

“Exodus”

Fall Series 1

Lesson 4

“Exodus 5:1-7:7”

Objective: To examine the account of the exodus from Egypt and to learn as much as we can about the nature of God, His mercy and what He desires for His creation. We will seek to do this by examining the historical background of the Exodus account, the interpretive history of Exodus amongst both Jewish and Christian scholars, where helpful. We will seek to understand the message of Exodus for us as Christians living in the 21st century American context.

Materials: The Bible, Ancient translations, Commentaries, both ancient and modern, Books, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet, and other resources as may be appropriate.

Procedures

1. To explore the message God of hope that the original audience will have understood from this text.
2. To understand how this text has inspired, challenged, and educated people down through the centuries guiding them not only in their personal lives, but the destinies of governments and nations.
3. We will seek to find out how these beliefs have played a role in the history of Christianity and how they continue to impact our existence and service to Jesus Christ today.
4. We will provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of these truths and their application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now. This sheet can be used as a discussion guide for small group discussion. We have several groups using this effectively.

Moses, with the support of his brother Aaron fulfills the commission that he had received from *Yahweh*, they confront Pharaoh, demand that he let Israel go to celebrate a festival in the wilderness, just as commanded by *Yahweh*. The reaction received from Pharaoh is perhaps the most dreaded that any leader could ever receive, things become worse for the people rather than better. This reaction is especially bad for a new leader that is untested and inexperienced as Moses was. The focus of Pharaoh's refusal is not upon Moses and Aaron, but upon *Yahweh*, whom he says he does not "know" (יָדָא - *yada*). Here once again we have this Hebrew word "*yada*" (know) that we have previously seen. Under Egyptian understandings, Pharaoh himself was considered divine and his knowledge was therefore considered to be virtually unlimited, since he was a "god."

For Pharaoh to express that he does not know *Yahweh*, such a statement carries the meaning that he considers himself superior to *Yahweh* and dismissive of Him.¹ The theme of not "knowing" *Yahweh*, which is introduced here for the first time will be picked up later on in the text and developed in the plague

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in the JPS Torah Commentary series (Philadelphia PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 27.

narrative. Later on there will be a flair and seemingly a relishing of this theme; as Pharaoh will certainly come to “know” *Yahweh* and His power.² In Targum *Pseudo-Jonathan* (an early Aramaic translation of Exodus) the text has this response: ‘But Pharaoh said: “*The name of the Lord has not been revealed to me that I should listen to his word and let Israel go. I have not found the name of the Lord written in the Book of the Angels. I do not fear him, and moreover I will not let Israel go.*”³

Since Pharaoh does not acknowledge *Yahweh’s* authority he considers there to be no obligation to abide by His demand to let the people of Israel go. At 5:3 then, Moses and Aaron reiterate the request, this time with the added information that the inability for the Israelites to go and fulfill this obligation will result in judgement being brought against the Israelites. This then would mean that Pharaoh’s workforce (the Hebrew slaves) would be killed which is the meaning of “pestilence” or “sword.” There may even be a sense that there is a very veiled threat that some of the judgment falling on the Israelites may affect the Egyptians as

² Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, in the Old Testament Library series (Philadelphia PA: The Westminster Press, 1974), p. 105.

³ Michael Maher, trans., *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, in The Aramaic Bible series, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1994), p. 173.

pestilence might not stop with ethnic groupings. In verses 4 and 5 of this chapter, Pharaoh treats the request as an attempt to shirk on their work; an attempt at being lazy.⁴

At 5:5 Pharaoh adds the additional information that the people are more numerous than the people of the “land.” Pharaoh easily wrestles the initiative away from Moses and makes him appear to be amazingly inept.⁵ In 5:6-9 the nature of Pharaoh, the tyrant, becomes more apparent as he exerts his authority as if there is no one, or nothing, that he must answer to as king. He acts in alignment with his belief and the belief of many other people. He sees no reason to demonstrate any mercy, or deference at all since he sits confident in the belief of his authority which is supported by those who follow his orders and treat him as if he is a “god.” The stage is being set for a battle between *Yahweh* and the gods of Egypt, one of which is Pharaoh himself. Surely it is the case with mankind that every tyrant shares some of the serum from which Pharaoh drinks deeply. That serum inoculates the heart and the soul with the belief that they truly control their own destiny and that they are not answerable for their decisions and

⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in the JPS Torah Commentary series, p. 28.

