

One America; Two Experiences: The Black Experience in America

A Word from Bob: You're reading the Resource version of a 5-Part blog mini-series on *One America; Two Experiences*. I've taken my thoughts from chapter 10 of my book [*Beyond the Suffering: Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care and Spiritual Direction*](#). This series focuses on understanding the history of the Black experience in America.

Part 1 Racial Reconciliation: Understanding 2 Vastly Different Views of America

2 Competing Narratives of the American Experience

As I talk to friends about the ongoing racial tensions in the US, many are perplexed. A Caucasian friend recently shared with me:

"It's like we're talking a different language when we talk across racial lines."

Not long after that conversation, an African American friend shared:

"When I talk about race with my White friends, it's like we're from two different planets. It's like we're aliens to each other in need of a universal translator."

My friends are onto something. And it's not just a recent development. From the very founding of America, Blacks and Whites have maintained two drastically different views of the American Experience.

In this series, I'm hoping to help us understand each other better by helping us to understand our long-standing different perspectives on life in America.

The Free Northern European White Male American Experience: "The Promised Land"

The idea of an American "national narrative" drawn from Scripture is not new. When European Christians immigrated to America, they chose a dominant biblical lens through which to view themselves corporately. They were, according to Puritan John Winthrop:

"A city upon a hill."

As God's new chosen people fleeing the religious tyranny of Europe, if they (White Europeans) obeyed God they would:

"Find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies."¹

From the earliest period of their migration to the New World, European colonists spoke of their journey as the:

“New Exodus of a New Israel from bondage in Egypt to the Promised Land of milk and honey.”²

For these early European Americans, America *already was* the Promised Land.

White Europeans left Europe in an exodus due to persecution, finding religious and political freedom and likening it to the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea.

Many would be shocked to realize that anyone has ever seen it any differently. Or, perhaps we should say, many free northern European middle-class and upper-class white males would be shocked to realize that anyone has ever seen it any differently.

The Enslaved African American Experience: “Bound for the Promised Land”

Consider contrast #1:

- Europeans *freely sailed to* the “land of the free.”
- Africans were *stolen away from* their free lands, stowed in the hideous holds of the slave ships, and brought to the “land of bondage.”

And contrast #2:

- For Europeans the Exodus *already occurred*.
- For Africans the Exodus was *yet future*.

And contrast #3:

- Europeans *lived in* the Promised Land.
- Africans *lived in* Egypt and were *bound for* the Promised Land.

“For African-Americans the journey was reversed: whites might claim that America was a new Israel, but blacks knew that it was Egypt, since they, like the children of Israel of old, still toiled in bondage. Unless America freed God’s African children, this nation would suffer the plagues that had afflicted Egypt.”³

“It required no stretch of the imagination to see the trials of the Israelites as paralleling the trials of the slaves, Pharaoh and his army as oppressors, and Egyptland as the South.”⁴

Could two biblically-based visions of one nation be any more different?

Both shared a common stock of biblical metaphors: Egypt, Exodus, the Promised Land. However, each saw the vision through different lenses.

Acknowledging these contrasting visions can increase our cross-cultural connections.

For instance, at times European Americans think of African Americans as needing to “assimilate” into American culture. This assumes that American culture *equals* the culture that European Americans supposedly single-handedly birthed.

However, from 1619 to today, there has been tremendous interplay between these two “cultures.” To suggest that African Americans assimilate into European American culture negates the equal contributions that African Americans have made in the creation of American culture.

With cross-cultural awareness, we can perceive the issue more accurately. “Minority cultures” are not required to jettison their cultural heritage and be assimilated into one elite, “dominant culture.” Instead, all cultural groups (Native Americans, Europeans, Africans, Asians, Hispanics, etc.) can cherish their own culture while at the same time co-creating *one* new multi-cultural nation. They jointly weave together a new mosaic, a shared heritage, a collective narrative.

Join the Conversation

How surprised are you that there have been two such diametrically opposed views of the American experience?

