

## *Unlistened to Lessons • Exodus 6:1–9*

A few days after Charleen and I were married, I began a job as a retail deliveryman for the Dugan Brothers Bakery in Clifton, New Jersey. The first week that I worked for the company I was in training, trained by a man who had worked for the company for twenty years. He had been on the same retail door-to-door bread delivery route for most of that time, and, in one week, he was suppose to teach me everything that he had learned in twenty years.

Following that week of training, we had a holiday weekend. I then had my first day out on my own. It was the day after the fourth of July, and my trainer had ordered supplies based on what he figured the sales would be great after the holiday weekend, so he put in a double order of everything. So I had twice as many pies and twice as many cakes and twice as many buns and twice as many of everything that you would normally have on that day.

I got up extremely early and got to work at 4:30 in the morning. I went through the long list to make sure I had everything that was on the order form. Then I packed everything into my **Divco** truck and by six o'clock was ready to leave.

I got into the truck, stood behind the wheel, started the engine and was ready to go. That's right! I stood behind the wheel. If you know anything about **Divco** trucks, they are trucks that you drive standing up.

These trucks have been mostly used for delivering milk, and they have many idiosyncrasies. For example, they don't have an accelerator pedal. The accelerator is on the knob at the end of the gearshift lever. When you turn the knob clockwise it goes faster and when you turn it counter-clockwise it goes slower. So you drive with your left hand on the wheel and your right hand on the end of the knob.

Then there's the problem of changing gears. You stand on your right foot and there's one pedal that you operate with

your left foot. Half way down is the clutch and the rest of the way down is the brake.

Well, I had the truck all ready to go. I put it in low gear, let the clutch out and drove through the warehouse and out down the ramp out on to the main road. I was still in low gear. And then I went to shift.

Now, when you drive a stick shift car, you intuitively put the clutch all the way to the floor. It's a matter of habit. So I went to shift into second gear and I put the clutch all the way down, which turned out to be the brake. And that thing just went **WHOMP** - and

stopped in about ten feet.

All the pies and all the cakes and all the cupcakes came flying out of the bins into the front of the truck. So there I was, stopped in the middle of the road, with smashed pies and goo and everything all over the windshield, at my feet, falling out the doors. It was a colossal mess.

Even now, as I reflect on that, I remember the sinking feeling in my chest. It was my first day, and I had done hundreds of dollars worth of damage. And I seem to remember that my trainer had mentioned something about that. He said, "You have to be very careful when you shift not to push the pedal all the way to the floor."

But, you know, that was the week after our honeymoon, and I was young and in love and it was beautiful and summery and I hadn't been paying all that much attention to all the things my trainer had to say. But I realized in that catastrophic moment that I had missed out because I had not listened. And it had been one of those unlistened to lessons of life.

Now for very different reasons the ancient people of Israel in Exodus 6 had their own unlistened to lessons in life. Verse 9 says, "Moses reported this to the Israelites, but they did not listen to him because of their discouragement and cruel bondage."

He told them God's lessons. But they did not listen. They did not listen to Moses because of their discouragement and their cruel bondage. They were hurting too much. The depression was too deep. Their problems were too great. Their bondage was too cruel.

I think many of us understand this all too well because there have been times in our lives when we too have been too hurt to listen. It's been in the wake

of a divorce. Or it's been in the midst of struggles with wayward children. Maybe it's been in a time of unemployment when the stress was so great that it seemed

that you were on the verge of a breakdown. Perhaps you were fighting an illness where your life was in jeopardy. And the problems ended up in discouragement and a cruel bondage.

It wasn't that God didn't speak to us at those times. Indeed he did. But frankly the noise of all of the problems and all of the pains and all of the difficulties was so loud that it was impossible to hear that still small voice of God.

How sad that those lessons from Exodus 6 were not listened to by those slaves in Egypt. It's not that I

*...we sometimes pray our 911 prayers.*

would criticize them in any way. For I think their circumstances were far more difficult than any thing I have ever experienced in my life. But I still think it's sad that the lessons were not learned. God must have considered them to be powerfully important lessons because he chose to include them when he gave us his Bible. Not so much for those people long gone, but for us that we learn these unlistened to lessons from the Lord.

The first of them in verse 5 is the lesson that God hears the hurting. God says, "Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant."

Now let's try to understand what happened here. These Israelites were in awful straits. They were down-trodden, abused, taken advantage of and they had done no wrong. If ever there was a classic case of the innocent suffering, this was it. Here was a whole nation of three million people who were unjustly enslaved and had no human way out. And so in pathetic desperation they cried out to God for help. I don't even think they cried out so much for deliverance. They wanted a lightening of the load, a reduction of the pain.

