

Journey To Freedom: Exploring The Exodus

Sermon 1 (Jan 8, 2012): Introduction

Perhaps as you went through your teenage years, you were increasingly keen to be free and independent of your parents? During this time, our parents lovingly sought to grant us increasing independence as evidence of our personal responsibility appeared. Until one day, we were allowed to make our own decisions and to live as we choose.

Long ago, this issue was dramatized in ancient Israel's struggle to secure her freedom and to demonstrate responsible obedience to God and to live 'fully' in right relationship with God and others. At one level, Moses can therefore be thought of as the anxious parent deputized by God to lead the people of God to independence and to teach them responsible and fulfilling freedom with God. But there is much more to the book of Exodus than this.

This is because the true story of Israel's journey from slavery under Pharaoh to freedom with God speaks to us today in our Christian journey. The book of Exodus is a pivotal book in our understanding of both the Old and New Testaments as it recounts the story of God's presence drawing near to His people as He frees them and leads them to the Promised Land and the covenant relationship – to freedom and new life. In the next 9 weeks, as we share the journey with the people of God 3,500 years ago and look at selected parts of God's salvation story, expect to hear the voice of God speaking across the centuries into our own lives.

The events described in the Book of the Exodus cover nearly 100 years and include major themes: the name and glory of God; the Covenants between God and man; the Law and the Tabernacle; the institution of the Passover which points to salvation through the death of Christ. What's more the Tabernacle and the priesthood reveal God-given principles of how we are to worship God and the privileges and responsibilities of being a person of God.

When Moses turned to the burning bush he came into the presence of the Lord. From that moment on, Moses found himself living in the tension between the ineffable mystery and presence of God and pragmatic daily living – a tension that is perhaps all too familiar to us. So come expectant.....

Some Background Information

The story that began in Genesis continues in Exodus. However, a large period of time has elapsed between when the story stopped in Genesis with the death of Joseph and the

expectation of the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham through his descendants who are in Egypt (as God had forecast in Genesis 15:13) and its resumption in Exodus.

The book of Exodus, which continues the unfolding story of God's salvation, therefore begins by looking back to the end of Genesis and recalling the entry of Jacob's family into Egypt. The Hebrew title for the book of Exodus is *'These are the names'* – derived from the opening line in Exodus 1:1 – and helps to underline the continuity between the books.

At the end of Genesis, God's people are little more than a relatively small extended family. In Exodus 1:5, we read that they were just 70. But as Exodus 1:6-7 tell us, God quickly began to fulfill His promises in the remarkable growth of the nation. Accordingly by the time Exodus begins, God's people are numerous enough to be called a nation. Estimates put the total number of Israelites at the time of the Exodus well over a million.

Date: From internal Biblical reference, the Exodus is dated to the 15th Century BC. (Note: This is the date of the event not the writing of the book.) We read in 1 Kings 6:1, *"In the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites came out of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, the second month, he began to build the temple of the LORD."* The fourth year of Solomon's reign is widely accepted to be 967BC which allows us to date the Exodus to 1447BC.

Authorship: The book of Exodus itself does not make any direct attempt to credit authorship to Moses. Biblical scholarship has identified either 3 or 4 major 'voices' in the Exodus text which hints at a number of authors or redactors assembling and shaping the text over a period of time.

An alternative view with regards authorship is based around the tradition that Moses himself wrote not just Exodus but the whole of the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the Old Testament) – a view largely based on the numerous references to Moses' writing activity in the Pentateuch, and the Israelite tradition of referring to a 'Book of Moses'.

Scholars suggest that the most realistic scenario is that Exodus, like the rest of the Pentateuch, contains pre-Mosaic sources, post-Mosaic editing and redaction, and a certain amount of Mosaic writing.

Despite the clear presence of a number of different authors and redactors and evidence of different source material the book is still to be read as a whole piece of theological / historical literature. The editing is not haphazard. It is not a literary or theological goulash – ingredients thrown in, mixed up and served - but a deliberate and carefully compiled document with a clear structure and theological trajectory.

Structure: The book reveals a clear internal structure and can be broken down into 3 key sections based on location or theological content:

Location

- 1) Israel in Egypt (Ex. 1:1 – 13:16)
- 2) Israel in the wilderness (Ex. 13:17 – 18:27)
- 3) Israel at Sinai (Ex. 19:1 – 40:38)