⁵ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 106.

their life. Maybe it is not simply tyrants and despots who drink of this serum, but also a great many people, who believe they are in control of their own destinies.

The outcome of this first encounter between Moses and Pharaoh appears to fall starkly in favor of Pharaoh. The people of Israel are now left in a worse state than before, their burden is increased and worse yet, Pharaoh appears to be gloating over the whole situation. As in any good drama the tension is raised and there is a sense of anticipation in the air. What will happen next? In 5:10-14 the task before the people is reiterated as is the order that their daily quota of bricks cannot diminish from before; when they were supplied with straw to make bricks. One thing that is perhaps important in the detail here is that the usage of straw in the making of bricks reflects a knowledge of ancient Egyptian building practice.⁶ The plan of Pharaoh is to sow discontent between Moses and the Israelites, to destroy his position of leadership among the people by making him unpopular.

Notice (5:15-19) that it is the Israelite “supervisors,” or “foreman,” that coming to complain to Pharaoh asking why do you

⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 106.

treat your “slaves” (עֲבָדֶיךָ) like this? They accuse Pharaoh of “sinning” (חָטָא), or being “unjust” to his own people. This sets up a contrast between how God treats His people and the so-called god Pharaoh treats them. This is also the point at which the supervisors realize that they are in trouble as their daily quota for bricks must not drop, even with having to gather their own straw to make bricks. At 5:20, the supervisors then come upon Moses and Aaron, who were waiting to meet them. Needless to say they were not happy with the outcome of the first meeting between Pharaoh and Moses. Things are now worse for the people rather than better. The worst fears of Moses in his new role of leadership have now come true. He has made things worse rather than better for his people.

Moses then does what all good leaders should do and turns to God, to *Yahweh*, and seeks help, he however goes further than most and accuses God, asking why He has done “evil” (רָעָה) “to this people?” Notice the similarity between this accusation and the accusation that the supervisors brought to Pharaoh. Moses wants to know why God even sent him? He questions the meaning of his whole mission, and accuses *Yahweh* of doing nothing to

deliver the people. Things are now worse rather than better for the people. The response of *Yahweh* is simple, direct, and to the point (6:1). “Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh.” The contest is now set between *Yahweh* and Pharaoh and though at this moment it appears that all the power and advantage belong to Pharaoh this will soon change. God says that He will do something to Pharaoh so devastating that he will actually drive the people of Israel out of Egypt.

Prior to 6:2, we have evidence of pervasive demoralization on the part of the Israelites and of Moses. In order to counteract this feeling of dejection and demoralization God once again affirms that He is *Yahweh* (יהוה), this is more than merely a name. Names are normally nouns, this one is a verb, indicating that it is through His actions that *Yahweh* will be defined and known. He (6:3) appeared to the patriarchs as *El Shaddai* (אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי), which is a reference to Genesis 17:1-8 and 35:11-12. *Yahweh* is not simply revealing His name, He is revealing His essential character. At Ezekiel 20:5⁷ God indicates that on the day He chose Israel and

⁷ Ezekiel 20:5 and say to them: Thus says the Lord GOD: On the day when I chose Israel, I swore to the offspring of the house of Jacob—making myself known to them in the land of Egypt—I swore to them, saying, I am the LORD your God. NRSV.



swore a solemn oath to them He was committing Himself to Israel. Here in Exodus, God confirms the validity of the promise that He made with the Patriarchs and it is on this basis that He will now redeem Israel from slavery. God now reveals His name to Moses as One who remembers His covenant and Who will now move to complete the promises made long ago to the patriarchs (6:4-5).⁸

Moses (6:6-8) is then told to deliver a message to the Israelites. A message that reveals to them that He is *Yahweh* a God of action who will free them from the burdens placed upon them by the Egyptians and to free them from their slavery. He will “redeem” (כָּפַר) them. This word carries with it the idea that He will act as their kinsman. It is more than just a stranger paying for their redemption it is a close relative acting on behalf of a family member. *Yahweh* is declaring that Israel is His family. The “kinsman redeemer” was the near relative who had primary responsibility for protecting, or regaining persons and property for the extended family. In time, the noun form of this word would come to have messianic associations referring to God’s ultimate act of redemption of Israel from exile.⁹

⁸ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, pp. 114-115.

⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in the JPS Torah Commentary series, p. 32.

Moses told the people what *Yahweh* had revealed to him, but they would not listen. The text indicates that they would not listen because of their “broken spirit” (מִקְצָר רוּחַ) and the Hebrew (Masoretic) text has here, in addition, that it was because of their “hard slavery.” It is interesting that in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, here the text has that they would not listen because “their spirits were crushed, and because of the terrible *idolatry they practiced*.¹⁰ This could be seen as perhaps a premonition of what is to come when Israel is at the foot of Mount Sinai and so easily seems to fall into idolatry. So often we forget how long Israel had resided in Egypt, more than four hundred years. It is hard to imagine how four hundred years of culture affects a people. It is also to be remembered that this four hundred years is before the giving of the Law with all of its safeguards against idolatry and assimilation. It would truly be amazing if the people were not participants in any of the idolatry of their neighbors, the Egyptians.

In 6:10-14 we once again have *Yahweh* speaking to Moses and telling him to go and tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, but once again we have Moses objecting to this. Even his own people

¹⁰ Michael Maher, trans., *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, vol. 2, p. 176



have not listened to him, what chance then is there that Pharaoh would possibly listen. He once again references that he is a “poor speaker;” literally it says here that Moses has “uncircumcised lips.” The idea is that the speech is obstructed by a “foreskin” that blocks the proper functioning. God then ignores (6:13) the objections of Moses and orders he and his brother to resume their mission, charging them to free the Israelites from Egypt.¹¹ What are some of the things that you feel God unreasonably challenges you to do in obedience to Him?

At 6:14-26, there is this seemingly sudden break from the narrative into a genealogy. This is a literary device that is intended to definitely mark off this first stage in the process of liberation. This genealogy will clearly point out a link between Exodus and the patriarchal period. It is intended to interject a positive note here into an otherwise despondent mood. This genealogy is intended to highlight the Levites. Notice that only the lifespans of the Levites are given and they are traced to five generations as opposed to the single generation given for the Reubenites and Simeonites. The Levites are here singled out from

¹¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in the JPS Torah Commentary series, p. 33.

the other tribes and Aaron is singled out from amongst the Levites. These features undoubtedly anticipate later developments for the Levites and for Aaron who will become High Priest. Aaron is further singled out in that his brother-in-law Nahshon, and also presumably his father-in-law, was a chieftain of the tribe of Judah and an ancestor of King David.¹²

After the genealogy (6:26) *Yahweh* once again orders “Aaron and Moses” (notice the reversal in order of the names) to “Bring the Israelites out of the land of Egypt....” This section appears to then end indicating that this is the “same Moses and Aaron” (once again reversing the names to the previous order with Moses being first). Despite this, at 6:28-30 we appear to have a summary of *Yahweh’s* orders to Moses and then this time an emphasis on the fact that Moses complains that he is a poor speaker and why should Pharaoh listen to him.

The response then comes in 7:1 with *Yahweh* once again telling Moses that He has made him like “god” (אֱלֹהִים - *Elohim*) and Aaron his prophet (his mouthpiece). Pharaoh claimed to be a god and Moses here is now told by *Yahweh* that he will fill the role

¹² Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in the JPS Torah Commentary series, pp. 33-34.



of god in the negotiations with Pharaoh. In so doing he will demonstrate the hollowness of the claim made by Pharaoh that he is a “god.” This will be done by Moses using his divinely endowed power and authority to expose the fact that this claim of Pharaoh is not correct when it comes in comparison to the one who is truly the unique creator God of the universe.¹³

When we get to 7:3, we arrive at one of the passages of Scripture that challenges our view of God in unique ways. We are told by *Yahweh* in advance that He would harden Pharaoh’s heart. This section opens up for us one of the classic philosophical conundrums. If Pharaoh does not have free will and God is controlling his actions then how can he be guilty and deserve punishment? “By what right, or justice could God punish the wicked, or reward the righteous?”¹⁴ In the discussion between God and Abraham over the fate of Sodom Abraham makes this statement: **“²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the**

¹³ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in the JPS Torah Commentary series, p. 36.

¹⁴ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation - Exodus: the Book of Redemption* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books and The Orthodox Union, 2010), pp. 47-48.

earth do what is just?”¹⁵ God appears to accept the truth of this statement and the negotiations over the city of Sodom continue with Abraham.

The general outline of an answer to our conundrum can be construed from noting the precise wording of the Biblical narrative itself. After each of the first five plagues, Exodus tells us that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (וַיִּתְזַק לֵב פַּרְעֹה). We find this at (7:13, 22; 8:15; 9:7). It is only from the sixth plague onwards that the hardening of the heart of Pharaoh is attributed to *Yahweh* (8:28; 9:12; 10:1; 20; 27; 11:10; 14:8). Plague 6 was the boils (9:12), Plague 7 the hail (10:1), Plague 8 the locusts (10:20), Plague 9 the darkness (10:26), and Plague 10 the death of the firstborn (11:21).¹⁶ Rashi understands that the “hardening of the heart of Pharaoh” by *Yahweh* in the last five plagues is a form of punishment for the first five times that he hardened his own heart.¹⁷ Maimonides gives the interpretation of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart as meaning that “repentance was withheld from

¹⁵ Genesis 18:25 - NRSV.

¹⁶ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation - Exodus: the Book of Redemption*, p. 48.

¹⁷ Rashi, *Commentary to Exodus*, 7:3.

him, and the liberty to turn from his wickedness was not accorded him.”¹⁸

Rav Assi said, “The inclination to do evil to begin with is like a spider’s thread and in the end like cart ropes.”¹⁹ Raba said, “In the beginning one calls it (the evil impulse) a passer-by, then a guest and finally a master (of the household).”²⁰ “Evil has two faces. The first - turned to the outside world - is what it does to its victim. The second - turned within - is what it does to its perpetrator. Evil traps the evildoer in its mesh. Slowly but surely he, or she loses freedom and becomes not evil’s master, but its slave.”²¹ In the narrative, the once mighty and confident Pharaoh will become a pitiful figure that almost elicits a sense of pity for him from the readers. He has certainly bitten off more than he can chew in challenging the power and authority of *Yahweh*.

Pharaoh has in fact become a tragic figure much like Lady Macbeth, or like Captain Ahab in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. He is trapped in an obsession, which in the beginning perhaps had

¹⁸ Maimonides, *Misneh Torah*, Hilkhoh Teshuva 6:3.

¹⁹ *Sukkah* 52A.

²⁰ *Sukkah* 52B.

²¹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation - Exodus: the Book of Redemption*, p. 49.



some sense of being rational, right or wrong, but has now taken hold of him and will bring not only him, but all those around him to ruin. He will get to the point, with the hardness of his heart, where he no longer hears any reason. His vision is clouded and perhaps this even helps us to understand modern tyrants such as Hitler and Stalin. In their exercise of freewill they ultimately lose that gift and are crushed as a result of the consequences of their earlier decisions. “The belief that freedom is an all-or-nothing phenomenon - that we have it either all the time or none of the time - blinds us to the fact that there are degrees of freedom. It can be won and lost, and its loss is gradual.”²²

“Pharaoh is everyman writ large. The ruler of the ancient world’s greatest empire, he ruled everyone except himself. It was not the Hebrews but he who was the real slave: to his obstinate insistence that he, not God, ruled history.”²³ Ben Zoma says, “Who is strong? He who overcomes his desire, ...”²⁴ Victor Frankl wrote:

²² Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation - Exodus: the Book of Redemption*, p. 50.

²³ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation - Exodus: the Book of Redemption*, p. 50.

²⁴ *Mishnah, Avot 4:2*. Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 681.

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."²⁵

We today so often believe that we are in control of so much of what happens to us in this world. This is an illusion, the reality is that we are in control of little other than of our own attitudes, responses, and beliefs. We cannot control the weather, even our life can be taken from us in a moment. We can go to sleep and not wake up, or be awakened in the middle of the night with a phone call telling us of the tragic death of a loved one, or friend. We are not controllers of our own destiny, but God did give us the great gift of freewill, which does allow us to choose some things over

²⁵ Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 75.



other things. One of the most important of these is that we can choose to trust in God, or we can choose to trust in self. We are responsible for our choices as is clear from not only the account here but also from so many other parts of the Bible.

At 7:4, *Yahweh* makes it clear what is about to occur “when” Pharaoh does not listen. He will lay His hand upon Egypt and He will bring the people out of the land “by great acts of judgment.” The Egyptians are about to be taught a hard lesson, one that is even harder for someone who has been told since birth that he is a god. The Egyptians are about to find out what it really means to meet God (7:5). So then Moses and Aaron do what *Yahweh* commanded (7:6) and then this section ends by giving us the age of Moses and Aaron (7:7), when they spoke to Pharaoh. Moses begins his career leading Israel at an age that was taken in Biblical times to be the completion of unusual longevity.²⁶

This section of Exodus sets the stage for the choices that are to come. *Yahweh* is about to reveal His mighty arm and bring the greatest superpower of the ancient world to its knees. The Egyptians will learn to hear His name and tremble. For Israel they

²⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, in the JPS Torah Commentary series, p. 37. Psalm 90:10 **The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.** NRSV.

will become participants in one of the greatest intrusions of *Yahweh* into the world of men ever seen. He will intervene and bring His people out of slavery and into freedom. They will stumble and fall, but God will stay with them guiding and pleading with them to trust Him and to follow Him. So much of their culture, their reasoning, and their previous experiences, will be shown to be unhelpful and false. They will be challenged to learn, to listen to God, and to follow His voice, trusting Him above all else.

Synopsis

In this section, Moses and Aaron fulfill their commission from Yahweh and confront Pharaoh. The first encounter turns out to be disastrous for Moses as he makes things worse for the people and appears to be a failure not only to Pharaoh, but to his own people. He wants to quit. In this first encounter the stage is set for the conflict that is about to ensue between Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt on one side and Moses and *Yahweh* on the other. At this initial stage Pharaoh seems to almost gloat at how he handled this amateur leader (Moses) and he seeks every opportunity to crush him not only in front of the Egyptians, but also in front of his own people.

Moses does try to withdraw and even confronts God for doing evil to the Israelites. In this narrative the tension continues to be cranked up higher and higher. God seeks to reassure Moses by reiterating His name and highlighting His connection with the patriarchs through the promises. The name, *Yahweh* expresses that He is to be noted for His action: Even His name is a verb. *Yahweh* will act as kinsman redeemer for Israel, which is a role of

great responsibility and closeness. In this, *Yahweh* indicates a close familial relationship with Israel.

The people of Israel are broken in “spirit” and likely too their relationship with *Yahweh* has suffered much during there four hundred years of living in Egypt and being exposed to its culture and its idolatry. We have a highlighting of the genealogy of Levi and of Aaron, which once again makes a connection with the patriarchs and sets the stage for what will come later.

There is a great challenge in this section with *Yahweh* saying that He will harden the heart of Pharaoh, but a careful reading of the text seems to provide a satisfactory solution to this difficulty. Pharaoh hardens his own hear during the first five plagues, it is only after this that *Yahweh* hardens Pharaoh’s heart. This may be an act of punishment, or simply a consequence of his arrogance and obstinance. Pharaoh will become obsessed with his own importance and with the conflict losing all semblance of reason as a tyrant who is backed into a corner by his previous decisions. We all can tend to make similar choices in our own lives.

Questions

1. When was there a time in your own life when you were challenged to lead for the first time? How did you feel?
2. What does it mean for you “to know” another person?
3. Why do we trust some leaders and not others?
4. Who do you listen to for advice about how you live your life? Why?
5. Where do you look for guidance in your everyday life decisions? Why there?
6. Why do you think most people make the life decisions that they make?
7. What are some ways that you acknowledge the authority of God in your own life?
8. On what basis do you choose the politicians that you support? Why?
9. When is a time in your life when you have felt things were beyond your control? What did you do?
10. Why do you think human beings crave the approval of other people so much?
11. What do you think about the accusation that Moses makes accusing *Yahweh* of having done “evil” to the people (5:22)? Have you ever felt that way?
12. What do you think it means for God to define Himself as a God of action?
13. What do you think it means for God to emphasize that He remembers His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?
14. What are some promises that you have made to others that you strive to keep?

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15. What are some things that cause your “spirit” to be broken? How do you seek to remedy that situation?
 16. What are some ways that our American culture tempts us set aside the things that God says are important?
 17. By what criterion do you judge whether a person is a good speaker, or a poor speaker? Why?
 18. What are some things that you believe that God has empowered you to do?
 19. How would you define “justice?” Why?
 20. What are some ways that you strive to keep your heart from becoming hard?
 21. How would you define evil?
 22. What are some things that tend to cloud people’s vision of what is truly important?
 23. What are some ways that you seek to insure that you have the “attitude of Christ?”

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know that God remembers and keeps His promises. It is important for us to understand the difference being human beings and what it means to be God. Sometimes we forget our place and we think we know more about how we should live our life and set priorities than God does. It is important to recognize that “freedom” to make choices is not only a gift it brings with it great responsibility. What are some of the ways that you seek to understand the will of God more fully for your life?

Where is God in these words?

God is in the words of this section of Exodus helping His people. He seeks freedom and justice for them. He has blessed them by helping them to multiply greatly even though they probably failed to realize that this was happening because of God’s blessing. God is in the words of this section setting up things so that people would understand more fully what it truly means for *Yahweh* to say that He is God. Where do you find the presence of God most real to you?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

Many times Exodus has been seen more as a set of stories that we tell children. We have often failed to realize how the message of this book is central to the message of redemption. God freed Israel from slavery to the most powerful nation of that day. Despite that fact many fail to recognize this story of redemption is actually the story of the Gospel. God seeks to be the kinsman redeemer for His people. He seeks to free them from slavery to sin, guilt, addiction and delusions. If we truly trust God it will change our priorities, our focus, and how we treat other people in our lives. What are some ways that your understanding of God changes you?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

Many times as we look at Scripture we can learn the facts, but fail to put into practice what we learn as if it is an additional piece of information for us simply to store. The word of God calls us to action. It calls us to change who we are and what we do because we understand the world differently. Israel was called to leave what they knew and understood; as unpleasant as it was, and to walk into the unknown. So often the unknown is the most frightening thing to us. Our imaginations construct for us all sorts of things to be afraid of and to avoid. In what ways do you allow the word of God to help you overcome your fears of the unknown as you pursue His will for your life?