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Leaving
Egypt

*
Finding God
in the
Wilderness Places

*
Chuck DeGroot



Leaving
Egypt



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Egypt

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Wilderness Places

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Chuck DeGroot

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Acknowledgments

Writing a book can teach you a lot about the Exodus journey. You're occasionally enslaved to little things like your laptop or big things like your reputation. You try your best to conquer the wilderness, only to find unexpected detours in your own writing and in your own heart. You battle inner voices of resistance ("You have nothing to say!") and face inevitable uncertainties ("Does it even matter?"). But if you're looking, you will recognize companions along the way. These have been my companions:

My wife, Sara, who loves me despite my own wilderness wanderings, and who brings my greatest joy in the journey.

My daughters, Emma and Maggie, who were sent directly from the promised land and bring laughter, happiness, and wilderness futility into my life.

An editor, Len VanderZee, who brings the precision of a scholar and the heart of a pastor.

And Jesus, who leads the way, though I stagger behind. I continue to believe, despite the inconsistency of my own heart, because Jesus walked the walk.

Finally, as a therapist, a pastor, and a professor, I've been privileged to lead a few others along the way. I've seen them find God in wilderness places despite excruciating pain, profound confusion, and moments of desperately wanting to return to Egypt. This book was written, in large part, on courage borrowed from these wilderness sojourners. Their names

and identifying features have been changed to protect their privacy.

San Francisco
July 2011

Introduction

In the summer of 1997, I had the opportunity to study in Oxford, England. It was one of those magical summers, the kind you don't want to end. I traveled to historic sites around England. I studied with Dr. Crispin Fletcher-Louis, who I've since fallen out of touch with, but who gave me the gift of a scholarly spanking every now and then, followed by the sensitive care of one who sensed my anxiety. I ate and drank in the great pubs of the city, including the Eagle and Child, the now famous meeting place of the Inklings, an extraordinary group including C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams. I visited The Kilns, C. S. Lewis's home while he resided in Oxford. Each day I researched in the basement of the Bodleian Library, which opened in 1620 and smells like it. But perhaps more personally significant than anything else, I took a class from Alister McGrath, who planted a seed that would blossom into this book.

Professor McGrath is well-known as one of the great living theologians today, but this great theologian, I found, is no stuffy British intellectual. He approaches the Bible with a kind of emotional and spiritual openness because it is the story out of which he is living his own life. He often talked about life as a journey, and how we are modern-day pilgrims navigating our own journeys, our own storylines.

While each person's story is unique, there's also a sense in which it's not. There are bigger stories, great metanarratives in which our stories find meaning and illumination. Over

and over, McGrath would invite us to see our own journey as it is mirrored in the one great story of Scripture. He talked about how our lives today are re-narrated by the biblical story. While these ways of understanding the relationship of the great story of the Bible to the story of our individual lives has since become almost normative, these were heady new concepts for me.

Several years later, McGrath published a small book called *The Journey*. I liked it so much that I assigned it each year to my students in a seminary course called “Psychology in Relation to Theology”—and that is where I began to develop the idea of this book. McGrath writes,

The Exodus tells our story. Each of us has a personal journey to make, from our own Egypt to our promised land. We have left something behind in order to make this journey. We have had to break free from our former lives in order to begin afresh. *We* were in Egypt. *We* were delivered from bondage. *We* are in the wilderness, on our way to the promised land. The story of the Exodus *involves* us—because it is *about* us.¹

McGrath’s little book is written from the perspective of a theologian, so it leans heavily on persons and experiences from church history. While I’m a theologian as well, my life’s work has taken me in the direction of spiritual and practical theology. My academic work was in the area of psychology, and my work experience includes a fluid (sometimes jarring) blend of therapist, pastor, seminary professor, and writer. But perhaps the most influential part of the development of this book has

been my students. Since 2003 at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, I have taught a course that covers the contents of this book. Interacting with my students has been humbling, refining, challenging, and extremely invigorating. All the stories I've heard over the years in classrooms and therapy sessions make me a conduit for many different voices that speak in this book. Theologians and biblical scholars, psychologists and social workers, clinicians and pastors, stay-at-home moms and divorced dads, abuse victims and pornography addicts—these are the people whose stories interact with the biblical story that moves from Egypt to the promised land.

I have come to believe that the Exodus story deeply reflects all our stories, and it is my prayer that you will see how it reflects and illuminates your story as well. This book is an invitation to recognize that the Exodus is your story.