And God heard their cry. He heard their cry and set in motion the remedy for their awful dilemma. But they were suffering so much, the pain was so great, that they could not hear God listening. They did not sense what God was doing to remedy their dilemma.

This is a situation in which I think we sometimes find ourselves. For when we face those awful valleys of life and we groan out in misery to God, pleading with him to make some kind of significant difference in what we are up against, he hears us. But sometimes we don't hear him hearing us. Sometimes we do not sense that he is taking initiative to meet our needs.

I'm told that in our metropolitan area we have the state of the art in our 911 system. It is far more than simply a telephone hookup technique to be in touch with the police. When you dial 911 you are almost instantly in touch with the dispatcher, but also you are being listened to by the various emergency services. The paramedics, the police, the fire fighters - all of them are listening in. And what is particularly amazing is that when you call in, the dispatcher on the other end instantly gets a read-out, not only with your telephone number from which you are calling but also the address where that telephone is.

So someone may call up and be unable to answer the dispatcher's questions or have any type of a rational dialogue, and yet the person at the other end is able to set in motion what is necessary to help the person in distress. The ambulance or the fire truck or the police or whatever is necessary is already on the way without any verbal communication taking place.

What to the person in distress seems like an eternity of waiting is, in reality, an amazingly short period of time from when that call is initiated until help arrives.

I find that we sometimes pray our 911 prayers. We go to God, hurrying into his presence. We are so desperate that we do not take the time to listen, and there is very little dialogue between us and God. All we do is plead our case about what is going on in our health or our job or our marriage or some other circumstance of life. And it seems as if no one is on the other end listening. It seems as if our desperate plea goes unheeded. And it seems as if it is an eternity before any kind of response is forthcoming.

But the truth of it is that God is there. He knows who we are; he knows us by name, address and telephone number. He is keenly aware of every detail of our circumstance. In fact, before we even continue our call he has taken the initiative to meet our need and help is on the way.

So it was for those ancient people of Israel. They were too broken, they were groaning too loud, to hear what God was saying. But he was saying it nonetheless. He was saying, "I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant."

That may seem like a strange expression to you, that God has 'remembered' his covenant. A covenant is a deal. A deal that God has made. In this case he had made a deal with the people who were the descendants of Abraham. It was a deal in which he promised that they would be his chosen people and that he would establish them as a great nation. As a great nation he would give to them an amazing Promised Land that flowed with milk and honey and had the cities already built for their occupancy. Not only that, but through them he would provide the Messiah who would bless all people and become the Savior of the world. God had struck that kind of a deal with these people of Israel.

Now it sounds to us, when we read these words in Exodus 6, as if God had forgotten his deal because he says he 'remembered' it. But we need to understand that these words are translated from a different language and a different culture. We even have to be careful when we read back in with our own language and culture because we can, perhaps, misinterpret what was originally intended.

In the Hebrew language and culture, words that we would call emotion words were often used to communicate action. So we may read in the Bible the statement where God says, "Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated." And we have difficulty understanding how God can love one person and hate another person because we interpret them primarily as emotional

terms. What we fail to understand is that this was the Hebrew way of communicating that God acted positively toward one individual and negatively toward another. He acted in what seems to be a hateful way toward one person and a loving way toward another.

Here we are told that God ‘remembered’ the covenant. In other words, God acted in a way that was consistent with the deal he had struck, the covenant he had made.

You know, God still does the same thing. He does not forget his covenants. He does not forget his deals. But we have what’s called a new covenant, a New Testament, one in which he promises us that he will care for us and love us. He will provide for us and will take our best interests to heart. He will cleanse away our sins. He has prepared for us a promised land that is his eternal home in heaven. When we groan out our problems, he hears, and he acts in accord with the deal, the covenant, that he has made with us.

So lesson number one is that God hears the hurting. I would predict that the basis of the response to that lesson depends upon the immediate circumstance of each of our lives. There are some of us who have gone through a very fine week in one of the best years ever. And when we hear the lesson that God hears the hurting, for us it is basically academic information to be tucked away in our minds for some future use. Others of us are hurting so deeply that we do not hear the lesson that God has spoken. In either case, it becomes an unlistened to lesson.

My prayer is that, whatever our circumstance, the lesson will be learned, because it is a lesson that is applicable to every one of our lives. It is the lesson that God does hear the hurting.

Now that’s the first of three lessons.

The second lesson, in verses 2 and 3, is the interesting lesson that knowing God beats going free. These verses address the issue of life’s greatest good. Here are the people of Israel, groaning under the awful injustices of slavery and misery. And God says to them, “I am the Lord.” And that seems to us who are reading it as something of a non sequitur. It does not follow.

They are saying, “Set us free,” and he says, “I am the Lord.” They’re saying, “We need help!” and he says, “I am the Lord.” They’re saying all of these things and all he does is keep saying, four times over, “I am the Lord.”