Theological Content

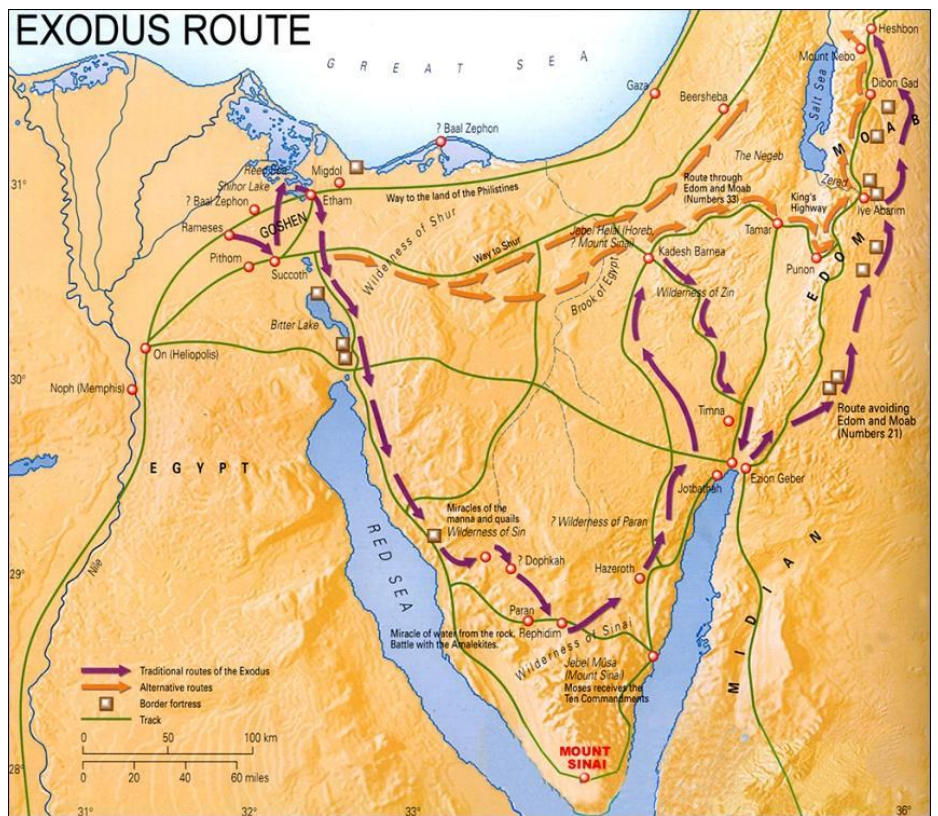
- 1) God saves Israel from slavery (Ex. 1:1 – 18:27)
- 2) God gives Israel his law (Ex. 19:1 – 24:18)
- 3) God instructs Israel to build the Tabernacle (Ex. 25:1 – 40:38)

More conservative scholars have summarized the structure of the book as built around the themes of 1) Salvation, 2) Law 3) Worship.

More Detailed Structure

1. God Saves Israel from Slavery (Ex. 1:1 – 18:27)

In this first section of Exodus, the problem of the enslavement of Israel is introduced. Not only are God’s people enslaved, but Pharaoh attempts to limit the population growth of the Israelites. Into this difficult situation Moses is introduced. Numerous miraculous events and a good deal of irony surround Moses’ birth and early life underlining the age old truth that when it comes to salvation God is full of surprises.



In Chapters 3 & 4, events conspire to force Moses out of Egypt and into the desert where he is taught about the nature of the God he is to serve. Chapters 5-12 narrate the details of Moses’ struggle against Pharaoh. In the narrative Moses is God’s representative, with Pharaoh symbolizing / representing the pagan Egyptian Gods. The plagues begin and increase in severity until eventually the Israelites are released.

Chapters 13 – 15 recount the journey out of Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea – the symbolic moment at which Israel is released from captivity and bondage. The crossing of

the Red Sea is of huge symbolic and practical importance as through it God works both salvation (for Israel) and judgement (on Egypt).

The second half of chapter 15 until the end of chapter 18 describes the transition and change of location to the wilderness. From the very beginning of their time in the wilderness the characteristic grumbling and complaints of an ungrateful people emerge – despite repeated demonstrations of God at work on their behalf.

2. God Gives Israel His Law (Ex. 19:1 – 24:18)

Three months or so after leaving Egypt the people of Israel arrive at Mount Sinai. They end up spending approximately two years in this location! It's worth noting that the rest of the Exodus narrative, and the narrative in Leviticus and the first part of Numbers, all take place at Mount Sinai.

It is at Mount Sinai that the Law is first given to Moses. God's presence is made known as He appears in smoke and fire on the mountain and the mountain becomes holy space. Moses ascends the mountain and receives the Ten Commandments and the 'book of the covenant'.

3. God instructs Israel to build the Tabernacle (Ex. 25:1 – 40:38)

A large amount of the Exodus account is devoted to the building of the Tabernacle. God's directions regarding the building of the Tabernacle are recounted in detail as is the actual building itself. That so much attention is given over to the Tabernacle highlights its importance to the wilderness generation of Israelites. The Tabernacle was the primary symbol of God's presence with his people and so occupied a key role in the religious life of the people of God. It is easy to skip over this final part of Exodus and to view it as repetitious and of little relevance, but to do so is to miss out on a key feature of the wilderness years.

In Summary

Each of these three sections in various ways underlines the central theological thrust of the book – *that God is present with Israel as Saviour and King*. The Exodus, the wilderness wanderings, the Tabernacle, and the ongoing life of the community testify to this and provide a commentary on the reality of God's presence being worked out and understood.

As we work through this 9 week series, we engage with God's people 3,500 years ago as they encountered the presence and work of God. The voice of God's people in ancient Egypt and in the wilderness echoes through the centuries and provides us with so much that is helpful as we negotiate our own life of faith – based, as was theirs – in the move from slavery to freedom, from wilderness to promised land.

Equally, as well as hearing the voices of God's people, we also hear the voice of God and see His work unfolding in the Exodus story. God rescues a nation, redeems his people, and

leads them out, via a time of shaping and refining, to a land where God's presence is clearly seen and his blessing is known.

House group Questions:

Remember: The book of Exodus continues the unfolding story of God's salvation from the end of the book of Genesis. The Exodus (or freedom) story in the book began when the descendants of Abraham entered Egypt as God had forecast (see Genesis 15:13). Egypt was 'the superpower' of the ancient world at this time. It is important to remember that the people of God were still awaiting for the promise of God to their forefather Abraham to be fulfilled as they entered Egypt as a tiny group and then grew significantly. The book of Exodus therefore begins by looking back to how the Israelites entered Egypt and bringing us up to date many, many years later.

Ice-breaker

1. Have you read the book of Exodus before? If so, what do you remember?

Study Questions: Read Exodus 1: 1-22

2. What was the situation of the Israelites under a King who had forgotten Joseph's role (Genesis 41) in saving the nation (verses 8-14)?
3. Why did Pharaoh's strategy backfire (v.12)?
4. What new population control plans did Pharaoh devise (v.15-22)?
5. How were his plans thwarted?
6. Imagine the emotions of the King and the mid-wives when he summoned them (v.18)? What do you think was the secret of the women's self-control and wisdom (v.17, 21)?
7. The greater the pressure applied by Pharaoh, the greater the increase of Israel (v.20-21). How do you account for this?

Concluding question of application

8. In what circumstances have you felt oppressed by unreasonable demands? How did you experience the help of God?

Suggested Reading:

1. Exodus: Free To Serve Stephen Dray (pub. Crossway)
 2. The Message of Exodus (BST Commentary) Alec Motyer (pub. IVP)
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Sermon 2 (Jan 15, 2012): An Anointed Leader

By this stage in the Exodus story we've learnt of the desperate situation in which the Hebrews find themselves. Life in Egypt is tough as a slave.

Some history: It's worth noting that the Hebrews were not, at this point in time, an organized nation. Tribal affinity existed within the Hebrew people in the same way as it did amongst most people groups in that part of the world, but the people that Moses will go on to lead out of Egypt are not yet an organized socio-political group. The organized 12 tribe structure of the nation would come in to being later whilst the Hebrew people were in Canaan. Accordingly, Moses' call is not to lead a well defined community with a clear social and political structure and organization. Rather it is a call to pull together a loosely affiliated people, albeit with a common heritage and ancestry, into a people that would eventually become God's agent and witness to the whole of his creation.

This helps us to appreciate the magnitude of the call that God gave Moses. Moses was called by God to unite a disparate group of unruly people and lead them on a demanding journey into an uncertain land with a shared purpose of building a new community under God. Moses really did have a mountain to climb!

Ice-breaker: Have you ever been surprised and met a famous person? How did you feel? How did those around you respond? How did the celebrity act?

Study Questions *Read Exodus 3: 1-15*

To draw out the meaning of this passage to us, I have prepared 6 questions that are prefaced by some succinct teaching around the passage. I hope that this will be helpful.

1. God grabbed Moses' attention in dramatic way. The burning bush is an example of a theophany. Theophany simply means the appearance of God, or to put it another way, divine disclosure to a human being. Moses' experience on Mount Horeb was a theophany.

Why do you think God chose to reveal Himself to Moses in this way and for what purpose?

2. How did Moses respond and why?
3. Have you or anyone in your group experienced God making Himself known to you? How did you respond? Were you surprised as Moses clearly was – he was looking for food for the sheep in his care (v1). Is the reference to sheep symbolic?

4. This God who speaks from the burning bush goes on to further reveal himself to Moses. He says *"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"* (v6). At this point, the true nature of the divine encounter becomes clear to Moses, evidenced in the way in which he responds to this information. On learning that this was no less than the God of the great Patriarchs, Moses hides his face in fear (v6b). Before he simply gazed at the bush in awe (v2-3).

And then something tremendously important happens in this encounter, something that will have a deep and lasting impact on Israel and on all those who have followed the God of the Bible since. God refers to himself as *'the God'* (v6). Not *'a God'* but *'the God'*. The God who met with Abraham and promised that from him would come a nation of people so numerous as the grains of sand on the shore. Moses was used to a pantheon of Gods, local and household deities, regional and tribal gods, but this revelation of the divine presence is nothing less than *'the God'*, the one who met with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is now meeting with Moses. God has history, and it is into this history that Moses now steps.

q) Why do you think this is so important?

5. From the self-revelation of God to Moses flows the call of Moses. To use the classical puritan formulation, *'the initiative belongs to God'*.

Thinking about calling, there is a tendency to think of calling in highly individual terms. For example, *'God has called **me** to follow him.'* *'God has called **me** to go to...'* *'God has called **me** to do...'* Whilst this is on one level true, calling understood simply as individual is a long way from the picture of calling in the Bible. This tendency to see call as being first and foremost about the person who is called is ultimately damaging.

Moses is called, personally, yes, but not in isolation. Moses' call is not first and foremost about him or designed to ensure that he feels valued and important in God's plan. Moses' call, like the call to all disciples' is a call to serve, and a call **to and for** others. Do you start to see some connections now?

Moses' call is to play a part in the work that God himself will accomplish. Yahweh will come down to rescue the Hebrews. The full force of this is lost in the English translations of the Bible. A literal translation of the verse in Hebrew is that God will *'snatch'* his people from the Egyptians implying a certain level of force - and Moses' call is to play a role in this divine action. In this sense, Moses' call is a blue-print for the call of all Christians. This is simply to respond obediently and reverently to God and to be involved in the work that God is doing. To play a part in the action that God is taking. Behind this is the assumption that God is always active, always working towards his final goal, the redemption of creation and the establishing of the kingdom reign of Christ.

q) Do you think of God as always active and always working towards His eventual goal? Do you understand your calling in light of this ongoing work of God?

- q) Here's a second challenging question – do you understand your call as being primarily about you, or is it a call to and for God and others?
6. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has made clear to Moses that He's seen the plight of his people (v7). God is going to act, as He has promised long ago and He's called Moses to be the one to lead His people into a '*land flowing with milk and honey*' and a '*good and spacious land*'. It is now Moses' turn to respond.

At this point in the narrative Moses doesn't cover himself in glory. We might expect that personally confronted with such a dramatic revelation of God's presence that Moses would be full of faith and boldness, eager to embrace the divine call that he has received. But he's not. What follows is a fascinating and immensely important exchange between God and Moses, which is built around a play on the words 'I Am' – the revelation of the name of God as Yahweh.

Moses says "who am I...that I..."

God says "I will...it is I..."

The point is simple – who Moses is, is not the issue. What matters is who is with Moses!

Moses, his first question answered, then asks a second question (v13). It is one thing for God to be with Moses, but Moses wants to know who God is. This is not unreasonable in the circumstances. And so Moses responds "...what if they ask me, 'What is his name?'"

What Moses asks here, is not so much what God ought to be known as, but whether God can accomplish the things He is promising. And so God reveals His 'name' – but it's not so much a name as an assertion of authority and an essential reality. "*I am that I am*" says God (v14). Meaning – continuing unfinished action – 'I am being that I am being' – not a conceptual or abstract being, but an active being – that God can only properly be referred to as 'is' or "The One Who Always Is".

The revelation of the name of God as "The One Who Always Is" was of immense significance for the Hebrews. Yahweh Is – however absent He may have seemed to be, however powerless He might have appeared, however inactive He was accused of being – Yahweh is – the continuing unfinished action of God is. He is active being and active presence.

For a people in slavery, about to embark on a journey that would establish and define a nation, this was what they needed to know. The response of faith demonstrated by the men, women, and children who left Egypt was built on this assertion of God's being and presence. And so the Exodus begins...

- q) Thinking about this theophany; our new understanding of the nature of the call from God and now appreciating the importance of Yahweh's description of Himself as

“the” God and “The One Who Always Is”, how does this help you in your understanding and daily relationship with God?

Conclusion:

Encouraged by what we have learnt, invite friends to share some requests for prayer and answers to prayer.

Be encouraged that the God of Moses is our God today.



Sermon 3 (Jan 22, 2012): Getting Pharaoh's Attention

As group leader, you may find it helpful to read Exodus 3-7 before you meet as a group so that you are familiar with the background to this study.

We're now at the point in the Exodus story where the plagues and disasters that God brings against Egypt and Pharaoh reach their climax. As we read about the exchange between Pharaoh and Moses, we learn more about the nature of trust in God, the purpose and ways of God and His character.

Ice-breaker:

Aged 5, my mother caught me stealing a bag of sweets from our local Sainsburys when we went on our weekly shop with my younger sister. Part of my punishment, was to write a letter of apology to the Store Manager and to deliver it personally to him in his office together with the cost of the sweets from my pocket money. I learnt my lesson and was humbled!

Have you had a similar experience?

Study Questions:

1. Skim the preceding chapters to name the preceding plagues and note Pharaoh's response. Do you see a pattern emerging in how Pharaoh responds?

Read Exodus 10:21-29; 11:1-10

2. Whilst we are not like Pharaoh, we can/do fall into the same temptation to try to ignore/disobey God and then offer a grudging acknowledgement and a conditional repentance. Can you identify with this?
3. Why do you think the plagues kept coming?
4. **Looking at Exodus 10:21-29.** The first plague attacked the power of one of Egypt's greatest gods, the river Nile. The ancient Egyptians worshipped the river Nile because it was vital to their way of life. (Remember in Exodus 1, that Pharaoh sought to enlist the support of this god by offering baby Israelite boys as a sacrifice as he tried to constrain their growth as a people group in Egypt.) The ninth plague (darkness) challenged the other great deity in their life – the sun. This plague was a particular insult to Pharaoh as he was believed to be the incarnation of the sun-god.

In response to the terrifying darkness, the eclipsing of the great Sun God, Pharaoh tells Moses that the Hebrew people will be permitted to leave but with one condition - they must leave their livestock behind. For Moses this condition was

un-acceptable because the animals for sacrifice had to be chosen from those owned by the Hebrew people.

Why do you think this was? Was Moses being “fussy”?

(Answer: It would have been possible for the Hebrews to find cattle and animals or sacrifice on their exodus journey out of Egypt. Animals roamed freely and not all were the property of individuals. But to sacrifice an animal that had been found on the way would have cost the Hebrew people nothing. It was important that the sacrifice was just that, a sacrifice, and that meant giving to God something of value from one’s personal possessions.)

5. In one form or another God’s people have always been required to make a “sacrifice” to and for God. As Christians, we don’t believe that the sacrifices we make to and for God earn our salvation or appease God. But we do believe that part of the response of faith entails willingness for Christians to give things over to God and to give of our best to Him first. As we do so, our action demonstrates:
 - a. our desire to honour God by placing Him first
 - b. our acceptance that all things belong to God and
 - c. our dependency and faith in God to provide

How does this understanding of surrender/sacrifice reveal itself in our daily life?

6. **Looking at Exodus 11:1-10.** What do you think of the nature of the final plague? Why does God choose to act in this way to ensure that Pharaoh agrees to set His people free?

(Answer: I must confess that, at first reading, this action of God is difficult to accept. Remembering the fascination of the ancient Egyptians with death - think of the great pyramids and their contents - and their desire to secure safe passage in the after life, this plague was all the more severe upon them.

Commentators suggest that this final plague was perhaps for the following reason. The Bible teaches that death and eternal separation from God is the ultimate and final punishment for sin. Accordingly, through his action in this plague, God is revealing his divinity, authority and purpose. As holy and just, God must act against sin. What’s more, His will must prevail.)

Conclusion:

Encouraged by what we have learnt about the place of sacrifice and trust in God, invite friends to share some requests for prayer and answers to prayer.



Sermon 4 (Jan 29, 2012):

Get Out! The Exodus Begins

Finally, the exodus begins. After 430 years the Hebrews begin their journey towards freedom in the Promised Land as the covenant people of God. This is a momentous event. The sequence of divinely appointed events that begins here will lead directly to the establishment of Israel as a nation, and the first stage of the fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham.

Ice-breaker:

What's the longest or most difficult journey that you have undertaken?
Share your memories with others.

Study Questions:

1. **Read Exodus 12:1-31.** Reading about the Passover, do you see the connection to Jesus (who was/is described as the "lamb of God") and the Communion meal? Take a few minutes to draw out the connection and symbolism of the Passover. This event brought freedom and new life with God. The Jews continue to celebrate it today.
2. **Read verses 31-36.** How is Pharaoh's attitude and behaviour different to his earlier responses to Moses and Aaron? What do you think he thinks about God now? Why do you think this is?

(Commentary: Pharaoh rises in the middle of the night to call Moses for an urgent audience. Not that long ago Pharaoh did not know or acknowledge God and treated God's requests and threats with contempt. But no longer. What's more he now reverses his previous order that he never wanted to see Moses again. Pharaoh's defeat is complete. From stubbornly refusing to let the Hebrews go, he now pleads with Moses for them to leave. Not just the Hebrew people, but their livestock too! "Get up, get out, go on" says Pharaoh "Go worship the Lord as you said".

The exchange between Moses and Pharaoh ends with the ultimate capitulation of the Pharaoh who had claimed ignorance of Yahweh, and then sought to match his mighty acts, and then withdrew his promises as soon as they were made. He asks for Yahweh's blessing! His resistance has gone, there is no need for further hardening of heart. God has proved both His presence and His power, and Pharaoh asks simply that the terrible curse which God has placed on Egypt might be lifted.)

3. **Looking at verse 33.** All of the Egyptians now want the Israelites to leave. This is because all of their families have been affected by the plagues and curses. The

death of first born children being the last plague. Although this was a very different time to ours, I find this act of God very upsetting.

Sometimes, perhaps because we are separated by so much history, we can gloss over the reality of this suffering or glibly justify it as 'a means to an end', after all 'God can do what He likes'. Or perhaps we may be tempted to view the Egyptians simply as pawns in the great plan of God. Reading passages such as this, where a great many suffer, seemingly for the sake of Israel, should make us ask difficult questions:

Why was it that every family had to suffer such a terrible thing? Was every family really equally responsible for the enslavement of the Hebrews? Did every family really have to suffer?

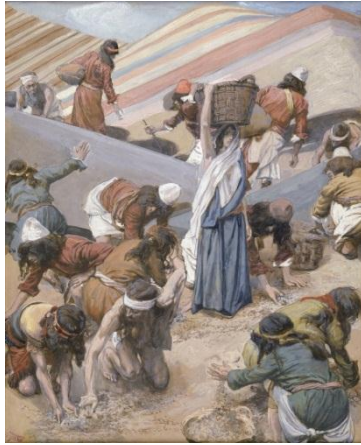
Sometimes we can shy away from asking the difficult questions. Sometimes we can deliberately blind ourselves towards the more awkward bits of the Bible...but we shouldn't - to do so is to live in denial and to be less than honest with ourselves and God. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 encourages us that *all* scripture is relevant and instructive. Just as Jacob "wrestled with God" and Biblical characters also wrestled with God in their journey of discipleship, so we are to wrestle as we seek to grow in faith with the help of the Holy Spirit.

What do you think of the way God chooses to act against Pharaoh?

4. As part of His covenant promise to Abraham, God has now fulfilled his promise and warnings to Moses (see Exodus 3:20-22; 4:23). How would God's action have shaped the Hebrews understanding of God?
5. Remembering that this is just one part of God's revelation and that Jesus, the Son of God, is yet to come and bring in the New Covenant, how has your understanding of God been influenced by our reading of Exodus so far?

Conclusion:

Consider closing with a time of prayer thanking God who He is, His presence and faithfulness. Ask God for His help to increasingly understand and accept aspects of His ways as we study the Old Testament, secure in the knowledge of His love and presence with us as we continue our journey of discipleship.



Sermon 5 (Feb 12, 2012):

God's Provision in the Wilderness

As group leader, you may find it helpful to read Exodus 12-15 before you meet as a group so that you are familiar with the background to this study.

Following the miracle of the crossing of Red Sea, the Israelites are on their journey to freedom. Three days in as they journey through the desert, they start to grumble (15:24) and the Lord again provides and blesses them with another promise (15: 26) which requires their obedience. Following this 'inconvenience' (15:22), the Lord leads them onwards into the desert to test their faith again.

Ice-breaker:

When was the last time that you grumbled?
Do you think that grumbling has a purpose?
Can grumbling be a "good thing"?

Study Questions:

Read Exodus 16:1-18

7. In verses 2-4, we read that "the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron..." Reading these verses, it appears that the Israelites were recalling their earlier life as slaves through 'rose tinted spectacles'. Looking at verses 7-8, why do you think they were groaning against God? What does their action reveal about them and their faith at this time?
8. In what ways, can/do we resemble the Israelites today in our journey with God?
9. Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-5, 10. What do you think about Paul's teaching here which refers to the Israelites conduct on their journey to freedom? How does this speak to us today? As we think about grumbling against God and within the church, you may like to read James 3:1-12 where the apostle gives more teaching about the tongue.
10. Read Exodus 16: 4-6 and 13-16. Do you see the connection to Jesus (see John 6:3, 51)?

Through the provision of the manna, God satisfied the physical and spiritual need of the people of God. Notice also that God graciously listened and provided more than what they asked for - through the manna (bread) and quail (meat) He provided

for their long term needs. Did you notice also (verse 10) that the Lord made Himself visible to everyone – to reassure and encourage faith.

11. God's generous provision was accompanied by a simple instruction (verse 16). This reveals that God acted (and continues to act today) to develop trust in and obedience to Him. We are invited and expected to honour God through obedience.

Skim read the rest of the chapter. As we think about our continuing journey with God, how does this study help us?

Conclusion:

Consider asking people to share testimonies of when and how God has provided for them.

Close by a time of prayer expressing thanks to God and asking for His continuing provision in requested areas (perhaps including resisting the temptation to grumble).

Consider concluding by saying the Lord's Prayer together.



Sermon 6 (February 19th, 2012):

Speaking With God - Moses on Mt. Sinai

Finally, the Hebrews who left Egypt in response to God's call to the Promised Land, arrive at one of the most important junctures of their journey so far – their time at Mount Sinai. (Remember the importance of mountains and high places in the Bible.)

It is therefore not surprising that the rest of the book of Exodus, all of Leviticus and the first part of Numbers all record the events that took place at Mt. Sinai. It is generally accepted that the Israelites spent two years encamped around Mt. Sinai. **Chapter 19 is perhaps one of the most important chapters in the Bible. Profound and eternal truths are established that apply to us:**

- God dwells with His people in covenant relationship and reveals more of His character, ways and purposes at this time in the salvation story
- Our responsibilities to God as members of the covenant are revealed (note: remember that Jesus initiated the second covenant)
- God judges His people when the covenant is broken
- God cleanses and forgives His people and restores the covenant

Ice-breaker:

Can you give an example of a covenant? (Answer: Marriage)

How is a covenant different to a promise? (Answer: A promise is a commitment by someone to do or not do something. In Biblical understanding a covenant is sacred and binding promise that God initiates. Given the character of God, He will never renege on a covenant.)

Study Questions: **Read Exodus 19: 1-25**

1. The section of Exodus that begins at the start of Chapter 19 is the centrepiece of the entire book **and** the centrepiece of Old Testament belief – the establishment of the covenant relationship between God and his people. It's not just that God has revealed Himself to His people. It's more than that - God now voluntarily commits Himself to a binding eternal relationship with His people. Given the nature and character of God, this is relationship in which God offers His presence to bless. The covenant is a gift of grace from God. For the agreement to be effective, the other party in this covenant agreement (the Israelites) are to honour their part. In this chapter, God begins to reveal what He requires of His people.

What is your response to this truth? How can/ought it to influence our faith?

2. Read verses 4-6. How does the language that God intentionally uses make you feel and what does this reveal about God?

(Helpful Hint: At this time, people were used to rulers who were hard, oppressive and selfish. Think back to Pharaoh. God's character and rule is different. Although God reminds Moses and the people that their salvation is attributable to His grace and sovereignty, the language He uses intentionally reveals His tenderness and love. E.g. verse 4b. When a young eagle learns to fly, the mother eagle hovers around and beneath them and is ready to swoop down to give support on her outstretched wings.)

3. From these verses, what do we learn about the covenant that God initiated with Abraham 600 years earlier (see Genesis 12:3) and developed under Moses (see Exodus 3:8)?

(Helpful Hint: God continues to extend the covenant by asking the Israelites to commit more to the covenant relationship through a life of obedience to God. We see this in these verses.)

"Holy nation": Holy means set apart for God. God's people, both individually and collectively, are to be different to everyone else, to be distinctive, and to live in a day to day relationship with God through which the fullness of life in the covenant may flow.

God also articulates his desire that Israel is to be a *"kingdom of priests"*. What does this mean?

The answer is as follows: Israel is to constitute the Lord's kingdom (the people who acknowledge Him as their King) and, like priests, are to be wholly committed (consecrated) to His service. At this time, priests enjoyed the most intimate relationship with God. So God is promising this relationship to every Israelite who honours Him by living obediently for Him. This then explains why (verse 10) the Lord tells Moses to instruct the people of God *"to consecrate"* themselves. Their outward preparation symbolised their inward preparation. What's more, the phrase also infers that everyone will share in the ongoing ministry of God. It is the origin of the expression and practice of *"the priesthood of all believers."*

4. Read verses 16-25. What do you think about the manner in which God revealed Himself? Why do you think God revealed Himself in this way at this time?

You may like to read Hebrews 12:18-28. Here, the writer refers back to Exodus 19 to deliberately contrast the new covenant that Jesus brings with the original covenant. In the old covenant, God chose to reveal himself in a certain way in order to develop faith at that particular time. To develop faith in the time of Christ and thereafter, God institutes the *new* covenant through Christ. The manner in which He lovingly and personally reveals Himself in the new covenant is a development of the old covenant. But God still requires personal obedience in the new covenant.

Conclusion:

Spend a few minutes thinking about and sharing the privileges and responsibilities of being members of the new covenant. Use this discussion as a basis for a time of prayer together.



Sermon 7 (Feb 26, 2012):

The Small Matter of the Golden Calf

A brief note to help set the scene: In terms of the flow of the historical narrative, Chapter 32 actually follows on from the end of Chapter 24. The chapters in between (25-31) provide a summary of what God taught Moses on the mountain.

Accordingly, it is accepted that chapters 25-31 are a later addition to the historical narrative.

To recap the story so far: the Covenant has been established, confirmed and the parameters of Israel's special relationship with Yahweh have been laid out – the instructions for worship and life. The Israelites are the jewel in the crown of all creation, God's treasured possession, and by fulfilling their obligations under the covenant they are assured of this status, their inheritance in the Promised Land, and the continued presence of God in their midst. God has been testing them on their journey to refine them and lead them into the fullness of relationship with Him. So far so good....

In Chapter 32, we pick up the story after Moses has ascended Mount Sinai to meet with God at His request. Moses has been on the mountain for '40 days and 40 nights' (a term used to denote a long period not necessarily exactly 40 days and 40 nights). And in his absence things begin to go very badly wrong...

Ice-breaker:

What's the longest amount of time that you have been separated from those you love?
How did you feel during this time apart?

Study Questions:

Read Exodus 32:1-18

12. Why do you think the Israelites made their "own god"? What do you think a "Golden calf" symbolizes?
13. Can you think of modern day equivalents of the golden calf?
14. Read verses 7-15. Do you see how the attitude and action of Moses resemble and points forwards to Jesus and his ministry of mediation for His people (you and me)?

Read Exodus 32:19-35

15. Contrast the response of Moses to that of Aaron. What can we learn from them?

16. Read verses 25-30. What do you think about the judgment that was made?

Conclusion:

What can we draw from this particular episode in God's unfolding story of salvation?

In one sense it's simple: The Hebrews fear and doubt combined to lead them to a place of unfaithfulness. Fearing that the presence of God had left them, unable to accept and live with the inherent invisibility and mystery of God, they recast him in their own terms. Terms that they could understand and control. Terms that made sense to them.

We, as those who live under the new covenant are privileged to have a greater revelation of the person and presence of God in Jesus Christ. And yet, even in this supreme act of accommodation, even in revealing himself in terms we can understand, God remains to us invisible and mysterious. And that can be difficult because we like to understand. And so perhaps we too face the same situation in our day to day life of following God.

It is perhaps helpful to ask ourselves some questions:

- In what ways can we be tempted to make Christ as we want him to be rather than as he is revealed?
- In times of difficulty, when the presence of God seems far off, do we create 'stand ins' for God?
- To what degree are we able to live faithfully and confidently with the invisible and mysterious God?

Do remember that we are blessed by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. (John 14:15-27)

Helpful Hints:

1. Erroneously presuming that Moses, who symbolised God's presence with them was 'gone' or selfishly impatient, the Israelites demand a substitute from Aaron. When men and women depart from the revelation of God, they tend to end up with a religion that is a perversion.

A bull was a symbol of strength, power and fertility. The Israelites thus pictured God as someone who would fulfil their personal ambitions. The inanimate golden calf was a contrast to the Lord who had revealed Himself to Moses and was personally caring for and guiding the people of God to the Promised Land. Yahweh was a holy God who hated sin but sought to bless His people and enjoy friendship with them. He understandably demanded a holy life of His followers which would be blessed.

Interestingly, the Egyptians worshipped a bull god, Apis. This may have inspired Aaron. His action was a flagrant violation of the second commandment (see

Exodus 20:4-5) and revealed much about Him and his understanding of God. Sin and fellowship offerings were made (verse 6) but an orgy followed. For Aaron, the offerings were made to 'manipulate' God and allow the people to continue in their sinful ways. Aaron constructed a cheap religion which demanded nothing of its followers and offered them nothing of spiritual, indeed of any real, value in return.

3. In Matthew 4:1-11, Jesus was driven into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. The temptation was to receive all the glory with none of the cost (see Matthew 4:8-9). If Jesus had agreed, He would never have been able to act as our mediator and Saviour. Although it was the Lord who spoke to Moses (32:10) the test was the same.

Despite the difficulties of leading the fickle people of Israel, Moses pleads with God on behalf of the people (verses 11-13). In faith, he speaks openly to "the Lord his God." Moses' relationship is personal and real. Notice also:

- that Moses did not excuse the sin of the people
- and appeals to the character and purpose of God (verses 12-13) reminding Him that the people were "His people" (verse 11)

Moses refuses personal glory and petitions God who relents. Moses seeks the glory of God above His own - just like Jesus. And this is our invitation too as John the Baptist also revealed (see John 3:30).

- 4 . Aaron gave in to the weakness of the people and led them into graver disobedience. Moses stands firm and destroys the golden calf. By grinding it into powder and making the people drink it, Moses demonstrated the powerlessness of the religion they had invented. It also identified the ringleaders!

Notice also how Aaron tried to place the blame elsewhere (verse 22) and escape the righteous judgement of God. How like Aaron mankind can be at times!

- 5 The full extent of the Israelites rebellion against the Lord is revealed in verse 25 – an orgy of sexual frenzy that was typical of pagan religions at this time. God had clearly spoken against sexual sin (20:14, 26; 22:16, 19; 28:42). The action of these Israelites dishonoured God privately and in public.

Moses called for those who were on the Lord's side to stand up for Him and wage war against sin. This was costly. To some, Moses' action may appear harsh but man can be aggressive in quelling a rebellion. The judgement on 3,000 people out of a nation of over 1,000,000 people puts matters in proportion and also demonstrates the seriousness of sin and the requirement of righteous justice.

The Lord refused Moses offer (verse 33) because no one could die in the place of others until the sinless Saviour died. Being Holy, the Lord was compelled to judge but as chapter 33 reveals, the Lord teaches the Israelites more about the nature of forgiveness and reconciliation as He continues to lead and provide for His people.



Sermon 8 (March 4, 2012)

The Second Chance – Covenant

From the low point of the incidents surrounding the making of the Golden Calf, a time so dangerous to the life of this new nation that merely surviving it is a feat of God's grace over man's rebellion, our exploration of Exodus now comes to one of the high points of the story. The renewal of the covenant and the next revelation of God to Moses.

Chapter 34 forms the last chapter of this particular part of the historical narrative, demonstrating a number of strong literary links to chapters 32 and 33, which in turn follow on from Chapter 24 in the historical sequence of events. In fact, although the text is broken at start of Chapter 34 and headed 'The new stone tablets' – there is really no such break, and the events that conclude in Chapter 34 really begin in Chapter 33:12.

Leaders may like to re-read the text, beginning at 33:12, as this allows for the immediate context of the verses to be set

Ice-breaker:

Have you ever had to learn a “basic” truth a second or third time? Perhaps learning to ride a bike, swim or use a computer? How did it feel when your “coach” kept going over the same ground again and again?

Study Questions:

In this study, God calls Moses to the mountain a second time to re-affirm His covenant and the rules for Holy living.

Read Exodus 34: 1-14

1. In our study this week, having moved on from the Golden Calf incident, Moses petitions God and asks for a demonstration of His presence and some reassurance that His presence will remain with both himself (Moses) and his people. God acquiesces to Moses request and demonstrates his 'Glory' to him in the most profound and powerful revelation of His presence so far. In the context of this part of the story, the word used for 'glory', means quite literally 'face', which helps us to make sense of Exodus 33:20.

From this encounter of the intimate and personal presence of Yahweh, Moses receives his instructions. God tells Moses to re-craft two stone tablets on which He will then re-inscribe His covenant law. The covenant, so quickly abandoned by the Hebrews will be renewed by God at His initiative.

Having given practical instructions, God then chooses to come down to Moses, stand with Him and pass in front of Moses (verses 5-7). As He does so, God proclaims:

“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished; He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”

Before we go on to think about this proclamation, can I encourage you to take some time to prayerfully reflect on this statement as a group. What most strikes you about these words? What is your response to them? (See Helpful Hints...)

2. The first half of God’s revelation is wonderful. But the second half of the revelation is challenging: *“Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished; He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”*

What do you think this means?

We’re familiar and probably agree with the idea of God not letting the guilty get off without justice being done - but punishing subsequent generations for the sins of those who have come before them...well that hardly seems fair and just! So what are we to make of this?

Most commentators agree that the form of words presented in Exodus is a poetic form that seeks to share meaning through the words used and also the way in which the words are assembled. Accordingly, when we read of God’s anger being visited on the children of those who sin, to the third and fourth generations, we are not to read this as literally meaning that a Great, Great, Grandchild will be punished for the sin of his or her Great, Great, Grandfather. Instead, taken in the context of the earlier assertion that God shows His mercy to thousands (of generations), we are to read this as poetic device which seeks to make the point that God’s desire to show mercy far outweighs His desire to punish. Nevertheless, we are left in no doubt by this passage that those who sin will be held to account by God and will face His judgment and justice.

It can be tempting to think of others when reflecting on ‘sinners’! It’s also tempting to think of ourselves as being without the sin that pervaded the life of Israel. But to do so is naïve. The reality of our lives is that we are subject to and tainted by sin as much as all the people who have gone before us. As God’s covenant people, that we sin is all the more tragic. Like the Israelites we manage to rebel despite all that God has done for us. And yet, in the face of this sin, as covenant people, God offers us His mercy and grace – if only we will acknowledge our need of it, respond in humble repentance and live for God as He invites/requires with the help of the Holy Spirit.

3. Read verses 8-14. Thinking about Moses, how are we to live in way that honours God and through which the fullness of God's covenant promise can be lived out?

For example, looking at verses 10-12, do you think if we lived as God invites/requires then things would be different in our society and world?

Conclusion:

Consider spending some time in confession and prayer, either as a group or individually. You may like to use these words of confession:

*Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
We have sinned against you
And against our neighbour
In thought and word and deed,
Through negligence, through weakness,
Through our own deliberate fault.
We are truly sorry
And repent of all our sins.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
Who died for us,
Forgive us all that is past
And grant that we may serve you in newness of life
To the glory of your name
Amen.*

Then re-read these words as a group and thank God for His mercy, grace and love.

"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin."

Helpful Hints:

These words spoken by Yahweh to Moses, which became one of the most ancient confessions of faith in scripture, are some of the most famous words in scripture. They are often recited description of the Lord. Interestingly, versions of this statement can be found in 8 other places in the Old Testament: Psalms 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; Numbers 14:18; Joel 2:13; Nahum 1:3; Nehemiah 9:17 & Jonah 4:2

Yahweh's decision to reveal himself in this way and with these words is interesting and important. You may recall that Moses, in his very first request that God reveal himself (Exodus ch3), is answered with a revelation of God's name.

In Moses' second request to God that He reveal himself, God answers to reveal His character. This second response, as well as explaining the divine name, also prepares Moses and in turn Israel, for the renewing of the covenant relationship. In revealing His character Yahweh reminds Israel that 'He is who He is' and 'will be who He will be' and that He will not accommodate his nature to the requests and vagaries of his people's commitment. God underlines the wonderful reality that He is willing to give himself to His people, but that they must take him exactly as He is. God will not compromise.

The English Non-conformist bible commentator and minister Matthew Henry (1662 – 1714) comments on the proclamation of God made to Moses:

"...He makes himself known in the glory of His grace, and goodness...He is merciful. This speaks of his tender compassion, like that of a father to his children.

He is gracious. This speaks of kindness...and says that He has compassion towards His creatures and a desire to do good towards them.

He is slow to anger (long-suffering). This is a branch of God's goodness which the sin of mankind necessitates.

He delays the execution of His justice, He waits in order to be gracious.

He abounds in love and faithfulness. This speaks of plentiful goodness which is above our expectation and deserving. The springs of mercy are always full, the streams of mercy always flowing. ...It speaks of promised goodness, it binds Him to mercy."

It is a long quote (translated by myself into modern English so not verbatim) but it's a beautiful description and summary of what God reveals of Himself.