How can understanding these contrasting viewpoints help you to better understand your culturally-different brothers and sisters?

How could understanding these distinct worldviews equip you to minister more effectively cross-culturally?

Part 2

The God of the Promised Land

We've Come This Far by Faith: The Drama of Redemption

Our worldview makes a world of difference. As African Americans journeyed from enslavement to emancipation, they faced the same spiritual questions that we all face when we encounter inexplicable suffering.

Nellie, a former slave from Savannah, Georgia, shared her confusion.

“It has been a terrible mystery, to know why the good Lord should so long afflict my people, and keep them in bondage—to be abused, and trampled down, without any rights of their own—with no ray of light in the future.”⁵

It is difficult enough to endure *personal* suffering and ponder God's purposes. The spiritual task grows even more challenging when we, like Nellie, open our eyes to a *world* of unjust suffering.

Delivered from Bondage: Leaning on the Lord by Gleaning from His Word

African American believers moved *beyond* the suffering—by entrusting themselves to the God of the oppressed. For example, when her mistress questions her about her faith, a slave named Polly explains her hope.

“We poor creatures have need to believe in God, for if God Almighty will not be good to us some day, why were we born? When I heard of his delivering his people from bondage I know it means the poor Africans.”⁶

Ponder Polly's faith perspective. She entrusts her troubled soul to the God of the Bible who reveals himself to be the *Almighty, Good Deliverer of the oppressed*.

Whether individual narratives, personal letters of spiritual consolation, slave spirituals, gospel songs, public speeches, or pulpit messages, they all focus on the narrative of:

God as *the God of the oppressed*.

Whether it was Hagar in the Wilderness, the Israelites in Egypt, the children of God in Canaan, or Judah in the Babylonian captivity, African American Christians repeatedly turned to scriptural narratives portraying God's character as the Father of the fatherless.

“For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight” (Psalm 72:12-14).

The classic African American gospel song *We've Come This Far by Faith* powerfully and poetically articulates the faith of Polly and her spiritual siblings.

"We've come this far by faith leaning on the Lord;
Trusting in His Holy Word, He's never failed me yet.
Oh, can't turn around, we've come this far by faith.
Don't be discouraged with trouble in your life,
He'll bear your burdens and move all misery and strife.
That's why we've come this far by faith."⁷

Consider the common denominator connecting Polly and this gospel song. Both glean from the Word narrative images of *a good God who is touched by the feelings of our infirmities and moved by our misery to move mountains* in response to our faith. It's all about narratives—about faith stories.

Experiencing the God Who Sets the Captives Free

The faith that Polly shared with her mistress and that African Americans sang about in church gatherings combined God's character, their situation, and scriptural themes of liberation. Aunt Jane's counsel to Charlotte Brooks illustrates the intersection of these three components.

"Aunt Jane used to tell us, too, that the children of Israel were in Egypt in bondage, and that God delivered them out of Egypt; and she said he would deliver us. We all used to sing a hymn like this: 'My God delivered Daniel, Daniel, Daniel; My God delivered Daniel, And why not deliver me too? He delivered Daniel from the lion's den, Jonah from the belly of the whale, the three Hebrew children from the fiery furnace, And why not deliver me too?'"⁸

For Aunt Jane, the God of Moses, Daniel, Jonah, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is alive and well on planet Earth. His powerful deliverance *then* relates to Aunt Jane and Charlotte *now because* His *character* never changes. He will deliver them from captivity because He is, in His *very nature*, a Rescuer.

"One of the sources that sustained Christian slaves against such temptations to despair was the Bible with its accounts of the mighty deeds of a God who miraculously intervenes in human history to cast down the mighty and to lift up the lowly, a God who saves the oppressed and punishes the oppressor."⁹

God Is a Time-God

Their faith was faith in an *in-the-moment* God—an immanent God who loves to love His children. Ex-slave Simon Brown explains:

"The folks would sing and pray and testify and clap their hands, just as if God was right there in the midst of them. He wasn't way off in the sky. He was a-seeing everybody and

a-listening to every word and a-promising to let His love come down. . . . Yes, sir, there was no pretending in those prayer meetings. There was a living faith in a just God who would one day answer the cries of His poor black children and deliver them from their enemies.”¹⁰

Their faith was in a *time-God*.