But what God is here seeking to communicate is that knowing him is more important than slavery or

freedom, than pleasure or pain, than even life or death. He is speaking to the essential priorities of life.

When I was a boy growing up in metropolitan New York City, I was an avid, AVID, fan of the Brooklyn Dodgers. One of the genuine highlights of my childhood came when I was a seventh grader and the World Series was the Brooklyn Dodgers against the New York Yankees.

My father got tickets to the World Series, and, aside from the delight of getting out of school for the day, I was going to be able to attend my first major league game. I’m not sure that I had ever been happier in all my life than that day when my father and I drove to New York and went to that game. The excitement of it; the smell of it; the enthusiasm of the crowds; the startling realization that the grass was green! I’d only seen baseball on black and white television. I had no idea how green the grass was.

With absolute excitement and enthusiasm I anticipated that the Dodgers would shellac the Yankees that day, once and for all, and get this rivalry over with. You know what happened? Not one Dodger ever even got to first base. They lost pathetically.

I can still remember the hurt, the awful letdown, of going home and not even wanting to talk about it, of not wanting to go back to school and face my friends. What had happened was just terrible.

I sort of pushed it away in my mind until one summer day, as an adult, I got into a conversation with one of these walking encyclopedias of baseball who knows everything about everything. He explained to me that he had grown up in Laramie, Wyoming, which does not have a major league team. Although he was an avid baseball fan, he was never able to go to a World Series game as a youngster.

So I said to him, “The first game I went to was a World Series game. It was a terrible game. I was a Dodger fan, and not one Dodger ever got on base.”

He said, “You were there? You were there when Don Larson of the Yankees pitched the only perfect game ever in World Series history?”

You were there?”

I said, “Yea, we lost. It was terrible.”

You see, I was so caught up in my team’s defeat that I failed to realize that I was a witness to a far greater and more significant history.

Now these Israelites were kind of similar. Here they were, so engrossed in their miseries, and I do not minimize their miseries; they were awful. But they

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were so engrossed with them that they failed to realize the far greater good of knowing God.

He's saying, "I am the Lord." And that is the greatest good of all of life. The greatest good is not to be successful. The greatest good is not to be healthy or happy or famous or free. The greatest good of life is to know God. Knowing God beats being free. Knowing God beats all else. Knowing God is Number One.

Ironically, life's greatest good often comes during times of life's greatest grief. Exodus 6:3 quotes God as saying, "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord I did not make myself known to them."

Listen carefully to what God is saying. He's saying that the great patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - they knew God, but they never had the opportunity to really know God as the ordinary slave in the land of Goshen did during Exodus 6. The great patriarchs could not know God as the slave knew God. You know why? It was because the great patriarch never experienced the grief and the misery of those slaves. Abraham Isaac and Jacob had never known their pain. They never faced those kinds of miseries and problems and agonies and despair. Their awful, awful troubles were also their great, great opportunity to know God as others could never have known him before.

Now I know that is a terribly difficult lesson for us to listen to when our own pain is pressing down upon us. But perhaps we can learn it now so that when we hit the bottom, when we are desperate, when we are frightened and alone and in trouble, maybe then we can remember that life's greatest griefs bring the greatest opportunities to know God. And knowing God is the greatest good of all.

Don't miss the opportunity. Don't miss the opportunity when grief comes your way to know God through it.

There's a third lesson in these verses. Again an unlistened to lesson. It is the lesson that God is more than Almighty. Actually there's a fascinating shift of Hebrew names in Exodus 6:3, one that is too easily missed by us English readers. So let's look again at Exodus 6:3, but let me throw in a few Hebrew words as it was originally written. God said, "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as El Shaddai. But by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them."

El Shaddai is sort of a hyphenated word. "El" is the basic Hebrew word for God. It's a word that is used to refer to the God of heaven, but it's also a word that is used to refer to false gods as well. Shaddai means "the mountain" or "the one of the mountain". So very, very literally El Shaddai as used here in Exo-

dus 6:3 means "God, the mountain one".

But that's not exactly the way they understood it. The Hebrews understood that to mean "God, the Almighty One", or "God, the Omnipotent One". God, the One who has the power to do anything and everything; God who is the creator of the world and the universe; God who can perform amazing miracles; God who can do absolutely anything that he chooses to do.

In other words, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob knew God as the powerful God who could do absolutely anything. That is marvelous and great without a doubt, but that is not the best.

And yet this is the way many of us have come to know God. We come to him with a certain amount of awe and are greatly impressed with his power. We readily acknowledge that he can do whatever he pleases. If he wants to bring the dead to life, then he can do it. If he wants to strike dead those who are alive, he can also do that. He is all-powerful.