In Part 1—Egypt: Facing Our Fear, we'll explore the terrain of Egypt, seeing both its enslavement and its appeal. We'll explore how we long for very good things and how these things often enslave us. Often we reach for quick fixes, Band-Aids for deep wounds, only to be disappointed. God's remedy is a relational one. At its heart is the struggle to trust others, and, most important, to trust in God. Trust is the only way we can survive in the wilderness.

In Part 2—Sinai: Receiving Our New Identity, we'll explore the significance of Sinai. It's the first major stop in the wilderness, and it's both a signpost to a better life and a potential roadblock for those who aren't ready for the test. As travelers, we're tempted to pitch our tent at Sinai, unwilling to venture into the deeper, darker wilderness territory. Sinai represents our tendency to find both intellectual and moral certainty in

our confusion. Growth requires us to travel on, to see Sinai as an invitation to pursue a life of shalom, of flourishing.

Part 3—Wilderness: Entering the Furnace of Transformation, is the core of the book. In the wilderness we're faced with our worst nightmares and our greatest possibilities. Though American culture holds out the hope of a quick fix, a microwavable spirituality, we'll see how God uses the wilderness to deepen us, to mature us, and to draw us into honest, authentic relationship with him as he continues to travel alongside us. We'll see that this is the journey Jesus took too.

Finally, we emerge from the wilderness. Part 4—Home: Experiencing New Identity and Mission, invites us to surrender through the image of open hands and to find rest in Jesus. Surrender leads us to life experienced in relationship with others, life manifested in happiness and virtue. We'll explore the Beatitudes as an announcement and invitation into the kingdom life of Jesus. But we'll also see that as quickly as we emerge, we find ourselves battling again with our memories of Egypt. This cyclical journey, this continuing battle, humbles us, leading us to increasing trust in the only successful Exodus journey ever taken—the wilderness journey of Jesus.

So jump in. Fasten your seatbelt. It's a wild ride, and not for the weak of heart. It would be convenient to avoid it, fight it, or resign to Egypt's snare. But it's well worth the ride. And in the end, we may say with the apostle Paul, "As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully. As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:5-7).

Part 7

*

Egypt:
Facing Our
Fear

Chapter 1

The Womb Becomes a Tomb

*W*e have all read in scientific books, and indeed, in all romances, the story of the man who has forgotten his name. This man walks about the streets and can see and appreciate everything; only he cannot remember who he is. Well, every man is that man in the story. Every man has forgotten who he is.

—G. K. Chesterton

But now I realize that the real sin is to deny God's first love for me, to ignore my original goodness. Because without claiming that first love and that original goodness for myself, I lose touch with my true self and embark on a destructive search among the wrong people and in the wrong places for what can only be found in the house of my Father.

—Henri Nouwen

Are we not slaves?

All of us, to be sure, sometimes feel trapped in circumstances and situations that seem to exist beyond our control. But often we are also slaves to ourselves, trapped in patterns of thinking and feeling that stifle our freedom. Are we not all slaves?

The Exodus story would answer yes. We are all slaves. We're slaves to image and appearance, to substances and relationships, to compulsive behaviors and abusive systems. We're all ensnared by the Egypts in our lives and the pharaohs that demand our allegiance. As free as we might imagine ourselves, each of us continues to wrestle with the "old self" (Colossians 3:9), as the apostle called it, parts of us that have never left the slavery of Egypt for the flourishing we're made for.

Are we not slaves? This question may also have been difficult to answer for the Israelites living in Egypt those many years after the famine that brought them there in the first place. For years the Israelites found safety, security, and refuge in Egypt. Life in Egypt began with great hope and possibility. Many might have said, "We're not slaves at all! God has given us a good life here."

Such is the case with slavery. It's hard to leave Egypt. It was hard then. And it's hard now.

Parting Is Such Sweet Sorrow

Why is leaving Egypt so hard, after all? Why is liberation such a difficult journey?

The reality is that our enslavements are not all bad. There is a certain appeal even to our greatest vices. I once worked with a gambler who loved the adventure and risk. As much as he wanted to be free of his obsession, he felt a simultaneous passion for it. "I love gambling," he told me. "It wrecks everyone and everything around me, but in the moment there is no greater pleasure."