“It looked like the more I prayed the worse off I got. But the God I serve is a time-God. He doesn’t come before time; he don’t come after time. He comes just on time.”¹¹

Their faith was *earthy and real*. Ex-Virginia slave, William Grimes, prays to his real God in his real time of need when Grimes’ master orders him flogged.

“I looked up to heaven and prayed fervently to God to hear my prayer, and grant me relief in this hour of adversity; expecting every moment to be whipped until I could not stand; and *blessed be God* that he turned their hearts before they could arrive at the place of destination: for on arriving there, I was acquitted. God delivered me from the power of the adversary.”

Grimes assures his readers that he “did not make a feeble attempt to induce my master not to flog me; but put my trust, and offered my prayers to my heavenly Father, who heard and answered them.”¹²

The Rich, Relevant Theology of African American Christians

These samplers teach us a very important truth:

Nothing is more important about us than the image of God that we hold in our minds.

Some people falsely assume that enslaved and free African Americans were a-theological, that they were all about experience in the heart and not biblical insight in the mind. This is utterly untrue. They combined heart and head, experience and theology, faith and fact.

Their theological understanding of God emphasized his unchanging nature as the *I Am* of Exodus. While running away from slavery in Kentucky, Henry Bibb’s heart trembles within him as he ponders the great danger to which he was exposing himself in taking passage on a southern steamboat.

“Hence before I took passage, I kneeled down before the Great I Am, and prayed for his aid and protection, which He bountifully bestowed even beyond my expectation; for I felt myself to be unworthy. I then stept boldly on the deck . . .”¹³

The Great I Am can be trusted to set the captives free because it is his enduring, eternal nature. As Bibb explains:

"I never omitted to pray for deliverance. I had faith to believe that the Lord could see our wrongs and hear our cries."¹⁴

Life is a story and God is the main Character in that story.

For African Americans, the unfolding plotline in their story, page after page, has been *God the Deliverer's daily deliverance of them*. As spiritual friends, they repeatedly turned one another to the faith stories of the Bible so that they could respond to "God's salvation drama as it unfolds and impacts their lives."¹⁵

Join the Conversation

What biblical images of God control your mind and your outlook on life? Is your God the *time-God*? The *God of the oppressed*? The *never-Changing, always-comforting God*? The *in-the-moment real God*? The *Divine Love and Wisdom God*? The *Great I Am God*?

Part 3 God's Chosen People

Who We Are in Christ

To move *beyond* the suffering, believing slaves began with the biblical narrative of who God is. As vital as this was, it could have remained impersonal. As we've seen, it certainly did not. Why? What was the "secret" to the African American ability to *relate who God is to their lives*?

They clung to biblical narratives of *who they were in relationship to God* and His drama of deliverance.

Christian slaves used scriptural imagery to counteract the shaming imagery of enslavement.

It is as if they said:

"We may be slaves of men, but so were God's chosen people. In fact, God's people have always been enslaved by God's enemies and God has always had compassion on His enslaved people."