Therefore, when we in our dilemmas go to God and plead our cause, when we like the Israelites have our groaning, we lay them out before God with no doubt at all that God - El Shaddai - can do anything. But we have our doubts that he will. So we address God saying, "Yes, you can; but no, you won't."

This is how the people of Israel knew God, as El Shaddai. But it didn't seem to make much difference in the problems of their everyday lives.

And so we read here in verse 3 that El Shaddai now reveals himself by a new name and the new name is Yahweh. Yahweh, or as sometimes is mistakenly pronounced, Jehovah, means "I am who I am", or "I will be who I will be". It was the covenant name of God. God says four times in eight verses here, "I am the LORD." When the Bible has all capitals for Lord – LORD - that means that the Hebrew word there is Yahweh or Jehovah. So four times - in verses 2, 6, 7 and 8 - he says, "I am Yahweh."

This may seem strange because here they're laying out their problems and this is the way he responds. They say, "We are slaves." And he says, "I am Yahweh." They say, "We're in trouble." And he says, "I am the Lord." They say, "We are miserable," and he says, "I am the LORD." They say, "How are we going to get out of here, and what's going to happen?" And he says, "I am the Lord."

That is not usually the answer we are looking for in our distresses of life. Usually we are looking for God to say, "Okay, this is the route out." Or, "This is the path to take." Or, "This is the intervention that I will bring."

But understand that God loves us too much to give to us a second best answer. The best answer to the

dilemmas of life is the answer, "I am the LORD." We give to him our problems and he gives to us himself. So do not slight and do not reject his answer or his offer. Yahweh God is not only the God who says, "I can", but he is the God who says, "I am," and, when we read on here, he is the God who says, "I will." In fact, eight times in these eight verses he says, "I will."

Look at it. In verse one, "I will do to Pharaoh...." In verse six, "I will bring you out.... I will free you.... I will redeem you...." In verse seven, "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God." In verse eight, "I will bring you to the land.... I will give it to you as a possession."

Bob Allen is a long time friend of mine. When I first knew him he was working for Ball Brothers in a space program making satellites for NASA. One day he took me to the lab where he worked as a pert engineer. His responsibility was to put together a program to move from contract dates to launch date for the satellite.

He had enormous charts that would bring together tens of thousands of little tiny details – vendors, supplies, plans, diagrams, manufacturing and testing. These charts brought together all of these details to a specified date at the other end. Decided five years in advance. And on that date, they would turn the satellite over to the United States government for launch.

Here in Exodus 6 is God's pert chart for the nation of Israel. And he's saying to them that he has every detail figured out. He's got it all planned. He knows what needs to be done, and he'll do it. He'll take care of Pharaoh, that's one part of this whole thing. He'll take care of Israel, that's another part. They need to be brought out, he'll bring them out. They need to be brought in, he'll bring them in. Everything that they need, he brings all of these pieces together. And at the other end, he has his specified date when everything will culminate exactly as he promises.

He's more than El Shaddai. He's more than Almighty God. He is Yahweh. He is the God who cares. He is the God of a covenant. He is the God who plans and acts and accomplishes. He is the God who says to us, in the midst of our dilemmas, "I am the Lord, and I will do what needs to be done."

And so these, the beloved people of Israel, his beloved suffering people, had these life-changing lessons. Number one: God hears the hurting. Number two: knowing God beats going free. Number three: God is more than Almighty.

But verse 9 says, "they did not listen to him because of their discouragement and cruel bondage."

Let me conclude with a word to those who are discouraged and in cruel bondage. I ask you to listen. Not to me, but to God. Listen and learn that God has not forsaken you; he has not forgotten you. More than anything else, he wants you to know him because that's best of all. That's better than any dream that you could ever imagine.

Listen and learn that he is more than Almighty God; he is Yahweh God who remembers and acts upon his covenants. He says in our times of distress, "I am," and, "I will." He is the God who has chosen to reveal himself to you as El Shaddai Almighty. But, more than that, he has chosen to reveal himself as Yahweh, the God of love and care, of covenant and planning.

And, more than that, he has revealed himself to you by yet another name that the Bible says is above every name, and that is the name of Jesus. Jesus, God's only Son, who came and died for us in our misery and distress and slavery. Jesus, whom to know is life eternal.

So listen. Listen through the pain of discouragement and cruel bondage. Listen and say yes to El Shaddai, to Yahweh, to Jesus.

Our Father, how much we love you. And yet, how much we sometimes hurt, and how great are our pains and our miseries. Too often we find ourselves discouraged and in cruel bondage.

Lord, I pray that we will listen to the otherwise unlistened to lessons of life. May we know you as the God who hears and the God who cares. May we know you as the God who is more than Almighty. May we know you as the God who has given to us himself in Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

*The greatest good of life is to know God.*

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