in the road to the Promised Land. And we learned this principle earlier in this series: the road to the Promised Land always

leads through the desert. Moses spent 40 years there before he was ready to lead his people to freedom. Now he and his followers will spend 40 more years in the same desert.

As surely as Job's integrity was tested in the bad times, so will the integrity of those following Moses. Will their faith be the same in the arid desert as it is when water is miraculously gushing from the rock; will it be as strong when they are hungry as it is when they are gorging on manna and quail; will it be the same when they face enemy armies as it is when they are praising God in the shelter of the Tabernacle? In short, will their walk match their talk? It's so easy to compromise integrity when the tough times come.

In today's edition of the Exodus story, Moses is caught in the Pharaoh's crosshairs. This god-king of Egypt is the most powerful man on planet earth. And he is implacably set against letting 3.6 million Jewish slaves leave Egypt. God responds by sending horrific plagues on the land. But they only manage to harden the stubborn resolve of this god-king. And he responds by tempting Moses to compromise his integrity. For those of us who face the same temptation, it's critical that we grasp the fifth principle from Exodus:

There are no shortcuts to the Promised Land.

Remember, all of us have spent time in an Egypt of our own making. Everyone of us has been in bondage to sin. We didn't serve the Pharaoh, but we served the Devil. Then Jesus came and took us out of the land of bondage. As those ancient Jews went through the Red Sea, so we went through our own baptism experience. And now we are on the road to possessing all the promises God has for those who follow his Son Jesus Christ. But we still struggle with abiding habits, old addictions, thorns in the flesh, emotional hang ups, and attacks by the enemies of our soul. When it seems that God is taking me from one desert experience to another, I always try to remember the line of a poem written by a Christian struggling to overcome his homosexual desires:

Whom the Lord royally elects,
those he ruthlessly perfects.

If the devil can keep you in his bondage, then he will come after you to discourage you along the way. He will always try to get you to go back to Egypt. He will tell you the lie that you can have *both* Egypt and the Promised Land at the same time. His chief tactic will be to offer you the easy shortcut of compromise. Some of you are barely hanging on today. Your marriage is being torn to shreds. Your resolve to remain holy in the face of some temptation to sin is ripping apart. Your commitment to hang in is beginning fray at the edges. The Enemy of your Soul is dividing your heart even as I speak. There's a growing rift between what you believe and what you are doing. You hear a thousand voices

screaming the words of Job's wife at you: "Are you still holding on to your integrity?" (Job 2:8) The Hebrew word for "holding on" speaks of desperation. Job is holding on for dear life to his integrity. As the winds of suffering are ripping at the fabric of his faith, he is fighting to keep his actions from being separated from his core beliefs. If you lose everything else in this life, don't lose your integrity. I love these words from former Wyoming congressman Alan Simpson:

"If you have integrity, nothing else matters. If you don't have integrity, nothing else matters."

Here are four transforming truths from Moses' encounters with Pharaoh that can help you fight for your integrity:

1. You can't get to your Promised Land without leaving Egypt.

This contest of wills between a sovereign God and a stubborn god-king is a battle to the death. God repeats the same message: "Let my people go!" The Pharaoh gives the same response: "No, I won't!" In Exodus 5:1, Moses says to the god-king of Egypt:

"This is what the Lord, the god of Israel says, 'Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert.'"

The Pharaoh wasn't born yesterday. He knows that if 3.6 million Jewish slaves cross the Red Sea and go to the Sinai to worship their God, they aren't coming back. The Devil knows that if we ever begin to worship God, he's lost us. Like the Pharaoh, the Enemy of our soul will pull out all the stops to keep us in bondage. Only God can break the yoke of whatever bondage you are in today.

So God unleashes four ecological disasters that would drive Al Gore crazy: the Nile turns to blood, making it unfit for drinking or farming; then there are successive infestations of frogs, gnats, and flies. At that point the Pharaoh offers a shortcut to Moses and Aaron in Exodus 8:25: "Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land." At first, it seems like a victory for the good guys. "Go, sacrifice to your God..." At last, religious freedom! It's almost too good to be true. But catch the caveat at the end of verse twenty-five: "...here in the land."

God says, "My people have to leave Egypt before they can worship." Pharaoh answers, "They can worship, but they must do it *in* Egypt." Do you see the subtle temptation? Do you hear the hiss of the Serpent? It is as old as the Garden of Eden. The Serpent says to Adam and Eve, "You can still walk with God while you are eating the forbidden fruit." He comes to us today and says, "You can stay in bondage to your sin and still have fellowship with God." Pharaoh is saying, "You can serve me as your Master and still serve your God as your Master." Jesus counters Pharaoh in Matthew 6:24: "No one can serve two masters. Either he will

hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other." Integrity will not allow a divided heart. You can't serve God and money. You can't focus on God while you look at pornography. You can't please God while you are consumed with pleasing people. Bob Dylan used to sing the song, "You've got to serve somebody." But it can only be *one* somebody.

Moses responds in verse 26, "That would not be right. The sacrifices we offer the LORD our God would be detestable to the Egyptians..." Moses understands that the enemies of God hate true worship. If we truly live for God, we will be hated. Don't be surprised if the cultural elite dismiss us as narrow-minded, pointy-headed Neanderthals who pose a clear and present danger to progress.

What Moses says should be a powerful reminder to us: it's not that we despise those who don't worship the way we do. God's people should go about their worship without a judgmental, arrogant attitude. But, as gentle and loving as we might be, the culture around us will find our worship detestable. Lasts week's pro-life Super Bowl ad, featuring Tim Tebow and his mother, was as innocuous as possible. But it didn't stop a firestorm of anti-Christian invective. We might be tempted to try to make peace by "Egyptianizing" our worship and lifestyle to make it palatable to others. If we do, we will lose our integrity. In *The Neurotic Notebook*, Mignon McLaughlin gives us a great warning: "It's impossible to be loyal to your family, your country, and your principles all at the same time." It's critical that you grasp the fact that you can't get to your Promised Land without leaving Egypt.

2. You can't get to the Promised Land without going all the way.

When Moses refuses to take the hook, the Pharaoh switches bait. In verse 25 he says, "I will let you go to offer sacrifices to the Lord your God in the desert, but you must not go very far. Now pray for me." Beware of the temptation cloaked in spiritual language. It's the most insidious and seductive temptation of all. Even Moses is sucker-punched by Pharaoh's deception. The Egyptian king begins verse 25 by saying, "I will let you go to offer sacrifices to the Lord your God *in the desert.*" It sounds like he is doing everything God commands. He ends verse 25 by piously saying, "Now pray for me." You might almost think that the Pharaoh has gotten born-again and filled with the Holy Ghost.

But notice the little seduction hidden away in the middle of verse twenty-five: "...but you must not go very far..." This is a lure that snags most postmodern American evangelicals: we can become followers of Jesus, but we don't have to take it too far. Its faith without fanaticism; faith that leaves room for lots of ways to God; faith like a smorgasbord where you can pick and choose a little of this and a little of that; faith that is equally-comfortable in diametrically-opposed arenas. Former Oklahoma Sooner quarterback and U.S. Congressman J.C. Watts

says this about lukewarm American Christians: "There's too many people who think that the only thing that's right is to get by, and the only thing that's wrong is to get caught."

The Egyptian Pharaoh masquerades as the religious convert, but he is using the devil's strategies. If the devil loses us to God-worship, he at least wants us to stay close by. But we can't just go ankle deep into faith, a few feet from the safety of the shore. Jesus says, "Take up your cross, and die daily..." It's an all or nothing deal. We can't just leave Egypt; we have to go all the way to the Promised Land. The journey comes without a roundtrip ticket.

3. You can't go to the Promised Land without a commitment to take your family with you.

Almost immediately after Moses leaves the palace, the Pharaoh's heart is hardened. You have to give him his due: he doesn't have a divided heart. Sometimes nonbelievers have more integrity in their unbelief than we have in our own belief system. So God pours out four more plagues on Egypt: dead livestock, boils, hailstorms, and locusts. Moses is summoned again. A chastened Pharaoh says in Exodus 10:8, "Go, worship the Lord your God. But who will be going?" Moses replies in verse nine, "We will go with our young and old, with our sons and daughters, and with our flocks and herds, because we are to celebrate a festival to the Lord." Moses cannot image God's people worshipping a covenant-keeping God without their children.

But Pharaoh replies in verses 10&11, "...Clearly you are bent on evil. No! Have only the men go, and worship the Lord, since that's what you have been asking for." Notice it's at the point of children and families that Pharaoh gets most violent. Verse eleven ends, "Then Moses and Aaron were driven out of Pharaoh's presence." The world will not compromise with us when it comes to our children. Pharaoh knows that as long as he holds their families hostage, the men will return.

Satan is still using the same strategy today. He says to us, "You can worship your God as long as you let me have your families. But what good is it if we worship God on Sunday, and let the Egyptians have our children the rest of the week? We give them over to day care, the television, video games, sports, the public schools, the universities, Facebook, text messaging, friends, activities, and a thousand other nannies to shape their lives while we go off to our adult Bible studies and men's groups. We guys neglect the nurture and care of our wives. We don't take the spiritual leadership in our homes.

Moses knows what we forget: to go to a place of worship without our families is an utter lack of integrity. In a postmodern America where 65 % of the World War 2 generation identifies itself as Christians and then dramatically lessens until fewer than ten percent of those under thirty

years of age claim to be Christians, we are facing a spiritual crisis. Our children are growing up Egyptians. The devil is happy to let the churches fill up with grey hairs as long as he's got the next generation.

4. You can't go to the Promised Land less your possessions come with you

There are no shortcuts. It's all or nothing. So God sends the ninth plague: Egypt is plunged in darkness. God is giving a frightening message to postmodern Americans. If we harden our hearts toward God, our culture will be increasingly plunged into moral and intellectual darkness.

Pharaoh plays his last hand in Exodus 10:14: ""Go worship the LORD. Even your women and children may go with you; *only leave your flocks and herds behind.*" Pharaoh lays down the trump card of seduction. We might leave Egypt. We might even commit to heading all the way to the Promised Land. We will even bring our children along. But will we leave our material assets behind? Pharaoh knows that, if their herds and flocks are left in Egypt, God's people will come back. Moses knows this too. We will sacrifice almost everything for our material treasures: our salvation, our sanctification, and even our children. But we will never be able to go to the Promised Land, if our material possessions don't also take an Exodus with us. If we go all the way to where God wants to take us, 1) we have to leave our Egyptian bondage; 2) we have to commit to going all the way to where Jesus wants to take us; 3) we have to take our children with us; and 4) we have to dedicate our material treasures to the Promised Land. Our wallets have to be owned as much by God as our hearts are his. Nothing gets left behind in Egypt. Nothing is owned by Egypt. It all belongs to God or our faith lacks a seamless integrity.

Today we have a chance to do something very specific in response to this challenge to our integrity. We are offering our Faith Promise Pledges. It's called *Faith* because we are promising more than we can reasonably give unless God provides what we don't have. Unless it is stretching you beyond your reasonable comfort, it isn't faith. We are doing this because billions of people are still languishing in bondage to sin. We are sending missionaries, planting churches, supporting national pastors, and involved in ministries here and abroad to get these people started on the way to the Promised Land. We are doing this because our assets belong to the God's kingdom, not Egyptian pleasures. Like Job, we want to be people of integrity. And we will hold on to that integrity, no matter what it costs as we go on an Exodus that refuses to compromise or take shortcuts on the promises of God.