Joining God's Larger Story: Transmitting Our Faith Stories

Having a biblical sense of self may seem rudimentary until we recall that African Americans were not perceived or treated as human beings, but as chattel. This is why the slave narratives were so monumental. Through the simple act of telling their own life stories they indicated that blacks, just as much as whites, had a personal narrative and lived fully human lives with emotions, actions, goals, thoughts, and longings.¹⁶

Octavia Albert found her motivation for interviewing her fellow African Americans in her conviction that their personal stories were part of God's larger story. Colonel Douglass Wilson was "a colored man of considerable prominence, not only in Louisiana, but in the nation." Albert consistently communicates to him what a rich experience he had before and after the war. She urges him to tell his story because it "would delight almost any one. Don't keep all the good things to yourself; tell us about them sometime."¹⁷

When Colonel Wilson expresses hesitation about his storytelling because some may think it inappropriate, Albert responds:

"I assure you,' said I, 'you will never hear that from me, because I believe we should not only treasure these things, but should transmit them to our children's children. That's what the Lord commanded Israel to do in reference to their deliverance from Egyptian bondage, and I verily believe that the same is his will concerning us and our bondage and deliverance in this country.'"¹⁸

Albert is an artful soul physician. The Scriptures are her soul anatomy textbook. She dispenses ample doses of biblical wisdom as she helps Wilson to see that *his storytelling is not self-serving, but community-building and God-glorifying*. She enlightens Wilson to his role in God's plan—by your testimony you witness to God's Exodus-like deliverance of his people.

Insiders in the Drama of Deliverance: Envisioning Our Life Stories

The central biblical image through which African Americans interpreted their lives and the Scriptures was the Exodus/Conquest. They were God's chosen people and He was leading them out of the land of Egypt, across the Red Sea, over the Jordan River, and into the Promised Land of Canaan. Exodus was the model drawn from Scripture that became the lens through which the Bible was read, and liberation from bondage was the Bible's central thrust.¹⁹

By identifying themselves with the children of Israel:

“African slaves declared themselves as insiders in the scriptural drama. The Hebrew model of interpretation placed the slaves squarely in the center of the salvation narrative. While slaveholders focused on ancient Israel as a slaveholding society, *the African slaves saw ancient Israel first as a nation descended from slaves*. In this sense, slave interpreters were able to reverse the patriarchal paradigm of the slaveholders”²⁰

The suffering slaves certainly resembled Jesus, the suffering Servant, more than their unsympathetic masters did.

As with their image of God, their image of themselves as God's chosen children journeying to Canaan was omnipresent. John Boston, a runaway slave from Maryland, took refuge with a New York regiment during the Civil War. Writing to his wife on January 12, 1862, from Upton Hill, Virginia, he weaves into his letter his “Exodus identity.”

“My Dear Wife, It is with great joy I take this time to let you know where I am. I am now in safety in the 14th Regiment of Brooklyn. This day I can address you thank God as a free man. I had a little trouble in getting away but as the Lord led the Children of Israel to the land of Canon so he led me to a land where freedom will rain in spite of earth and hell.”²¹

The Power of Story

Edward Wimberly recounts that in past and current African American ministry, pastors have used storytelling in preaching and counseling to deconstruct and reconstruct shame-filled African American stories of being unlovable. He further explains that people bring *secular scriptures* to church—well-formed personal narratives fashioned by the world, the flesh, and the Devil.²²

These worldly narratives of life become idols around which people organize their lives and interpret reality. Changing them requires Divine and human intervention. Using the language of the Apostle Paul, people need to put off the old secular idolatrous lying scripts and put on the new worshipful truth-telling Scriptures (Colossians 3:1-17).

Join the Conversation

What biblical narratives organize your view of yourself? Are you *God's chosen child*? Is your life story *worth-telling and God-glorifying*?

How can you use the concept of narrative images of God and of self in your ministry? How can you help people to put off the shaming lies of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and put on the freeing truth and grace of God's Word?

Part 4 God Comes Down!

God Sees; God Hears; God Comes Down; God Rescues!

African Americans have applied the Exodus/Conquest narrative individually *and* nationally (see Part 1, Part 2, and Part 3). The national examples would fill hundreds of books. Reverend Absalom Jones' *Thanksgiving Sermon* provides an excellent synopsis.

Rev. Jones chose as his text Exodus 3:7-8. Jones starts by briefly highlighting God's sustaining care and healing comfort for Israel. He then relates the historical Exodus narrative to current African American life *on the basis of God's unchanging nature*.

