

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor

[Swift Creek Baptist Church.com](http://SwiftCreekBaptistChurch.com), 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834

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Exodus 2:23-3:15 (read 2:23-2:11) “Moses and the Burning Bush”

Intro. From the moment you are born you find out that you cannot live in this old world without suffering. Your first breath was probably started with a slap on your bottom. From infancy we experience hunger and discomfort. As children we begin to experience the pain of rejection, and being ridiculed. You probably have been mistreated in your life by a family member, a boss, or even a so-called friend. In an audience this size, it is likely that some of you are going through suffering or hardship right now.

The young nation of Israel certainly knew hardship, oppression, and suffering. According to vv.23-24, the cruel oppression of the Israelites in Egypt continued without interruption. We know that Moses was 80 years old at this time (7:7), and the oppression started before he was born. So Israel had endured oppressive bondage for over 80 years by the time we get to chapter 3. When would it ever end? No doubt they hoped that the death of one Pharaoh, and the rise of another, would end their suffering. But v.23 implies that they were disappointed that the change of kings did not mean a change in their suffering, and they cried out to God.

God seemed to be silent & indifferent to their suffering, but our text reveals that God was waiting on the right time to intervene on their behalf. We need to remember that in our own lives. Once again, Moses enters the picture. I want to give a little background to the story of our text. Moses grew up in the palace of Pharaoh. He had the best the Egypt had to offer. But he grew concerned about the suffering of His own people, the nation of Israel. One day he saw an Egyptian taskmaster treat an Israelite with cruelty, so he intervened, and in the process killed the Egyptian. As a result, Moses had to flee for his life, and ended up spending 40 years in the desert area of Midian. It was a very sharp descent from Pharaoh’s palace to the wilderness. It’s possible that Moses could have inherited the throne. Instead, he got a job tending the sheep of Jethro,<sup>1</sup> who became his father-in-law. He was doing the very job he was taught to despise (Gen. 43:32). Yet that was just the kind of preparation he needed for leading a nation of Israel, God’s special flock (Ps. 100:3). God doesn’t lay hands on His servants suddenly but takes time to equip them for their work. During those many days and nights in the field, he had plenty of time to meditate upon the things of God and pray for his people who were suffering in Egypt. God often uses solitude to prepare His servants (John the Baptist, Paul in Arabia, etc.). This also prepared Moses for living almost 40 years in the desert. So we see that Israel was suffering, and God was beginning to work to deliver them from their suffering by the hand of Moses.

Now this morning I want to share with you what you should do when *you* go through times of suffering. What we read here in Exodus provides some good principles for us to follow. You can have deliverance from your suffering, and you can experience the victorious Christian life. So what should you do when you suffer? First of all:

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<sup>1</sup> Learned men are not agreed on the signification of the word *chothen*, usually translated father-in-law, and which in Gen 19:14 could be translated “son-in-law.” It seems to be a general term for a relative by marriage, and the context must determine its precise meaning. It is very possible that Reuel was now dead, it being forty years since Moses came to Midian; that Jethro was his son, and had succeeded him in his office of prince and priest of Midian (Clarke).

## I. CONSIDER GOD'S PURPOSE FOR YOUR SUFFERING

I'm sure many in Israel were wondering in the midst of their suffering, "Why, God, are you allowing this to happen to us?" Well, bad things are going to happen to us simply because we live in a fallen, sinful world. But the question remains, "Why does an all-powerful God *allow* bad things to happen to us?" I can assure you that God has a purpose in allowing you to suffer. Two of His purposes are found in our text:

A. God Wants to Cleanse Us by Our Suffering – In the time of Israel's suffering, notice how God revealed Himself to Moses. We read in v.1 that Moses "led the flock to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God." This means that Moses led the flock through the desert to the other side, and came to Mt. Horeb,<sup>2</sup> which may be the designation of a range of mountains, with Mt. Sinai being one particular mountain in that range (cf. 24:13, 16). Then we read in v.2, "And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire...." When Moses saw the burning bush, his curiosity caused him to draw near. What a strange sight! As we compare v.4, I believe the Angel of the LORD is God Himself. The word "angel" simply means "messenger," & God certainly had a message for Moses & His people. This may have been a preincarnate manifestation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Notice that God "appeared to him in a flame of fire." Fire is distinctly a divine symbol. For example, God accompanied the Israelites in all their journeys through the wilderness as a pillar of fire by night. God is light, and fire gives off light. Fire is also full of energy, and God is even more powerful than fire. But fire is also a figurative representation of the holy wrath of God against sin. It is in fire that the Lord comes to judgment (Dan. 7:9-11; 2 Thess. 1:8). Heb. 10:27 warns of God's "fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries." Rev. 19:11-12 says that Jesus has eyes as a flame of fire, and "in righteousness He judges and makes war." Therefore, Heb. 12:28-29 says that we should, "serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire."

So why did God appear in a flame of fire, a symbol of divine judgment? Well, apparently the children of Israel had lost much of their ancestral faith, and had in many instances fallen into the idolatrous practices of the Egyptians. In the flame of the burning bush the Lord manifested Himself as the jealous God, who cannot tolerate the worship of other gods (34:14), and whose anger burns against idolaters, to destroy them (Deut. 6:15). That being the case, one purpose of their suffering was chastisement. Accordingly, while the fire represented God and His burning anger against sin, the thorn-bush represented the people of Israel as they were burning in the fire of affliction, the iron furnace of Egypt. In fact, Deut. 4:20 says, "But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be His people...." Although the affliction of Israel in Egypt proceeded from Pharaoh, yet was it also a fire which the Lord had kindled to purify His people and prepare them to be a holy nation, who would serve Him, and Him alone. It wasn't pleasant to go through, but God was using their suffering to turn them away from the sin of idolatry, and to cause them to turn instead to Him.

Some of you remember the rescue of eighteen-month-old Jessica McClure from a well shaft in Midland, Texas. Left alone for a few minutes in her aunt's backyard on October 14, 1987, the little girl had playfully dangled her feet over an innocent appearing, eight-inch opening

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<sup>2</sup> Horeb is called the Mount of God by anticipation, with reference to the consecration which it subsequently received through the revelation of God upon its summit (K & D, 437).

in the ground. When she tried to stand up, she fell into the darkness. With one leg up and the other down, Jessica was wedged in the narrow shaft above the water, but some twenty-two feet below the ground. Rescuers drilled a twenty-nine-foot vertical shaft parallel to the well and then bored a five-foot-long horizontal tunnel through solid rock to reach her. It took far more time than any had anticipated—fifty-eight hours. Medical personnel grew increasingly alarmed and warned that dehydration and shock were becoming greater dangers than the entrapment itself. Finally rescuers reached Jessica, but they could not pull her out. The way her body was wedged in the shaft foiled all their efforts. The health technicians conferred, checked the little girl's vital signs one more time, and then gave these awful orders: "Pull hard! She does not have more time. You may have to break her to save her."

When the rescuers pulled the last time Jessica came free without additional injury. But when I heard the instructions of the medical technicians to the rescuers I could not help but relate them to what the Bible teaches. God so much desires the salvation of His children that He will even allow them to experience hurt that will convince them of their need of him. As cruel as this providence may seem, it actually expresses a great love because God, who knows that no one's hours on this earth are unlimited, is willing to break us to save us.<sup>3</sup>

Whenever you go through the fire of affliction, you should at least consider the possibility that God is using that affliction to turn you away from sin, and lead you to put your trust in Jesus as your Savior. Or if you are already a Christian, He may use suffering to purge some unconfessed, unforsaken sin from your life. That's certainly not always the case. As I said in a previous message, sometimes we go through storms of correction. But other times we are simply going through a storm of perfection.

So God may use suffering to cleanse us from sin. Another purpose for suffering that we see from our text is this:

B. God Wants to Turn Our Hearts Toward Him - Afflictions are often the means of leading us to turn to God and to pray. As we see from v.23, when the Israelites were sorely oppressed, they began to pray. If the cry of oppression had not been among them, probably the cry for mercy would not have been heard. David said in Psa. 119:67, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word." God's used suffering in David's life to bring him back to Him.

C.S. Lewis said that God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our work, and shouts to us in our pain [Illus.#C-628]. God can indeed use suffering to get through to us.

If you are going through a time of trouble, God is probably allowing that trouble that you may look to Him. Now as you look to God in your suffering, you should take the next step in experiencing victory over suffering. You should not only consider God's purpose in your suffering, but you should also:

## II. CALL UPON GOD IN PRAYER

Now v.23 does not specifically say that they cried out to God. It only says that God heard their cry. However, Dt. 26:7 specifically says, "Then we cried out to the LORD God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and looked on our affliction and our labor and our oppression." So by way of example, Scripture admonishes us to call upon God in prayer when

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<sup>3</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 178-179.

we face trouble. In fact, in Psa. 50:15 God specifically says, “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.”

God reveals in our text why you should call upon Him in prayer: He cares for you. 1 Pet. 5:7 says, “casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.” This truth is confirmed in our text. Notice in v.24, “So God heard their groaning....” He did not turn a deaf ear to their prayer. God is not indifferent to our sufferings. Then v.25 says, “And God looked upon the children of Israel....” God looked upon His suffering people with love and pity. He who sees the sparrow fall surely sees and takes note of your suffering. Then v.25 goes on to say, “and God acknowledged them.” The Hebrew word translated “acknowledged” is the common word for “know.” Here it probably carries the same meaning as in Amos 3:2, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth.” God knew about other nations, but Israel was the only nation He had chosen to know in terms of relationship. God knows you, and wants to have a personal relationship with you as your Heavenly Father. Now look down to v.7. God says, “I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows.” Likewise, God said in v.9, “Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.”

When you are going through a trial, you can be sure that God knows the suffering you are going through. He sees, He hears, He knows and He cares. God reveals Himself as compassionate & caring. So take your problems to the Lord in prayer. Keep praying, until the Lord delivers you.

Years ago commentator Harry Ironside told the story of the incident of the Christian man who was the only one saved from a wrecked vessel after a storm at sea. He found himself cast upon a little island, and by great effort got certain materials together and managed to make a little shelter from the equatorial storms. He waited day after day praying God to send a ship to help him, and he used to go down to the shore of the little island and wave a signal, just a piece of his clothing, every time he saw a ship passing in the distance, but some way or another they never saw him. One day as he was cooking his dinner, he saw a ship some distance away and hurried to the shore, earnestly praying that this time they might see and come to his relief. He waved frantically, but they went by, until at last the little vessel was almost out of sight. Then turning to plod his way back to his little hut, he was astonished to see that it had burst into flames. He had left some embers, and the wind had set the place on fire. Everything burned, and then when at last he stood there utterly distressed, not knowing where he would be able to gather sufficient material to build another shelter, to his amazement he saw that the vessel was headed right for the island. As they neared the shore they sent a little boat for him and took him on board. He asked, “Did you see my signal?” “Your signal!” they said; “Yes, we saw your smoke, and so we came to rescue you.” God had answered prayer, but not at all in the way he expected it, and so, some day when we get home to heaven, we shall see that many of the prayers we thought God had not heard were answered in His own wonderful way.<sup>4</sup>

Now I want you to notice one important truth as you approach God in prayer. God is holy. God said to Moses in v.5, “Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.” This is the first of almost 400 references to holiness. That God is holy means that He is separate from sin. He is unique from all others. I believe we should acknowledge His holiness as we approach Him in prayer. Jesus taught us in the model prayer to acknowledge God’s holiness very early in our prayer, for He taught us to pray to the

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<sup>4</sup> H.A. Ironside, *The Epistles of John & Jude* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1931), 213-214.

Father saying, “Hallowed be Thy name.” When you enter God’s presence in prayer, you need to realize that you are on holy ground, for God is holy. Holy ground must be treated differently from common ground. So God told Moses to take His shoes off. Shoes that were used to walk on common ground were not to walk upon holy ground. You see, in that day the custom in the East was to wear shoes or sandals merely as a protection from dirt. They would remove their shoes at home, and in other special places. In our western countries reverence is expressed by pulling off the hat. Or we may recognize that God’s house is special by the way we dress.

Today, we approach God through prayer. Wherever you pray or worship is holy ground. You need to treat times & places of prayer and worship as special, not common. And you need to express that in some culturally appropriate way. Yet I’m afraid many people today get overly familiar with God, and do not show enough reverence. God is our Friend, but He is also our sovereign Lord. What is your attitude as you approach God in prayer?

So when you face times of suffering, call upon the Lord in prayer. However, do so with reverence. Finally, when you go through times of suffering:

### III. CLAIM GOD’S PROMISES

Israel had suffered for over 80 years waiting on God’s deliverance. But God is in no hurry, and we need to be more patient. His delays are not due to unconcern, for He hears our groans, sees our plight, and feels our sorrows. He always has a purpose when He delays intervening on our behalf. And the good news is that you can count on Him to keep His promises. Notice in v.24 that after over 80 years of suffering, we read that “God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.” He is ever mindful of His promise. What He has promised, He will perform, for He never breaks His covenant with His people.

There was a little Scottish lady who worked hard taking in washing in order to send her son to the university. When he came home for vacation, his mind was filled with doubts about God from the liberal teaching he had received. He did not want his mother to know about the change in his thinking. Meanwhile, she kept telling him how wonderful it was of God to save her and how she knew she was saved. Finally he could not listen to more of her talk and said, “Mother, you do not seem to realize how small you are in this universe. If you lost your soul, God would not miss it at all. It would not amount to anything.” She did not reply right away but kept putting dinner on the table. Finally she said, “I’ve been thinking about what you said. You are right. My little soul does not amount to much; I would not lose much and God would not lose much. But if He does not save me, He will lose more than I will. He promised that if I would trust Jesus He would save me. If He breaks His word, He will lose His reputation and mar His character.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, God keeps His Word. You can count on Him to keep His promises.

Application: God is a covenant keeping God, and He expects us to keep our covenants and promises. When you make promises and vows in marriage, you should keep your vows. If you sign a contract, you should do what you say you will do. Have you made a promise recently that you have not kept?

Since God is a covenant-keeping God, He began to take the step necessary to deliver His people Israel. His first step was to appear to Moses, and call him to be His chosen servant, to deliver Israel from bondage.

Now there are several promises right here in our text. Let’s look at these, and apply them to our lives:

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<sup>5</sup> McGee, 208-209.

A. God Promises We Can Persevere – I believe this is indicated by the way God revealed Himself to Moses. Notice in v.2 that Moses saw what was, according to the Hebrew, a thorny bush. And there was something very unusual about the bush. It was on fire! And what was really unusual was the fact that “the bush was not consumed.” Unless you keep supplying more fuel, fires always burn out. We have already seen that this is first of all a picture of God. Unlike earthly fire, God never dies out.

We may also say that the bush within the fire represents Israel. Like a thorn bush, they were lowly & despised. And since God identifies with His people (Mt. 25:40; Acts 9:4), the fire represents God working in Israel. Though Israel was despised & persecuted with the fire of affliction, they were not consumed. That being the case, they as a nation shared this characteristic of God. The centuries of time have confirmed this truth. Though they have gone through the fire of affliction time and time, they have never been consumed! Other nations have come and gone, but Israel has endured. Indeed, God promised in Isa. 43:2, “When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you.”

This promise of perseverance is also indicated by the very name of God revealed in this text. Moses was afraid that the children of Israel would not accept him. So we read in vv.13-14 that Moses said to God, “Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say to me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And He said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” If the Israelites had fallen into the worship of many gods, it might be expected that they would ask the name of the particular deity Moses claimed to represent. After all, the Egyptians had many different gods known by many different names. Furthermore, it is not likely that the Israelites had much knowledge of the true God at this particular time. So God was quite willing to reveal His name to Moses, and to His people.

You need to understand that in the Bible, the name is not just a means of identification, but it reveals the character & nature of a person. One way to get to know God better is to pay attention to His names. God usually, if not always, revealed a name for Himself based on the particular need that His people were facing. God’s name reveals the fact that He never began, & He never will end. He is the eternal I AM, the ever present One. His character never changes. This gives us confidence that He is always the same (Heb. 13:8), and we can always count on Him to be true to His promise. Furthermore, He draws His being from no external source. He is self-existing and self-determined. He is the fountain & source of life. He gives, and is none the poorer; He works, and is never weary. In contrast, all creatural life has a clear tendency towards ending or extinction. Again, this corresponds with the way God revealed Himself by the undying fire. God lives for evermore, a flame that does not burn out.

Now if the eternal God is working in us, and if we place our faith in Him, we can endure the most difficult of trials. The apostle Paul experienced this in his own life. He wrote in 2 Cor. 4:9 that he was “persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.” His life was unquenchable until God’s purpose had been fulfilled! God’s presence kept the bush from being consumed, and God’s presence in our own lives will keep us from being consumed by the fire of affliction and persecution. Listen, child of God, you may be going through a very difficult time right now, but God will enable you to endure and persevere. Don’t give up. Don’t lose hope. It’s good to know that God is not only in our present, but our future as well, no matter how bleak the future appears! Oh, let us knit ourselves to Him who lives for ever, and whose love is lasting as His life.

So when you are going through the fire of affliction, lay hold of the promises of God. Just as He will never die, even so we can persevere through our trials, and even if our bodies were to die, we know that we shall live forever. After all, Jesus promised in John 11:25, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.” The believer partakes of the immortality of the indwelling God. Or, as Jesus also said, “Because I live you shall live also.” If He dwells in us we shall live as long as He lives.

B. God Promises to Deliver Us – Notice in v.24 that “God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.” What was that covenant promise? God had promised years before in Gen. 15:13-14 that He would deliver them from Egypt, and lead them back to the Promised Land (see also 46:3-4). His promise to bring Abraham’s offspring back into the land after 400 years caused God to devise a plan to deliver them. The time had come for Him to redeem His people. So look down to v.8. God states what He is going to do for His people Israel, “So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey,<sup>6</sup> to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites.” God’s redemption of His people involves deliverance from a state of bondage, to freedom and blessing. Israel could rightly count on God to redeem them from bondage, and give them something far better, because God had promised to do so!

God has promised to redeem us as well. We were bound by sin, and condemned to a devil’s hell. But God made promises throughout the Old Testament that He would send a Savior to deliver us. And sure enough, God so loved the world that He sent His Son to die for the sins of the world on the cross. Indeed, the words of v.8 were fulfilled again about 1400 years later, “I have come down to deliver them. . . .” He kept His promise, and if you are still in the bondage of sin, trust in God, who promises to set you free. And as we have seen, God not only sets us free from the bondage & condemnation of sin, but He gives us something better. We become sons and daughters of God, bound for the Promised Land of heaven! (cf. Ephesians 2:5-7). You can also count to God to deliver you from your suffering. If deliverance does not come in this life, it certainly will by the time you go to heaven!

C. God Promises to Be With Us –Moses expressed reluctance regarding his ability to lead the deliverance of God’s people. My, how things had changed! Forty years before this moment, he was ready to deliver Israel. He was cocky and almost arrogant. He slew an Egyptian and delivered one of his brethren from oppression. He thought he could deliver Israel by himself. He found out that he could not. He knew that he was no match for the power of Pharaoh. So he ran. And after 40 years of exile and humiliation, he learned how really weak he was, as he expressed in v.11. The son of Pharaoh’s daughter had become a shepherd, and felt himself too weak to go to Pharaoh. I believe He was also afraid. So God promised him in v.12, “I will certainly be with you.” God can take an insignificant bush, ignite it, and turn it into a miracle; and that’s what He wanted to do with Moses. He was like a weak bush but God was the empowering fire (19:18; 24:17; Deut. 4:24; Jud. 13:20; Heb. 12:29); and with God’s help, Moses could accomplish anything. “Pharaoh versus Moses” did not look a very hopeful cause, but “Pharaoh versus Moses with God’s present help,” that’s a very different matter.

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<sup>6</sup> Milk and honey are the simplest and choicest productions of a land abounding in grass and flowers. Thus, it was a fruitful, fertile land.

“I will be with you” is all the assurance God’s servants need in order to succeed (Josh. 1:5; Isa. 41:10; 43:5). God sends no man on errands which He does not give him power to do. Everyone engaged in Christian service needs to lay hold of that promises. And God’s promise to be with us also applies to our times of trial. You can count on God to keep His promise. He will protect you. He will sustain you. He will give you the strength you need.

Do you know the legend of the Cherokee Indian youth’s rite of passage? His father takes him into the forest blindfolded...and leaves him...alone. He is required to sit on a stump the whole night, and not take off the blindfold until the sun shines through it. He is all by himself. He is to be brave, and not cry out for help to anyone. Once he survives the night, he is a MAN. He cannot tell the other boys of this experience. Each lad must come into his own manhood. The boy was terrified...could hear all kinds of noise...Beasts were all around him. Maybe even some human would hurt him. The wind blew the grass and earth...and it shook his stump. But he sat stoically, never removing the blindfold. It would be the only way he could be a man. Finally, after a horrific night, the sun appeared and he removed his blindfold. It was then that he saw his father sitting on the stump next to him...at watch the entire night. We are never alone. Even when we do not know it, our Father is protecting us...He is sitting right there beside us. All he have to do is trust Him.<sup>7</sup>

Conclusion: So when you go through times of suffering, consider God’s purpose in your suffering. Turn to the Lord and call upon Him in prayer. Then claim God’s promises. By faith in the Lord, you will persevere. God will deliver you. God will be with you. You will come out on the other side of your suffering as a stronger person.

Have you been suffering the consequences of your own sin? Well it is time to turn from your sin, and trust in Jesus as your Savior. He died for your sins. You can be forgiven and set free. Turn to the Lord now, and trust in Him. Do it today!

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); Adam Clarke, *Adam Clarke’s Bible Commentary* (accessed from *Online Bible*), completed by 1832; Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2007; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978 reprint); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972); Warren Wiersbe, *Be Delivered: Exodus* (Colorado Spring: Chariot Victor Books Publishing, 1998). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Note: This message is too long as is.

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<sup>7</sup> Author unknown, *Pulpit Helps*, page 28, March 2007.