A friend of mine who is a financial analyst had a similar experience in her work habits. Though she's been called

a workaholic by those who know her, and though she knows that her habits negatively impact her health and her relationships, she finds it hard to stop. “I cannot take a break. If I miss even the slightest change in the market, I lose my edge and my analysis is flawed.”

What makes these enslavements of Egypt so powerful in our lives is that they connect to good desires built into us by the Creator, or else they would not be so enslaving. My client loved the adventure of gambling. Likewise, my friend loved the feeling of life on the edge. And I could understand both. We human beings were made for adventure and risk, in the image of our adventurous, risk-taking God. We were modeled for demanding, exacting, absorbing work in the image of our hard-working God.

Egypt was not always a place of slavery. Originally it was the place the Israelites were protected from famine and where they flourished. Our own Egypt experiences are the same. Good desires and longings somehow turn into enslavements. How does that happen?

In his penetrating essay “The Weight of Glory,” C. S. Lewis helps us understand those good desires beneath our Egypt experiences. All his life he was enthralled and haunted by the memory of beauty and the search for it. It was the center of his life, his god. Beauty is, of course, a good thing, but he mistook beautiful things for beauty itself. Lewis writes,

These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers.

For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.¹

Good images of what we really desire. I like that. It rings true as I think about my own experiences. But it also rings true with the original story.

Desire beneath the Destruction

Lewis grasped the reality that good things in life often hold the paradoxical possibility of beauty and brokenness. So too Jewish mystical writers tend to grasp the dual role that Egypt plays in that central Jewish story, the Exodus. It's a space for growth and flourishing. But it can also be a trap if seen as the final destination. For the Israelites, it held the possibility of beauty and brokenness.

Interestingly, the metaphor that embraces this dual reality is that of a womb. The womb, of course, is a place for a baby to grow and be nurtured, a place of security and sustenance. But a womb is not a permanent home. At full term, the womb becomes a constrictive place where growth is no longer possible. So it was for the Israelites in Egypt. Estelle Frankel, a psychotherapist who works out of the Jewish mystical tradition, notes that the Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, hints at a similar word in the Hebrew, *meitzarim*. What is fascinating is that this second word can be translated as “a narrow place,” a space that is ultimately constricting. Just as the womb becomes an inhospitable place for a baby at full term to grow and thrive, so the once-fertile land of Egypt became an

inhospitable place where the Israelites could no longer grow and prosper.² The womb became a tomb.

The experiences of most men and women I counsel resonate with this imagery. They wonder how the good things they've pursued in their lives have become traps, snares, obstacles to growth. To be sure, there is something soothing, comforting, even secure about Egypt's womb. I've watched women in abusive relationships as they have returned to an abuser over and over or found a relationship with another abusive man. These relationships are clearly destructive. But these women have another perspective. They have told me, time and again, that since abuse is what they know best, it is strangely familiar, even comforting. Returning to the abuser is like returning to the womb.

The inevitable question is what kind of good desire stands behind a horrible trap like abuse? Can it be that something good always hides behind some twisted form of slavery?

Women who have been abused will say that they long for security and find it in the perceived "strength" of the abusive man. Their good desire for love, for security, for comfort, for strength, or for intimacy becomes twisted and distorted. An abusive man is a womb that becomes a tomb.

This story of distorted, twisted goodness goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden, and it's been told countless times since, right up into your life and mine. You and I take good things and twist them. We ourselves become twisted in the process. It's a story of desire, good desire, but desire never completely satisfied. Gerald May writes,

There is a desire within each of us, in the deep center of ourselves that we call our heart. We were born with it, it is never completely satisfied, and it never dies. We are often unaware of it, but it is always awake.³

It's this same desire that C. S. Lewis so often spoke about as a longing that tugs at our hearts. What I hope to convey to each person I work with is that their everyday struggles with addiction, idolatry, or enslavement of any kind represent a kind of search for goodness, for life, for home. I hope to awaken in them an insight into their original design, their original goodness, which has now become so distorted. Only then will they embrace their God-blessed, God-loved self, and find the strength to leave Egypt, the womb that has become a tomb. And that is the hardest battle of all.

Design Flaw

I recently read something appalling in a Christian publication. A person claiming to have expertise in sexual addiction wrote that sex addicts need to know that they are perverted human beings whose black hearts desire only to destroy and mutilate anything good in God's creation. Sickened, I could not help but think of the many sex addicts I know—male and female. If this person knew anything about sex addiction, I thought, he'd know that this is exactly what each one of them thinks about him- or herself. And it is the very thing that perpetuates continued addiction!

A voice within each of us incessantly repeats this very lie. It tells us that we're flawed at our core. It speaks of perversion, darkness, and irreparable sin. I'm convinced that this is

the voice of Satan (“the accuser” in Hebrew), a primordial liar who seeks to re-narrate the Christian story his own way. It’s the voice that appears time and again in Scripture, whether in the Garden as a serpent or in the wilderness with Jesus as one who promises what he can’t deliver. It’s a voice that tells us that we’re a design flaw in God’s good creation.

I’m a Calvinist, and Calvinists famously believe that we’re all a mess—it’s called total depravity. But Calvinists also believe that God made the world—and us—good, in fact, *very* good (Genesis 1:31). We can only grasp the doctrine of original sin (that sin has infected everything and everyone) if we first grasp original goodness (that we were all created good and in God’s image).

That’s not to say that the deep sense of guilt that haunts our lives is unnecessary or wrong. Certainly much of what I see is bad guilt, sending the message “Nothing good can come from you” to our heart. But there is an important sense in which guilt can be a good thing. Guilt is our internal warning system that something in us that God made for good has veered off to the path to destruction.

Sin’s real devastation, writes Henri Nouwen, is in its strange capacity to erase our memories, to cause us to forget our noble origins. “[T]he real sin is to deny God’s first love for me, to ignore my original goodness. Because without claiming that first love and that original goodness for myself, I lose touch with my true self and embark on a destructive search among the wrong people and in the wrong places for what can only be found in the house of my Father.”⁴ And this is precisely what happened to the Israelites in Egypt. They were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, people of the

covenant. That was their true story. But slowly and steadily, over the span of four centuries, a different story began to form their identity: the Egyptian story, one that would plague them in their future journey.

Egypt is a place where we forget our noble roots as image-bearers created in goodness. We forget that we are born in and for love. That original destiny gets twisted into lesser loves and desire. Over the course of time, we develop a kind of spiritual amnesia. And at our lowest point, we ask, “Who am I?”

It’s a recurring story among the people I work with:

- * An addict is exposed after years of hiding and deceiving. His family is devastated. He says, “I don’t know who I’ve become. This isn’t me.”
- * A wealthy shopaholic is caught in the act of stealing, her only form of adventure in a predictable world. Still she asks, “Who am I?”
- * An executive works fifteen hours a day. Barely awake, he says to me, “Chuck, I’m completely lost.”
- * A diabetic who can’t stay away from sweets feels torn in his identity. “Part of me knows that I’m killing myself, but I don’t care.”
- * A forty-something woman cannot stop going back for more plastic surgery. She tells me, “I’ll keep working on me until I find the me I’m happy with.”
- * An accountant cannot stop doctoring the books at work, though at home and at church he’s considered the good guy. “I don’t know who I become when I’m doing that,” he says.

Identity erodes as ordinary people literally lose themselves in their personal Egypts, forgetting who they are. As G. K. Chesterton says: “We have all read in scientific books, and indeed, in all romances, the story of the man who has forgotten his name. This man walks about the streets and can see and appreciate everything; only he cannot remember who he is. Well, every man is that man in the story. Every man has forgotten who he is.”⁵

If you stick around Egypt, you lose your true story, and sooner or later, you’ll come to believe that you are a design flaw.

On the Side of the Victim

Terrorism involves the use of brutal, random violence to bring people into a state of helplessness. There can also be a kind of terrorism of the soul. Pharaoh’s agenda is clear. He wants to convince Israel that it is in their best interests to stay right where they are. He’ll get that message across in whatever way he needs to.

Israel’s love affair with Egypt began innocently, or so it seemed. Egypt was their brave protector in the midst of famine; one of their own, Joseph, presided over the whole business. But over time, a subtle change took place. Soon enough, Israel was hearing what all abusers tell their victims: Look at all I’ve done for you! You owe me!

And when psychological manipulation doesn’t work, brutal force often does. In the days of Moses, Pharaoh was a paranoid abuser who stooped to genocide to protect his power. He stopped at nothing to keep the Israelites under his thumb.

I can imagine a conversation playing out with Moses that sounds a whole lot like the serpent playing his mind games with Adam and Eve, and with Jesus in the wilderness: “Moses, surely God hasn’t promised you a land flowing with milk and honey? That’s just like him—all talk and no action! Let me tell you where the action is. It’s right here, working for me, enjoying the fruits of my empire. You’ve found happiness here, you and your people. Haven’t my predecessors and I been good to you? Things can be good again if you just cooperate. Stick with what is certain. Don’t believe those fairy tales of a better life!”

This is the psychological terrorism of Egypt. Slowly but surely we become numb to the true, the good, the beautiful. Eventually we forget that we were made for more.

In one of my favorite movies of all time, *The Shawshank Redemption*, a long-time prisoner named Red explains the psychology of prison to his friend Andy, who persistently dreams beyond the walls. “These walls are funny. First you hate ’em, then you get used to ’em. Enough time passes, you get so you depend on them. That’s institutionalized. They send you here for life, and that’s exactly what they take. The part that counts, anyway.” Though Andy has been in prison for years, he has not forgotten life outside. He has not forgotten who he is. He says, “There’s something inside . . . that they can’t get to, that they can’t touch. That’s yours.”⁶

Red is personally responsible for being in prison; his crimes left victims. But in another sense he is a victim. In this sense, it can be said that all of us are victims. We’re victims of the deceit of Pharaoh. We’re victims of the enslaving institutionalization that traps us in every form of Egypt we struggle

with. That's why Paul repeatedly calls us "slaves to sin" in Romans 6.

Understanding this is especially important for Christians who have been told, over and again, that sin is always our fault. I don't want to minimize responsibility; the Exodus journey compels us to deal with our hearts in deep ways. But the Exodus story also reminds us that there are powers outside of us seeking our enslavement. While I'm suspicious of those who find a demon under every bush to blame for a problem, I'm equally suspicious of those who dismiss the ongoing and sinister influence of that ancient serpent.

C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* is a series of fictional letters written by a devil called Screwtape to his nephew, Wormwood. Screwtape is out to teach his young nephew how to enslave his assigned human victim and snatch him away from the Enemy (God). Here the ploy is pleasure:

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made all the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden. Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable.⁷

In every situation I see as a therapist and a pastor, I assume that Evil has set its target for destruction. What we call sin is something far more complex than we often think. When I see the businessman trapped in a pattern of stealing and deception, I'm not immediately interested in calling him to account by merely pointing to his sin. Sin is a far more complex reality. As Lewis reminds us, it's ultimately being separated from our Creator and losing our identity. It's not just about sins, but a sin-complex, at the heart of which lurks a monstrous deception.

At some level we're all victims. God doesn't start blaming the Israelites for getting themselves into the mess in Egypt. Instead, God rescues—without qualification, without interrogation. It's the pattern that emerges throughout the biblical story—the beautiful pattern of grace. He tells you and me that we're victims. We've been enslaved, so it's all right to cry out in frustration and pain. It's all right to feel lost and hopeless.

But it's also all right to hope. Moses is there to remind us that victims hope and pray and cry out. And God responds.

Out of Egypt

I feel trapped. That's one consistent message I hear from so many people. People feel trapped in jobs. They feel trapped in bad relationships. They feel trapped in family patterns. They feel trapped in a body they dislike. They feel trapped by their income, whether large or small. They feel trapped by having kids or by not having kids. They feel trapped in their singleness or in their bad marriages.

In a country that boasts the greatest freedom in the world, so many feel trapped, enslaved, stuck in a life that does not

*
The
Exodus
story
is your
story.
*

The Israelites' liberation from Egypt and journey to the promised land is one the Bible's most compelling narratives. But the Exodus isn't just a long-ago Bible story. We each find ourselves enslaved: to work, to destructive relationships, to food, to spending . . . but beyond our personal Egypt lies God's promised land.

Chuck DeGroat shows how our wilderness journey helps us face our fears, receive our new identity, experience transformation, and live into our newfound freedom.

Discussion questions follow each chapter.

Chuck DeGroat is director of the counseling center at City Church in San Francisco, as well as academic dean of the Newbigin House of Studies. He also served as professor and director of spiritual formation at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando.



It's a long and sometimes painful journey out of "Egypt," the place of fear, enslavement, and distrust. I know—I've been there, and still visit on occasion. If you're trapped in "Egypt" and know there should be something far better, this book will change your life. With profound biblical and theological insight, Chuck DeGroat has written a "travel guide" for human and flawed travelers who want to be free.

—Steve Brown, professor at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, author, and teacher on the nationally syndicated radio program *Key Life*.



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