"The history of the world shows us, that the deliverance of the children of Israel from their bondage, is not the only instance, in which it has pleased God to appear in behalf of oppressed and distressed nations, as the deliverer of the innocent, and of those who call upon His name. He is as unchangeable in His nature and character, as He is in His wisdom and power. The great and blessed event, which we have this day met to celebrate, is a striking proof, that the God of heaven and earth is *the same, yesterday, and to-day, and for ever*."²³

He Has Seen: God Pays Attention to Our Earthly Story of Suffering

In classic sustaining style, Jones next shows that God has been watching every event of their earthly story.

"He has seen the affliction of our countrymen, with an eye of pity."²⁴

To emphasize how important it is to pay attention to the earthly story, Jones presents an outline of African American history hauntingly similar to ours in *Beyond the Suffering*: capture, middle passage, auction block sale, enslavement, separation from family, work from sunup to sundown, deprivation of food, clothing, and shelter, torture of the body, and withholding of religion from the soul.

Jones prefaces each point with the repeated phrase concerning God, "*He has seen*." Thirteen times. Can you hear it? Feel it? Imagine it? Place yourself in the congregation.

"He has seen." "Oh, yeah!" *"He has seen."* "Preach it!" *"He has seen."* "Come on!" *"He has seen."* "Glory!" *"He has seen."* "Yes, he has!" *"He has seen."* Clapping. *"He has seen."* Standing. *"He has seen."* Swaying. *"He has seen."* Hands raised. *"He has seen."* Shouting. *"He has seen."* "Amen!" *"He has seen."* Tears streaming. *"He has seen."* Kneeling.

He Has Heard!

He has not only seen; He has also heard. Jones preaches:

“Inhuman wretches! though You have been deaf to their cries and shrieks, they have been heard in Heaven. The ears of Jehovah have been constantly open to them. *He has heard* the prayers that have ascended from the hearts of His people; and he Has, as in the case of His ancient and chosen people the Jews, *come down to deliver* our suffering countrymen from the hands of the oppressors.”²⁵

The suffering Jews and the suffering African Americans are one people of God.

He Came Down!

Four times Pastor Jones repeats the phrase, “*He came down.*” Healing hope. God sustains *and* He saves. He climbs in the casket *and* He rolls the stone away leaving an empty tomb. He sees, *and* He comes down.

What worship response is appropriate? Celebrate the empty tomb!

“O! let us *give thanks unto the Lord*: let us *call upon His name*, and *make known His deeds among the people*. Let us *sing psalms unto Him and talk of all His wondrous works.*”²⁶

What ministry response is appropriate? Work to extend justice and freedom.

“Let us unite, with our thanksgiving, prayer to Almighty God, for the completion of His begun goodness to our brethren in Africa.”²⁷

True to the African American soul care and spiritual direction tradition, sustaining, healing, reconciling, and guiding are *societal* as well as individual. Liberation starts with spiritual freedom from sin through Christ. It continues with personal freedom from slavery. However, it is never finished until there is universal freedom from the slavery of sin and the sin of slavery.

Join the Conversation

How does Rev. Jones’ sermon on Exodus 3 help you to better understand the African American experience in America?

Concerning Rev. Jones’ repeated phrase, “*He has seen*”:

- What misery in your life has God seen? What difference does it make knowing that He sees and cares?
- How can you help your friends to know that *God* sees their misery?
- How can you communicate that *you* see the misery of your spiritual friends?

Part 5

Following the North Star: The African American Faith Journey

The African American Faith Journey

We follow the North Star guidance of African American faith narratives by remembering that life is the story of God's conquest of evil in our lives and on our planet. God is the Hero of our biblical faith story. Our heroic Savior has sovereignly chosen to work with us, in us, and through us.

The ultimate evil adversary in our story is Satan. He inspires all sin, including the sin of slavery.

Emancipation from sin is God's grace-work. He saves us by grace through faith then calls us individually and corporately to work out our salvation with fear and trembling—in childlike dependence upon him.

Faith is childlike, yet it is adult and mature. Faith requires courage which is inspired by hope which motivates us to love one another for God's glory. Such daring adult faith refuses to deny the realities of suffering and sin. Instead, it faces life head-on.

The African American National Anthem: *Lift Every Voice!*

Such faith faces life with the faith of James Weldon Johnson. Johnson is the author of *Lift Every Voice* which has been called "The African American National Anthem."

Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet,
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered;
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
 Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
 Thou who hast by thy might, led us into the light,
 Keep us forever in the path, we pray.

Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee.
 Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee.
 Shadowed beneath Thy hand, may we forever stand,
 True to our God, true to our native land.²⁸

But God!

This is the faith journey for Africans in America. This is their National Anthem. This is the Black national narrative.

Freedom did not ring for enslaved African Americans. Instead, *bondage reigned*.

But God!

Enslavement is not the end of the story—not earthly enslavement and not spiritual enslavement.

The new personal and national narrative for the African American Christian sounds something like this:

“We’ve come this far by faith. The journey has been dark, but it’s taught us great faith lessons leading us toward the light. The journey isn’t over yet. Our path remains strewn with obstacles, but the goal is in sight. God calls us on our voyage to live an emancipated *spiritual* life. Whatever bondage the world, the flesh, and the Devil hurl at us, through Christ’s power at work within us, we can stand, *as one*, true to God and true to our native land.”

The Rest of the Story

We all—Black and White and Asian and Hispanic and Native American—have much to learn from the faith journey of African American Christians—our predecessors in the faith, and our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We have much to learn especially about *moving beyond the suffering*. The Black experience in America has been filled with suffering—and it continues to this day. Yet, in Christ, African Americans experience an exodus in the midst of suffering as they follow in Christ’s steps by entrusting themselves to the God who judges justly (1 Peter 2:21-25).

Join the Conversation

Of everything in our five-part series, what has surprised you the most about the African American experience in America? How can you apply this new knowledge as you work toward racial reconciliation?

In your life, how can you follow the African American example of facing suffering face-to-face with Christ moving beyond suffering to clinging to Christ so you can sing a song of faith and hope?

Endnotes

¹Warner, *American Sermons*, p. 42.

²Raboteau, "The Legacy of a Suffering Church," in Altschul, *An Unbroken Circle*, p. 81.

³Raboteau, "The Legacy of a Suffering Church," in Altschul, *An Unbroken Circle*, p. 81.

⁴Hughes, *The Book of Negro Folklore*, p. 286.

⁵Coffin, *The Boys of '61*, p. 415.

⁶Reed, *An American Diary*, p. 65.

⁷McClain, *Songs of Zion*, song 192.

⁸Albert, *The House of Bondage*, p. 31.

⁹Raboteau, "The Legacy of a Suffering Church," in Altschul, *An Unbroken Circle*, p. 81.

¹⁰Hopkins, *Down, Up, and, Over*, p. 107.

¹¹Johnson, *God Struck Me Dead*, p. 170.

¹²Bontemps, *Five Black Lives*, pp. 73-74.

¹³Bibb, *Narrative of the Life*, p. 24.

¹⁴Bibb, *Narrative of the Life*, p. 69.

¹⁵Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care*, p. 18.

¹⁶Ashby, *Our Home Is Over Jordan*, p. 56.

¹⁷Albert, *The House of Bondage*, pp. 129-130.

¹⁸Albert, *The House of Bondage*, p. 130.

¹⁹Evans, *We Have Been Believers*, pp. 40-41.

²⁰Ibid., p. 41.

²¹Berlin, *Free at Last*, pp. 29-30.

²²Wimberly, *Moving from Shame to Self-Worth*, pp. 16-27.

²³Warner, p. 540.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., p. 541.

²⁶Ibid., p. 542.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸McClain, song 32.