

THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD

Exodus tells the story of Israel's liberation from Egypt and its acceptance of an abiding, committed relationship to God.

Reflections on the
Book of Exodus by
Mark W. Hamilton

Table of Contents

Lesson 1: What's in a Name? (Exodus 1-2, 6)

Exodus recognizes that naming goes with power and namelessness with powerlessness. It tries to reverse that reality by naming midwives and families of slaves, thus giving them the dignity humans need. This lesson explores the nature of human dignity and how humans undermine it. It also focuses on how God, by giving names to things, seeks to make them meaningful.

Lesson 2: Hearing what the Lord Hears (Exodus 3-4)

Moses must leave his safe, comfortable life in order to do God's bidding. In this call narrative, Moses learns what the seemingly absent Yahweh has been concentrating on: the hurt of human beings. Moses learns that God cares for the oppressed, keeps promises, and engages human beings in redemptive work.

Lesson 3: On Negotiating with God (Exodus 7-10)

What would possess a person to defy God? The stories of the plagues reveal, among other things, Pharaoh's mindless attachment to power. We also see the desire of God to demolish false gods, represented by forces of nature. Exodus sets up the problem of whether God is the bringer of calamity or of relief. Free will and conditioning come into view as we consider what it means for a human leader to intend certain results.

Lesson 4: Worship and the Freedom of God (Exodus 12)

Slaves unaccustomed to the presence of God must learn what it means to worship as free persons. The instructions for the Passover connect human dignity with divine promise. We can use this part of the exodus story to explore what worship means in our own lives. The rhythms of life that worship offers make us into different people than we would otherwise be.

Lesson 5: Passing on the Faith (Exodus 13)

The continued life of a community of faith depends on educating newcomers in the key stories, practices, attitudes, beliefs, and ideas of that community. Israel at this point in Exodus needs some simple, sustainable, and effective mechanisms for educating its children and anyone who might join them later in what it means to be the people of God.

Lesson 6: Celebration 101: Worship as a Witness to What's Real (Exodus 15)

The Song at the Sea makes three moves: it recognizes God's incomparably great work of salvation; it calls for all the nations to hear of God's work and thus to draw near to God; and it invites Israel into God's presence at the holy mountain. This threefold move (upward, outward, and onward) is the basic movement of all worship that celebrates God's presence, and so the song becomes an avenue for us to talk about worship and life in our own time.

Lesson 7: Community-Building 101: Learning to Trust (Exodus 16-17)

In this first of a series of lessons on the nature of community, we see Israel trying to discern whether God is trustworthy or not. Their experience with their newfound deity so far has

been one of watching his systematic dismantling of the Egyptian Empire, not one of overtly benevolent actions toward humans. Thus they must learn that God can be trusted to provide the most basic elements of life. Community without trust cannot long survive, as the Israelites learn.

Lesson 8: Community-Building 201: Finding Leaders (Exodus 18)

In the second lesson on community, Israel must develop a system for finding, equipping, and sustaining leaders. While this text does not explore all the dimensions of leadership, it can serve as a springboard for our own reflections on the subject.

Lesson 9: Community-Building 301: Norms and Goals (Exodus 20-23)

In the third and last lesson on community, we recognize that we are what we do. Norms of behavior matter, and the reasons behind them matter. Mindless adherence to rules will destroy a community, and so will the anarchy of values. The Ten Commandments give us a way forward by connecting what we do to what God has done and by orienting us to the most basic needs humans have as we live together.

Lesson 10: Work for Liberated People (Exodus 25)

The former slaves must learn to work, no longer for the sake of oppressive masters, but for the sake of growing closer to God. The purpose of the Tabernacle was not to build a house for God, who after all needs no such abode, but to create a place where humans can, based on their own understandings of time, matter, and space, meet the God who transcends all three. In building this building, Israel learns again what meaningful work would be.

Lesson 11: Standing in God's Way (Exodus 32-33)

How does a religious leader respond to serious communal failure? Moses pleads with God for healing and forgiveness for Israel. The dialogue between Moses and God reveals new depth to their relationship as based on their communication "face to face."

Lesson 12: The Presence of God (Exodus 34 and 40)

Exodus began with an absent God and an enslaved people. It ends with God's overwhelming presence and a people on the road to freedom. Such a transformation has come about because God has taken initiative to save, teach, forgive, and heal. As Israel is born anew, it begins a story that continues until this day.

Exodus: A Brief Introduction

The book of Exodus, the second scroll in the Pentateuch, tells the story of Israel's liberation from Egyptian bondage and its formation as a nation. Though at one level an epic of origins for a nation, the book transcends its time and place as it bears witness to the desire of God to fashion a people who can live sane and holy lives in community with each other and in harmony with God.

The book itself goes under two different names. The Greek word *exodos* means "the way out" or "the migration," a name that the ancient Greek translators gave the book before the time of Christ in order to emphasize its main story line of liberation. The Hebrew name is *Shemot* ("names"), from the opening line "these are the names of the children of Israel...." This title emphasizes another key theme in the book, the idea that the nameless people and the nameless God receive names and thus become real.

The combination of these two titles provides a key to understanding the book: here we have a story of freedom *from* the shackles of oppression, in which only the powerful have names, and freedom *for* a relationship to the true and living God. Exodus invites readers to imagine alternatives to a world in which imaginary gods and deceptive value claims hide the greed and lust of the powerful. This alternative is called Israel. It is called the people of God.

Yet Exodus also recognizes that this imagined world is hard-won, always precarious, and for that reason all the more precious. Making it real will require more than the overthrow of empires. It will require also that freed people imagine themselves as living meaningful, committed, responsible lives. Freedom will lead to law, not as an act of surrender, but as its logical conclusion, for the alternatives to law are anarchy and tyranny. Israel has had enough of both.

In reading this book, it is helpful to remember several things, discussed below. But it is most important to remember that we have here a story, a record of the lives of real people with all their defeats and triumphs. And the most real character of all is the God who summons them into the desert so that they can live. Everything else is commentary.

The Structure of the Book

Exodus does not merely report one event after another. It has a clear and meaningful structure. A possible outline goes like this:

- A. Israel under bondage in Egypt (1:1-11:10)
- B. The Day of Liberation (12:1-15:21)
- C. Seeking God in the Desert (15:22-18:27)
- D. Finding God at Sinai (19:1-40:38)
 1. The Covenant (19:1-24:18)
 2. The First Tabernacle Instructions (25:1-31:18)
 3. A Trial of Faith (32:1-34:35)
 4. The Second Tabernacle Instructions and Completion (35:1-40:38)

Thus, at one level, the book has a simple geographical arrangement: slavery happens in Egypt and freedom in the desert outside Egypt. At another level, we could graph the book on a grid like this:

	Minimum Freedom	Maximum Freedom
Maximum Order	Slavery in Egypt	Law at Sinai
Minimum Order	The Plagues	Idolatry at Sinai

The only survivable quadrant is the one with maximum order and maximum freedom, epitomized by the giving of Torah at Sinai. It is possible to have maximum freedom and maximum order because the law is internal to the minds of Israelites, not an external norm imposed on them. Rational people should avoid the interruption of that state of harmony by either tyrants such as Pharaoh or reckless anarchists such as those who called for a Golden Calf. Hence the tension that makes the story of Exodus work.

Often we see order and freedom as opposites, and sometimes they are. But when the order derives from our pursuit of God and the things of God, then a life-giving, liberating pattern of meaningful living comes to be. Israel learns this truth as it comes to internalize the vision of justice and peace that the law sets forth.

Major Characters

Something else makes the story work: it has great characters. Along with the minor characters such as the midwives or Miriam or Pharaoh’s servants, four major characters play a role: Yahweh or God; Pharaoh; Moses; and the people of Israel as a whole.

First, take Yahweh. Although the midwives “fear God” and therefore preserve the lives of the babies, God seems conspicuously absent until He appears to Moses in the burning bush. Even then, it is not at all clear either who this God is (Moses must ask) or what sort of God this is. Much of the book explores the nature of the self-revealing God who keeps promising and has a wider set of capabilities than merely bringing catastrophes on stubborn leaders and their empires. The story of Exodus, at some level, is a referendum on the rule of God.

Second, as in any good story, this one has a villain: Pharaoh. Unnamed, historically unanchored, this ruler of the mightiest empire of the time proves no match for God, though how outclassed he is only becomes clear as the story progresses. Pharaoh’s extraordinary cruelty, arrogance, and stupidity lead to his and his nation’s downfall.

Third, God’s sidekick is Moses, a man who introduces himself as one lacking the most rudimentary speechmaking skills and demonstrating profound depths of self-doubt. Yet he became the instrument for divine justice and mercy, and one of the greatest religious leaders of all time.

Fourth, Israel functions here as a single character. Prone to doubt, crushed by hard labor, afraid of the future and despairing of the present, Israel as a people must become just that – no longer a ragtag mob of slaves but free men and women.

The interactions of these characters create the narrative excitement of this book. More than that, they show us the true nature of reality under God.

Major Themes

Of the many themes that play a role in Exodus, seven stand out. These will appear again and again throughout the book.

First is the identity and nature of God. The God of Israel's ancestors keeps promises, fights as a warrior against forces of evil, and extends mercy to the penitent. This God is Yahweh, who appeared to Moses at Sinai.

The second is the importance of justice in community. The Bible does not conceive of justice as an abstract list of rights and duties, but as the joint life of a community. Justice is what brings dignity to each person in the community. Injustice destroys dignity and meaning.

The third theme is obedience to God. The midwives obey the absent God, and Israel must learn to obey the present God. But this obedience is not based in fear, as it was when the slaves obeyed Pharaoh. Rather, it is based in trust as expressed in covenant.

The fourth theme is worship. When Moses tries to persuade Pharaoh to release the slaves, he says that Israel needs to worship their God. God, in turn, leads Israel to Sinai so that they can worship properly. Worship builds community.

The fifth theme is lawgiving. While American Christians sometimes understand law as a negative, restrictive, and ultimately deadening influence, Exodus understands law as an alternative to tyranny and anarchy. Law is a gift from God.

The sixth theme is repentance. Pharaoh will not repent and is destroyed. Israel does repent after worshipping the golden calf, and so is saved. The willingness to turn from evil is a fundamental character trait of the worshiper of the God of the Bible.

The seventh theme is election. While Christians sometimes portray election as the opposite of universal salvation, the Bible does not ordinarily see things that way. God chooses a people as a bridgehead into the human race so as to bring everyone to an awareness of salvation.

Again, it will be important to trace the interactions of these themes as Exodus seeks to work through the tensions and possibilities created by them. The book never has a simple take on any of them, and so we must be attentive. We will see that these themes appear repeatedly, sometimes in easily understandable ways, but often in forms that cause us to think more deeply about what they might mean in our own lives.

Exodus in History and Theology

To understand any biblical book, we need to know its setting, or rather settings. That is, we should consider what period of history it describes, when it was written, and how subsequent readers understood it. The series of contexts in which the material in the book has existed shapes how we understand it, much as the history of a house shapes how people live in it.

First, the story itself is set sometime in the Late Bronze Age, during the Egyptian New Kingdom. The lack of chronological detail in the book itself leaves us to guess the date of the exodus and the identity of the Pharaoh. The mention of the cities Pithom and Raamses may indicate a date in the thirteenth century BC, although the some scholars hold out for an earlier date. Most scholars believe that it is impossible to date the exodus with any sort of precision. The earliest fixed date in our chronology is about 1220 BC. Around that year, Pharaoh Merenptah (or Merneptah) left a stele, or stone monument, in which he

mentioned invading Palestine and defeating a series of cities and tribes, among them “Israel.” The Israelites existed in Palestine before this date, but we do not know how much earlier.

Second, the book itself was traditionally thought to be from Moses himself, but most modern scholars would question that claim because the book refers to Moses in the third person and, more importantly, because as we have it, Exodus is written in first millennium BC Hebrew, not the earlier language of the time of Moses. Having said that, it seems very likely that the basic structure of the story and even some texts (e.g., Exodus 15:1-18, the Song at the Sea) come from the second millennium.

Third, the story of Exodus has stimulated mountains of commentaries, sermons, poems, hymns, paintings, sculptures, and numerous other expressions of our desire for God’s liberating power in our lives. Tracing this history would be a life’s work. In this series, we will see a few examples, but there is much more to learn.

Fourth, in our own time, the book of Exodus has served many purposes. In poverty-stricken parts of the world, liberation theologians and others have used it to remind oppressed people of God’s desire to free them. In the West, Cecil B. DeMille and others used the story to point us to the commitments of freedom. Composers and artists used the story to speak of the search for human dignity. And so the history continues.

Most significantly, this history serves a theological purpose. The book of Exodus introduces a new kind of human experience into the world, that of a liberated people who seek the wholeness that God offers. Undoubtedly they are flawed, prone to human weakness and sin, and otherwise like everyone else. Nor do they hide from that fact. But the introduction of this new human experience is an effort at restoring the original human experience in which God communed with human beings face to face. The wild, unmanageable, yet uniquely meaningful relationship with God that Israel finds, almost against its will, becomes the model for the rest of the human experience, for all of us. Gloria in excelsis deo.

Additional Reading

Shelves of books about the book of Exodus exist. Here are a few that might prove useful:

Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003).

Mark W. Hamilton, *On the Mountain with God: Covenant and Freedom in Exodus* (Abilene, Tex.: Leafwood, 2009).

Göran Larsson, *Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999).

Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Lesson 1: What's in a Name? (Exodus 1-2, 6)

Exodus recognizes that naming goes with power and namelessness with powerlessness. It tries to reverse that reality by naming midwives and families of slaves, thus giving them the dignity humans need. This lesson explores the nature of human dignity and how humans undermine it. It also focuses on how God, by giving names to things, seeks to make them meaningful.

Outline

- A. Genealogy (1:1-7)
- B. Stories of breeding and killing (1:8-22)
- C. The Emergence of Moses (2:1-25)
- D. Who is God? (3:1-6:13)
- E. Genealogy (6:14-30)

Parts A and E form an inclusio, a literary device in which the opening and closing material are very similar. The inclusio creates a framework by which we can understand what is in the middle. The names and the act of naming are important.

Storyline

The opening of Exodus takes us back to Genesis by reminding us that Israel has escaped to Egypt. However, the earlier hopeful time of deliverance from famine proves risky, as a tiny minority grows into a perceived threat to the mightiest empire on earth. Thus the stories in chapter 1 describe the increasingly paranoid attitudes of Egyptian leaders toward the immigrants. Pharaoh begins by treating the Israelites as an economic resource, using them as slave laborers who can build the great monuments of the New Kingdom. Israel's response to this cruelty is to keep on multiplying, an act that obeys God's earliest command to human beings, but more significantly only increases the perceived threat to Egyptian order even as it provides more and more slaves for Egypt's economy.

Thus Pharaoh creates a second policy, more lethal, in which he seeks to breed his property in more scientific ways. As one would with cattle, he eliminates the males and leaves only the females as breeding stock (presumably eventually to be with Egyptians?). In its anatomy of oppression, Exodus has shown steps in the dehumanization of strangers: see them as economic resources only; deny the legitimacy of their basic human instincts; attempt to control their families; and, finally, fail to stop even at murder. This pattern of oppression has been repeated innumerable times in human history and is always the temptation of the paranoid in power.

The midwives' tale offers a slim hope for Israel's survival in such horrific surroundings. The women with the odd names Shiphrah ("Beauty") and Puah ("Sparkle"), perhaps given them as an act of defiance of the demeaning attitudes of the Egyptians toward Israel, defy Pharaoh. Their lie in Exodus 1:19, so obviously unbelievable and apparently playing to Egyptian prejudice, preserves life and so is justified, since the preservation of life is the highest human value under most circumstances. The midwives' refusal to obey Pharaoh comes from their "fear of God," that is, their religious commitments, whatever they were.

Here the story raises for us at least two points. First, there is the business of who gets a name and who does not. To name something is to make it real, to give it a place in the whole world of named things. Things that lack a name lack ultimate meaning. Exodus is quite selective about whom it gives names to. It begins by naming the offspring of Jacob, even though the reader already knows those names. It then steadfastly refuses to name Pharaoh, even though enormous monuments – many surviving to this day – bear the names, titles, and stories of triumphs of precisely these great leaders while ignoring the names of the countless slaves and peasants who made their success possible. Or rather, not “even though,” but precisely because the tendency of the empires of the world is to name the powerful and leave the powerless unnamed does Exodus go in the opposite direction.

The second problem the story surfaces is the question, where is God? The midwives have some sort of rudimentary fear of God, though doubtless it lacks any theological sophistication because the God of the ancestors has become unknown in Israel, owing to his apparent failure to keep the promises to the ancestors (see the next lesson). The women act with honor even when they cannot see God’s presence.

The same is true of Moses’ mother in chapter 2. Here we see the story zoom in on one family as it struggles with the implications of Pharaoh’s decrees. The best option seems to be to put the boy afloat in the Nile, where perhaps he can escape the crocodiles long enough to be found by someone able to save him. He is. As luck would have it – or, as providence would have it? – a princess finds Moses and raises him, giving him a name (that theme again!) and setting him on a course that might promise him opportunity but in fact proves a virtual dead end. Only when he leaves the palace and identifies with Israel can he begin the sojourn that leads to his being the liberator and lawgiver.

Finally, we turn to chapter 6, which picks up the idea of naming and reminds us that the nameless, the oppressed and downtrodden, do have names and therefore both histories and futures. Moses acts as God’s spokesperson in order to save a people.

Punchline

These stories, again, raise the question, “what’s in a name?” Exodus tries to give meaning to the lives of the Israelite slaves by giving them names, and thus purposes and relationships, that will reflect something more than the values Egypt assigns to them. We do not yet hear about God, and yet this very act of naming is a deeply religious act because it seeks to find human dignity – given by God in the creation – even where other humans have done their best to destroy it. As such, these stories help us hear the voices of multitudes who experience suffering, and they remind us that ours is a story deeply connected to their lives.

By giving us stories of ordinary people in extraordinarily difficult circumstances and by refusing to have God bail them out too early, Exodus creates a highly realistic depiction of human existence. We suffer. We cause suffering. We often face choices of great difficulty, in which all the answers seem bad. Yet we survive, not simply through luck and pluck, but through faith and trust. That is the story into which these small stories seeks to initiate us.

For Further Reflection

1. Where do you see signs of human-made suffering in the world today? Who is involved and why? What would it take to end this suffering?
2. The midwives risk their lives because they “fear (better: revere) God.” What sorts of risks would we take out of our reverence for God? What keeps us from taking such risks?
3. At age 40, Moses takes actions that might help his people, but do not. Why not? What do we learn from his misguided actions? When is it appropriate to act, and when inappropriate?
4. What are the unnamed things or persons around us? What names do we give some people that they do not want? Does the process of naming matter?

Lesson 2: Hearing what the Lord Hears (Exodus 3-4)

Moses must leave his safe, comfortable life in order to do God's bidding. In this call narrative, Moses learns what the seemingly absent Yahweh has been concentrating on: the hurt of human beings. Moses learns that God cares for the oppressed, keeps promises, and engages human beings in redemptive work.

Outline

- A. Moses meets God at the burning bush (3:1-6)
- B. God calls Moses to be a prophet (3:7-12)
- C. Moses argues with God (3:13-4:17)
 - 1. Who are you, and do you know what you're doing? (3:13-22)
 - 2. What if they do not listen? (4:1-9)
 - 3. I am not eloquent! (4:10-17)
- D. Moses departs (4:18-23)
- E. The firstborn sons (4:24-26)
- F. Moses goes to Egypt (4:27-31)

The story is a prophetic call narrative, a well-known genre in the Bible (see 1 Samuel 3; Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1). In such a story, the prophet offers reasons for not being God's spokesperson, and God overcomes those reasons. Thus Moses' reluctance is part of the game that a prophet must play, though there is no doubt that he will take the role, as indeed he must. In the interaction of God and Moses, however, we discover important aspects of how each views the world and thus what options we ourselves have.

Storyline

The call narrative opens with a puzzle, a bush that burns but is not consumed. Quickly, however, this puzzle changes into something far more complex and life-changing, Moses' encounter with a God who seeks to deliver. Here both Moses and God break their long silences, speaking to each other of miracles and long-hidden desires and fears. There is a marvelous candor in this story, a kind of innocent wonder on Moses' part and a passionate desire for a better world on God's. The conversation between them does more than simply reveal Moses' quite natural fears regarding his new and daunting calling. The conversation reveals the mind of God.

It may not make sense, then, to focus too much on Moses' expressions of fear. Certainly his confusion is understandable and common to everyone who has taken on the task of living faithfully to God. The mystery and majesty of the divine overwhelm our poor human faculties. Yet the story is not really about Moses, at least not primarily. It is about God's desire for Israel.

Several features of this desire stand out. First, God keeps promises to the ancestors. The theme of the promise to the ancestors shapes not only the book of Genesis, but much of the reflection on life in the promised land that we see in Deuteronomy. God keeps promises made long ago, even when the immediate recipients of the promises remain ungrateful. God's promise keeping does not directly depend on our response to it.

Hardening Pharaoh's Heart: *The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is a significant theme in Exodus 3-14. Sometimes, readers feel a certain sympathy for the Egyptian ruler, believing him to be unable to resist the manipulations of the puppeteering God. Such a reading, however, badly misunderstands Exodus, for several reasons. First, to harden a heart does not mean to make lacking in compassion but to strengthen with courage. The various Hebrew expressions translated "to harden his heart" all head in this direction. Second, and more importantly, the first person who hardens his heart, who resists reason and common decency, is Pharaoh himself. He is not an innocent bystander, but a brutal tyrant. Third, Pharaoh does not lose his ability to control his own actions. He is not a puppet without free will. He is arrogant, and that pride compromises his ability to will the good. Fourth, God's assessment of Pharaoh is not gratuitous but is realistic to its core. God recognizes that brutality corrupts, just as power corrupts.*

Second, God hears and sees the suffering of the people. Exodus 3:9 contrasts Israel's promised future with its terrible present, with God acknowledging the gap between dream and reality. Oddly, the text does not answer the question of what has taken God so long to notice or why He allowed things to come to such straits. Such questions, though legitimate, seem unanswerable. The point is that God acts now.

Third, God's desire is to bless Israel. The land of milk and honey has its own hazards and will require work. More than that, it presently belongs to someone else. Yet the dangers there are the dangers faced by free people, not those by slaves.

Fourth, God's desire requires interpretation. One should ask why God did not simply send the plagues and free Israel without Moses' aid. Why does God need Moses? The answer seems to be that God seeks to communicate with human beings about what is happening. Pharaoh must be properly warned so that he has a chance to repent, however unlikely he is to take that chance. Israel must know so that they can enter into a covenant with this newfound God.

It is, therefore, very interesting to trace out God's answers to Moses' objections. Exodus 3:14-15, for instance, give us an important clue to what is happening. Here God reveals the covenant name Yahweh. The revelation opens with a pun *ehyeh asher ehyeh* ("I am who I am"), but then

drops the obscurity in favor of the name itself. Yet God has not really dropped the obscurity at all, but has merely given a name to it (that theme again!). Even though the revelation of the name is an answer to Moses' question, "Who should I say sent me?" this is not really a full answer. Rather, the name serves as a sort of reference point for Moses and Israel as they continue to ask about God's true identity, a question we are still addressing today.

To take another example, Moses asks how he can speak to Pharaoh (3:11). The brutal tyrant seems unlikely to respond to mere words. Yahweh agrees with Moses' unstated assessment in 3:19-22. It does not take a deity to recognize that men of Pharaoh's commitments do not change, no matter what. Much of the next few chapters examine the extraordinary stubbornness, dishonesty, and self-absorption of the Egyptian king.

Finally, in considering Yahweh's answers to Moses' questions, we should recognize that the text is also interested in how God responds to Moses' qualms about himself. Chapter 4's miracles tell us something. Curiously, the only person who accepts their validity is Moses himself (since the Egyptian magicians can replicate them). The miracles do not persuade others. It must be, then, that they were designed to persuade Moses, to give him something tangible to hold onto while he was still unable even to imagine what lay ahead. Thus it is possible to interpret them as acts of divine mercy accommodating human lack of imagination and fear.

Punchline

The story of Moses' call surfaces several major theological questions for readers today. Let us consider three.

First, what does God do in the world? Exodus portrays a God who takes sides, who intervenes dramatically in order to rescue slaves from bondage. This intervention is a way of keeping age-old promises. Therefore, it shatters the world of power relationships, of getting and spending, of measuring everyone and everything by the needs of the empire. More than that, God seeks to build on a new world of freedom, peace, and justice. Israel must show the way.

Consider the story of the attack on Moses and his son. What a strange, out-of-place tale! Scholars have explained it in many different ways, but the key to it seems to be the idea of the firstborn son. God has sent Moses to rescue His firstborn son. That rescue will eventuate in the death of the firstborn Egyptians. Moses' own son has not yet entered the covenant and so must be circumcised as a symbol of what is to come. We may wonder why God would seek to kill Moses (why not just tell him?), but certainly the story as we have it makes the point that circumcision as a symbol is very important. It's still an odd story, however.

Second, we see the struggles of Moses as he becomes a person of faith. True, Moses is unique in Scripture in his relationship with God (surpassed only by Jesus, as the epistle to the Hebrews reminds us). Yet his fears seem very normal, and so we do well to examine them and how our own lives exemplify them. Still, the focus of Exodus does not lie on Moses' fears but on God's answer to those fears. Moses gains faith because he sees God's vision for Israel and God's willingness to act. Moses experiences divine mercy and truth-telling. Then Moses becomes a person of faith.

Third, Exodus offers us an honest appraisal of power in the world. As citizens of the richest and most powerful nation in human history, we are easily tempted to see its ways of wealth-making and power-mongering as normal, even as divinely sanctioned. We easily become blasphemers, servants of two gods. Exodus shows us a different, nobler way.

For Further Reflection

1. What do you believe is God's vision for the church today? For our community? For you? What are some ways to act on those visions?
2. How does God overcome our fears today? How well do we articulate them to God or to ourselves? Does this matter?
3. What evils must Christians work to overcome? How do we do this in ways that are Christian?

Lesson 3: On Negotiating with God (Exodus 7-10)

What would possess a person to defy God? The stories of the plagues reveal, among other things, Pharaoh's mindless attachment to power. We also see the desire of God to demolish false gods, represented by forces of nature. Exodus sets up the problem of whether God is the bringer of calamity or of relief. Free will and conditioning come into view as we consider what it means for a human leader to intend certain results.

Outline

- A. Moving Moses and Aaron to action (7:1-6)
- B. Pharaoh refuses to believe a sign (7:7-13)
- C. The first nine plagues (7:14-10:27)
 - 1. Blood (7:14-29)
 - 2. Frogs (8:1-11)
 - 3. Lice (8:12-15)
 - 4. Biting Insects (8:16-28)
 - 5. Cattle disease (9:1-7)
 - 6. Boils (9:8-12)
 - 7. Hail (9:13-35)
 - 8. Locusts (10:1-20)
 - 9. Darkness (10:21-27)
- D. The promise of the final, most tragic plague (11:1-10)

Storyline

These horrific chapters recount the utter destruction of the Egyptian empire as Yahweh destroys its economy and thereby defeats the various gods protecting aspects of it. Along the way, we see Egypt split into various factions while Israel remains intact. Most terribly, we see exposed the corruption of Egypt's leader as he refuses to care for his own people.

The steady drumbeat of plagues communicates several important ideas: (1) the possibilities of good and bad leadership; (2) the ways in which God interacts with human hearts; and (3) the ways humans may choose to respond to God. Consider each one.

First, the story describes a prophet, Moses, doing a prophet's job, calling on a king to repent in order to save his country. In the biblical tradition, rulers do not legitimately enjoy absolute power. They are accountable for their actions, both to God and to other human beings. Their job is to protect the vulnerable, avoid excessive self-aggrandizement, and otherwise help improve their world. By limiting his concern to some of his subjects while actively working to diminish the lives of others, Pharaoh forfeits his role as a leader. He repeatedly refuses to acknowledge the rightness of his opponents' cause. When forced to do so by the obvious power of Yahweh, he quickly reneges on his promises. He is, in short, the Hitler of the Bible. Sympathy for him is thus out of place and a reflection not only of our misunderstanding of the story, but of our refusal to take its moral claims seriously.

Second, the story surfaces the problem of how God interacts with human beings. For modern persons, this story raises the problem of free will versus determinism. Can we make decisions about our lives, or are our decisions unreal illusions of independence?

Exodus does not try to answer that question abstractly. But it does seem to picture the conflict between God and Pharaoh as one between two decision-making rulers, one truly a deity and one only pretending to be. There is no sense in which God simply manipulates Pharaoh. To the contrary, Pharaoh tries to manipulate God by weaseling out of commitments, by pretending to repent, and by refusing to acknowledge reasonable demands.

Third, the actions of Pharaoh raise the question of how one can respond to God. At the end of the plague stories in chapters 8-9, we see a progression in Pharaoh's responses from offering half-hearted concessions (8:21-25) that he then reneges on, to simple refusal to agree. We also can track the responses of Pharaoh's servants, who eventually begin to believe in Yahweh and to take prudent precautions (9:20) and even to plead for a change of policy (10:7). We also see Moses working as a spokesperson for both and an intercessor for Pharaoh, a dual role that a prophet must take. These various reactions illustrate possibilities for those encountering God in either calamity or success. We make choices within limits. Both limits and choices are real.

Thus we read the plague stories, not as a fairytale of disaster, but as an episode that allows us to explore human responses to hardship. Pharaoh and his followers, having built their entire lives on the hardships of others, must face calamity themselves. They do not like it, and they respond in ways that rarely rise above the self-serving. As spectators of their story, we can choose other responses, and we can take other sides.

Punchline

As difficult as it is, the story of the plagues allows us to raise important questions about how we respond to suffering. Do we take lessons to heart, or do we try to work our way around them so as to preserve our own status? How should we respond to God's urging that we change?

If this is a story about failed repentance and missed chances, it is also a story about the sharp distinctions God makes between those he wishes to protect and those he wishes to warn. We should state the distinction clearly. This is not a story about how God rewards the faithful (which Israel are not) and punishes the guilty (which the Egyptians are, but to varying degrees). It is, rather, a story about how God takes sides, both in order to keep ancient promises and to protect those suffering in the present. God neither rewards Israel for its good behavior nor ignores the bad behavior of Egypt. The key differentiator between one group and the other is their willingness to follow God in the pursuit of justice and peace. Egypt need not have experienced the plagues; it might have turned back at any moment. Its leaders would not do so. Hence the catastrophe.

For us, the lesson is sobering. If we ignore the plight of others around us and assume that God will not intervene on their behalf, we face the worst possible calamities. Our religious structures become exposed as facades for power and wealth, as ways of pretending away the fate of others so as to defend our own. Nothing could be more tragic in the long run.

For Further Reflection

1. In your view, what responsibilities do leaders have for their followers? How do the settings of leadership relate to your answer?
2. Are free will and determinism helpful ways of understanding your experience with decision-making? When do things seem free, and when determined, if you can tell? How does your answer relate to your understanding of accountability?
3. Notice Moses' role in the plagues as he intercedes for Egypt again and again. What lessons do you learn from his role?
4. What do you think about God's role in the plagues? How does this story confirm or challenge your understanding of God?

Lesson 4: Worship and the Freedom of God (Exodus 12)

Slaves unaccustomed to the presence of God must learn what it means to worship as free persons. The instructions for the Passover connect human dignity with divine promise. We can use this part of the exodus story to explore what worship means in our own lives. The rhythms of life that worship offers make us into different people than we would otherwise be.

Outline

- A. Instructions for Passover (12:1-20)
- B. Moses instructs the elders (12:21-27a)
- C. Reaction of the people (12:27b-28)
- D. The departure from Egypt (12:29-42)

Storyline

This chapter introduces the practice of worship to the community of soon to be liberated slaves. Passover becomes the cornerstone of the year, the festival around which all others are built. It commemorates the birth of Israel as a free people by reenacting the moment of liberation. By reminding Israel of the tension and uncertainty they experienced at the end of their slavery, of the mighty act of God's intervention to save them, and of the hope that they therefore gained on that basis, the Passover brings Israel to life each year. No wonder that Jews celebrate this feast in elaborate ways until this day.

The Passover law of Exodus 12, like all rules for worship, consists of several parts: requirements, optional behaviors, motivations, and mechanisms for continued practice. (1) The time of the sacrifice, the participants in it, the sort of animal to be eaten, and the connection between the ritual actions and their theological meanings are all prescribed. (2) However, some things remain optional, including whether the eaten animal is a sheep or a goat, how many people are involved in eating it, and just what bitter herbs make up the condiments, among other things. The community is free to build all sorts of associations and insight on top of the basic festival. Worship always involves both mandatory and optional elements, and the task is to know which are which. (3) Exodus pays close attention to the motivations of the worshipers. Whatever individuals may think, the community should remember, celebrate, and teach about the events of the exodus. And (4) the law makes provisions for passing on the story of the exodus to children, who will in turn pass it on to theirs, and so on.

Thus worship at Passover works in three dimensions. It is vertical in that it connects human beings to God. It is horizontal in that it connects humans to each other, both those who are Israelite by birth and those who embrace the covenant through circumcision. It is eternal in that generation after generation those who remember and celebrate Passover thereby become free and honorable people.

In this chapter, three words can serve our own reflections on worship. The first is "sign" (Hebrew: *'ōt*) in 12:13. For the generation that actually left Egypt, the blood on the doorposts pointed directly to both the blood that the Egyptian tyrants had shed and the freedom that Israel was about to enjoy as the blood of the lambs replaced their own blood. But for subsequent generations, the memory of the blood (since later generations never put blood on their doorposts, as far as we know) was a sign of deliverance. In this case, as in all

similar ones, worship points us to something else. The second word is “memorial” (Hebrew: *zikkarōn*) in 12:14. Israel does not merely remember the facts about a past event; they reenact that event every year so as to be aware that slavery and power are not the final answer in a world that God rules. The third word, or rather phrase, is “eternal statute” (Hebrew: *chuqqat olam*) in 12:14. Passover is a norm, a guideline for as long as people worship the God of Israel and seek justice with this God. The need to celebrate the victory over evil becomes a baseline reality for faithful people.

Worship thus consists of activities (Passover, eating unleavened bread, consecrating firstborn children, who will no longer be born to slave away for others), of words, and of attitudes. Worship makes community and vice versa.

Punchline

In considering how this text thinks about worship, we recognize that mere outward actions are not enough. Nor is mere attitude enough. Action and attitude go together. Memory and hope walk hand in hand. More than this, worship is not merely a human act expressing our longing for something more than our short lives. Worship is not an escape mechanism or an opiate for troubled souls. Rather, worship is a response to God’s invitation to be a people.

In thinking about worship this way, we recognize that many of our arguments about worship are petty and pointless. Or, rather, we miss the point when we focus mainly on either patterns of actions or emotional responses. Worship is about a community of saved persons coming together to continue the work of salvation by recommitting themselves to God’s work in the world. Worship is also about our coming into the presence of God as we remember that not only is the Passover “the Lord’s Passover,” but the table is the table for the Lord’s Supper, and the book we read is the Word of God. Worship does not come about through our initiative, to meet our felt needs, or to make us feel good. Rather, it is an experience that brings us to what is real, to what matters permanently. We pray, read, sing, and celebrate because God has made a commitment to us to keep rescuing those in need and to continue calling us to join in that liberating work.

Since God has acted to save a community of people, that community must pass on its faith to outsiders and to its own children by telling its story and connecting it to everyday life. It does the former by introducing the outsiders to its worship (as here the newly circumcised outsider is brought into the circle of the Passover festival), and the latter by responding to questions that either arise as children observe the elaborate preparations for worship or that parents prompt more deliberately. The explanation to “why are you doing this” is not some abstract theory or speculative theology, much less a mindless “because God told us to,” but is a deep reflection on what God has done for us and why.

Finally, just as Passover in ancient Israel was the first of several feasts in a given year so that time itself could be organized to serve God’s people in their focus on the things of God, so also does the worship of God’s people today need to be a way of organizing time, relationships, economics, and, in short, every aspect of life around a different, freer, more meaningful way of being. If we begin to think of worship in this more biblical, more spiritually mature way, we will make progress as a Christian community.

For further reflection

1. In what ways have your experiences of worship been about the presence of God and God's continuing saving work? Why are such considerations sometimes absent from worship in your experience?
2. What can we do to help outsiders and our own children grow as worshipers of God? How can we practice together the presence of God? How important is intergenerational ministry in this connection?
3. What have been some meaningful one-time experiences of worship for you? Also, what ongoing patterns of worship do you find helpful?
4. Passover is about memory. What do you believe it is important for Christians to remember as we worship? What should we learn from worship?
5. In what ways does the structure of worship matter? What meaning does that structure have?

Lesson 5: Passing on the Faith (Exodus 13)

The continued life of a community of faith depends on educating newcomers in the key stories, practices, attitudes, beliefs, and ideas of that community. At this point in Exodus, Israel needs some simple, sustainable, and effective mechanisms for educating its children, and anyone who might join them later, in what it means to be the people of God.

Outline

- A. The ordinance for the firstborn child (13:1)
- B. Reminder of the law of unleavened bread (13:2-10)
- C. The ordinance for the firstborn child, with commentary and implications for education (13:11-16)

Storyline

Exodus 13 continues the thoughts of chapter 12, but takes them in a new direction. The book shows an awareness of the fact that its readers were not present at the original Passover, yet they commemorate it year after year. They, therefore, need to know how and why to do so. Hence chapter 13's interest in the mechanisms of education and inculturation.

As it stands, the chapter weaves together two basic rituals of Israel's life. The first is the dedication of the firstborn child. Just as God has rescued Israel, the firstborn child and thus the heir of all the good things belonging to God, and has slain the firstborn children of Egypt, so also must "firstborn-ness" play a role in Israel's worship life in perpetuity. (This is not because firstborn children are somehow special, but because they symbolize the continuation of the family and the nation. One child has been born, and others may follow!) By "redeeming" them (see the explanation in Numbers 18:8-20), Israel commemorates the exodus and somehow brings it to life again by symbolizing God's ongoing care for Israel, God's firstborn child (see also Numbers 3:13; 8:17-18).

The second big idea is the commemoration of Passover, which we discussed in the previous lesson. For over three thousand years, this annual holiday has been the occasion of solemn celebration and hopefulness in God's ongoing deliverance (see Psalm 44, for example).

What do these two things have in common? Exodus 13 connects them by considering how children will think about them: "when your son [or daughter, for that matter!] asks you...." in verse 14 echoes "you shall tell your son" in verse 8. In this text, the family is a unit of religious education, a location for collecting memory. The seemingly odd customs of the community actually reveal its most basic commitments.

This text does not, let us note, say everything there is to say about education, religious or otherwise. To construct a fully Christian understanding of religious education, we would need to look at many other biblical texts, as well as the whole experience of the church from antiquity until now. We would have to weigh numerous considerations including our knowledge of learning theory and brain science to do a complete job of it. But this text does teach us several valuable things:

- (1) *Ritual is an important part of education.* This text does not start with abstract, ethereal ideas. It begins with practices. A family gives to God something as a way of expressing gratitude for the gift of a child or an animal. A family keeps the Passover. And, in response to these practices, children (and the same would apply to adults new to the faith!) ask questions that their elders can answer.

- (2) *Collective memory or, if you like, history deserves our attention.* Israel recites the events it shares, events that made it what it is (see Psalms 78, 105, 106 for examples of such recitals). Faith is not just an individual commitment or the hidden thoughts of an interior life. Faith is lived out in practices (in Exodus, through keeping God's Law), and it is shared when faithful people remind each other of God's works among them.
- (3) *The family and other structures in society work together to form those young in faith.* No one should ever claim that the family alone does this work. For many reasons, it cannot. Yet the family is crucial because we learn the most important things we learn in family contexts. Parents do not just preach about a life of gratitude and service. They can model it by how they live. Much of our education for life comes from imitating others and, eventually, as we age, from reflecting on that imitation. Picking good models becomes crucial.
- (4) *The content of education in the communities of faith descended from ancient Israel is a rehearsal of the mighty deeds of God.* As we grow in our understanding of the Christian faith (or as Israel grew in its understanding, or as Jews today do so), we learn many things, some crucial, others less so. In the midst of all this learning and doing, it is easy to lose sight of what is really central, the presence of God. The aim of education in the Bible is to help people live in ways that are open to God's presence. Therefore, we learn to remove from our lives all habits and attitudes that impair our openness to God, and we take on habits and attitudes that make us more open.
- (5) *Such education draws important moral lessons.* The story of Exodus highlights sharp moral contrasts. Pharaoh is oppressive, and God is liberating. The story underscores the importance of human choices, large and small, and it calls us to make such choices wisely.

Punchline

Whenever Christians have tried to describe our beliefs and practices, we have usually begun by confessing faith in God. The classical creeds usually open with the statement, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth." Beginning with God highlights the fact that Christianity is not merely a human achievement or an expression of human longing. Rather, faith is a gift from God, offered freely to all human beings, and made alive in all who accept it. Faith does not begin with us, but with God. In this text, it begins with God's mighty works and the many ways humans may have of remembering those works.

The statement "I believe in God" implies a relationship between two persons, between God and me. Faith does not erase the human person or in any way diminish our dignity or personal integrity. To the contrary, faith expresses fully the truth that we live in relationship with God and that this relationship gives meaning to our existence, just as it seems to do something to God.

In fact, the confession "I believe in God" implies not just two, but three persons. The third is the person who hears this confession. In the first instance, the third person is the church who teaches us who God is. The hearer of this confession may also be the world, as we see in many Old Testament texts that underscore the importance of the nations' hearing of the news about God's saving work.

In this text, we can think about a God who is both the gentle parent and guardian and the almighty ruler of the Universe. Though it may seem paradoxical to speak of divine love and tenderness on one side and power on the other, in fact, the Bible consistently portrays God as exercising power for the benefit of the vulnerable, thus expressing tender love.

For Further Reflection

1. What are the implications of the fact that people come to faith in different ways? How should that fact shape how we teach, preach, and otherwise minister to each other?
2. What is the content of the faith we pass on to the next generation? How do we decide what should be passed on and what should not?
3. How does a Christian worldview (one shaped by faith) differ from other possibilities? How does one foster a Christian worldview?
4. What are we teaching our children, and how are we teaching these things? Do our practices of education support the content we seek to pass on? Why or why not?
5. How is your family doing in passing on your faith to your children? What would you like to do better?

Lesson 6: Celebration 101: Worship as a Witness to What's Real (Exodus 15)

The Song at the Sea makes three moves: it recognizes God's incomparably great work of salvation; it calls for all the nations to hear of God's work and thus to draw near to God; and it invites Israel into God's presence at the holy mountain. This threefold move (upward, outward, and onward) is the basic movement of all worship that celebrates God's presence, and so the song becomes an avenue for us to talk about worship and life in our own time.

Outline

- A. Introduction (15:1a)
- B. Yahweh's triumph over Egypt (15:1b-13)
- C. The response of the nations (15:14-16)
- D. Yahweh's relocation of Israel to the holy mountain (15:17)
- E. Conclusion (15:18)

This ancient hymn celebrates God's victory over Egypt's tyrannical ruler and his army. Its concluding line, "Yahweh will reign forever and ever," summarizes the central idea of Israelite (and therefore, Christian) faith. The rest of the hymn describes what it means for God to reign.

Storyline

Just as Israel has learned in chapters 12-13 how to worship in one way, now it must learn how to do so in another. Worship can relate to the full range of human experience, from sorrow expressed in laments to ecstasy expressed in hymns like this one. Worship can also shape the community of faith in different ways, as here it allows them to express the joy they feel at deliverance. As in chapter 12, however, we should remember that the song in chapter 15 does not concern only the first generation that left Egypt. It is a song for all subsequent generations of those who experience God's deliverance, in whatever form, for God's eternal reign continues today.

In reading, or better singing, this song, we learn several more things about worship. Each matters to us today.

First, and most obviously, worship is an act addressing God. Prayer does not merely give God information, but it allows us to express what we have learned about God and ourselves, and also to ask questions of God. Worship is a very open and honest exchange of views between humans and God. Thus we hear this song switching back and forth in its address. Sometimes it calls to God and sometimes to the entire worshiping community. The singer can describe God as a warrior, but also as the God of the ancestors, thus reclaiming all those years of slavery by reminding the hearer of the song that God was at work then, even when He did not seem to be. Or, to take things in a different direction, the singer asks "who is like you among the gods, O Lord?" expecting the answer "no one" and thus asserting the claim that Israel's God is identical to the God of all the universe. We express a sense of wonder to God.

Second, worship involves the most creative possibilities in human language. It is sometimes a useful exercise to pick up a hymnbook or book of prayers and notice the rich variety of metaphor that we use when want to talk to God. It is as though we cannot speak

as well as we would like about God or to God in our ordinary speech, and so we resort to figurative language. So it is in Exodus 15, as the song uses many metaphors for God and God's work to help us celebrate what we have experienced. The use of symbol and metaphor is important.

Third, worship concerns creation, not just human beings. This song, in particular, uses ancient images of creation, in which a deity overcame forces of chaos associated with water. Here the force of chaos is a human one, Pharaoh and his army, and the water is a lake north of the Gulf of Suez. The creation that God makes is not of the entire world, but of a people who are now free, and who can thus be the pioneers of a new creation. This creation language reminds us that God's work extends far beyond anything we understand, yet also embraces the things closest to us. God's work is both beyond our control and yet deeply personal to each of us. Worship helps us recognize and acknowledge these truths.

Fourth, worship concerns the outsider. Exodus 15 states one form of an idea that grows throughout Scripture. The idea is that the Gentiles should take an interest in what God is doing. For Exodus, the Gentiles' response should be one of awe and even deep concern. But this idea matures through the Bible until it becomes the idea that God's concern extends to all the nations. Exodus 15 plants the seed that grows into that beautiful plant we call the mission of the church.

Fifth, worship enacts a reunion of sorts. Just as humans began in a garden where they had intimate communication with God, now they will return to God's verdant holy mountain. (It is not totally clear whether the mountain in question is Sinai, the land of Canaan, or somehow both.) Israel will now enjoy the intimacy with God that humans had earlier lost. Whenever they sing a song like Exodus 15, they will receive a foretaste of this reunion.

Punchline

Humans need to worship God, not for God's sake so much as for our own. Without the rich experience of prayer, adoration, intercession, submission, and contemplation we dry up spiritually, and our concerns for other human beings also wither. Exodus thus responds to this need of ours by describing several ways in which Israel, now a freed people, will worship God.

In today's church, the need to reflect deeply on the experience of worship is also great. We have come to see the terrible inadequacy of worship as merely a set of rules – a pattern of behaviors – or as an expression of our emotions, usually within a narrow range of socially acceptable behaviors. The Bible offers us something much deeper.

Worship in Scripture, again, embraces a wide range of experiences. It is relentlessly communal and profoundly personal. It concerns past experiences of a whole community, as well as their future hopes. It also takes individuality seriously. It can accomplish all this because the biblical tradition does not think of worship as merely a human creation, but as our response to God. God abides with us during worship, making us into something we would not otherwise be. We do not worship a distant being who acted only in the past. We commune with the God in whom we live, move, and have our being, who is not far from us, but is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

For further reflection

1. What symbolic actions or objects (say, the cross) mean something to you in worship? Why? What does the absence of symbol, an absence many Protestant groups have embraced as a matter of principle, do to you? Do you experience this absence as a loss or a gain or perhaps somehow both?
2. What does Christian worship teach us about how we should live with each other? With God? With strangers?
3. What does the phrase “presence of God” mean to you? Is this a meaningful idea in your experience? Why or why not?
4. If you were to write a song about God’s work in your life, what would be in it? How would it be like songs in the Bible, or how different?

Lesson 7: Community-Building 101: Learning to Trust (Exodus 16-17)

In this first of a series of lessons on the nature of community, we see Israel trying to discern whether God is trustworthy or not. Their experience with their newfound deity so far has been one of watching his systematic dismantling of the Egyptian Empire, not one of overtly benevolent actions toward humans. Thus they must learn that God can be trusted to provide the most basic elements of life. Community without trust cannot long survive, as the Israelites learn.

Outline

- A. God provides food for the hungry (16:1-36)
- B. God provides water for the thirsty (17:1-7)
- C. God provides safety for the endangered (17:8-16)

These three stories follow a similar pattern: a problem arises; Israel raises questions about God's leadership; God speaks to Moses about solutions; and the people follow God and learn their lesson.

Storyline

After leaving Egypt through Yahweh's dramatic acts of salvation, Israel quickly faces the question of whether they have exchanged one tyrannical overlord for another. Hence their question, "Have you brought us into the wilderness to slay us with hunger?" (16:3). The following stories try to address the question of what sort of God it is who has liberated this people. Is Yahweh merely a God of pestilence and destruction, perhaps unwilling or unable to preserve people now liberated from slavery? Is God to be trusted?

The stories of provision of food, water, and safety answer the last question in the affirmative, stating a cornerstone idea of biblical faith. God is a God of mercy and grace. As the medieval saint, Birgitta of Sweden prayed, "My Lord Jesus Christ, the strenuous soldiers and faithful servants of this world gladly expose their own lives to death in order that their lords may enjoy safety of life; but you ... hastened to the death of the cross in order that your servants might not miserably perish" (Marguerite Tjader Harris et al., eds., *Birgitta of Sweden* [New York: Paulist, 1990], 231). The God of the Bible goes to great lengths to extend mercy to sufferers. Unlike Pharaoh, who uses fellow human beings for his own glory, heedless of their aspirations or sufferings, God seeks nothing from Israel except its own well-being.

Nor is this all. Israel at this point in Exodus's story has lived for generations almost as animals, bred, bought and sold, killed, and worked for the profit of others. They have learned to trust no one, to grab whatever they can, and to hoard what otherwise might disappear tomorrow. Now they must learn to be free people who trust God for even the basic provisions of life. To trust, they must weed out old habits and assumptions and take on new behaviors.

Their need to learn trust explains several details of the story, including the odd rotting of the surplus manna (except on the Sabbath), the attention to the special nature of the Sabbath itself, the emphasis on the vision of God's glory (16:7-8), the strange manner of winning the battle with the Amalekites (17:8-16), and so on. These unanticipated

behaviors teach Israel to think in new ways. Also, the narrator helps us think in new terms by introducing several words or phrases that point us to these new ways of thinking, such as “all the community/assembly,” “bread from heaven,” and “Sabbath.” The stories thus paint a strong contrast between Israel’s confusion and complaining, on the one hand, and Yahweh’s patience and mercy, on the other. Israel becomes a people when its suffering becomes an occasion for learning, rather than a source of despair or infighting.

This last point is most clear whenever God speaks in these chapters. Consider two examples, 16:4-5 and 16:28-29. In the first speech, God responds to the cry for food by promising to give human beings angelic food (whatever that is, hence the Israelites’ word *manna* or “thingamajig”) and thus to provide for them the best possible sustenance, signaling the deepest possible care for their fate. God gives manna as a test to see if Israel can obey “my law” (Hebrew: *torah*). Thus at some level the story foreshadows the giving of the law at Sinai, and it shows that that law reflects God’s generosity.

Similarly, the second speech, which shifts from words of God (16:28) to words of Moses speaking for God (16:29), states God’s frustration at Israel’s foolish refusal to follow instructions that are for their own good (and are, in any case, easier to follow than to break). The speech also returns to the theme of “my Torah and my commandments,” again foreshadowing what is to come.

The point is that the first law of God that Israel learns is the law of the Sabbath. Unlike their lives in Egypt, in which every day was the same experience of drudgery and utter vulnerability, their new life with God will be one in which they can afford to rest from their labors in the trust that they will be provided for. They can cease being animals and become human beings, just as God originally intended us to be. The lesson of trust could hardly be clearer.

The lesson becomes crystalline in 17:7, as Israel learns the answer to the most important question of Exodus, and in fact of human existence in general: “Is the Lord in our midst, or not?” The affirmative answer, seen here in a spring of water for thirsty people, is the foundation of our faith.

Punchline

For us reading these stories, just as for all the generations of readers that preceded us, the stories of Israel in the wilderness remind us of a basic human tendency to rely on our own survival instincts even at the most inappropriate times, even when community and meaningful existence are threatened by our fear-driven actions. The many things that threaten our ability to trust God – lust, anger, envy, laziness, and all the rest – are perennial human problems. They have not disappeared.

But here the merciful God who liberates human beings has allowed Israel to take baby steps, easily understandable (if odd) measures that will allow them the freedom of trust that will be crucial to their faith, and to their very survival. As these stories unfold, we see realistic fears translated into extraordinary hopes. No longer a mob of slaves, Israel becomes an assembly, a people, who can obey a merciful God rather than a greedy, cold-blooded murderer like Pharaoh. Learning to trust God, and thus to trust each other, is the first ingredient in the formation of the community of God’s people. Other ingredients will become clear as we proceed in this book.

For further reflection

1. What does it take to trust God? What factors can make such trust either hard or easy? How important a factor in an individual's trust for God is his or her presence in a community of believers?
2. To rest on the Sabbath implies a willingness to limit our desire for gain. What challenges must we confront to be willing to do this?
3. How do you see God's presence in your own life? In the church's life?
4. How well do you trust God for material things? For security? For relationships? What are the challenges to trusting God? The benefits?

Lesson 8: Community-Building 201: Finding Leaders (Exodus 18)

In the second lesson on community, Israel must develop a system for finding, equipping, and sustaining leaders. While this text does not explore all the dimensions of leadership, it can serve as a springboard for our own reflections on the subject.

Outline

- A. A reunion with family (18:1-12)
- B. A story about leadership (18:13-27)

These two stories sit together, not merely because Jethro plays a prominent role in each of them, but because an elderly wise man interacts with a vigorous leader of a younger generation (thus reflecting the ideal arrangement of an ancient society). The stories also connect at another level: in one, Jethro recognizes the greatness of Yahweh, and in the other, he recognizes the inadequacy of any human leader, even Moses. The outsider, Jethro, thus speaks what the insiders should have known.

Storyline

These two stories allow readers to reflect on three interrelated issues surrounding spiritual leadership: the need for awareness of the mighty deeds of God that make a spiritual community possible; the characteristics of leadership; and the need for open communication. We will explore each. But first, notice that the spokesperson for these values throughout this story is not Moses, who is too enmeshed in his work to reflect deeply on it, but the outsider Jethro, who has some religious commitments to God (he was priest of Midian), but had not experienced the drama of the exodus except through the storytelling of Moses. By making Jethro the wise man, Exodus allows us to reflect on both the significance of our story for others and on the possibility that those who experience God's presence most directly may lose proper perspective as they become overly complacent. The outsider's perspective on the realities of spiritual leadership helps us gain a realistic understanding.

Consider, then, the first aspect of spiritual leadership, the mission of telling the story of God. Although Exodus 15 announced the theme of Gentile awareness of Yahweh's power to save, the first person who hears the story from Israelites themselves is a friend, Jethro. The story itself is interesting. Rather than portray Moses as the triumphant war leader who makes loud proclamations, we see a man who shows deep respect to his family and the norms of good behavior in his society, as well as concern that they know about God's liberating work. Moses honors Jethro as his father-in-law and then tells him the story. Jethro, in turn, expresses the sort of excitement appropriate to such a story and then offers a sacrifice to God, again a proper response of a thankful heart and an appropriate way of associating himself with Israel's story. Jethro, though not an Israelite, acts better than the Israelites do and thus serves as a model for subsequent generations.

Spiritual leadership in Moses' case revolves around the telling of the story of God's work. Like the apostles in Acts 6, Moses exercises the primary role of storyteller and person of prayer. He is not primarily a decision-maker or expediter of plans. He is not a

business manager. He is the one who constantly focuses the attention of insiders and outsiders on God. Thus he serves as a model for leadership throughout the centuries.

While considering that model, so foreign to modern expectations, we may add the second aspect of leadership in these stories. Verses 13-27 explain the origins of the structure of Israelite society. Here the communal leaders (“princes”) manage the relationships of people within their subgroups. They apply Moses’ teachings and their own wisdom to the problems of the community. Thus verse 21 offers a list of character traits such leaders should have. They should be “persons of strength” (comparable to the heroine of Proverbs 31, who is a “woman of strength” – the Hebrew is very similar), “in awe of God” (or, God-fearing), “trustworthy” or “truth-telling” (either translation is possible), and “haters of corruption.” Such honorable persons, whatever their leadership capacities, would provide a foundation for a well-functioning community.

Obviously this text does not give a full-blown theory of leadership, but it does state some basic behavioral patterns that would, if lived out in a religious community, make life much easier for everyone. Moses should appoint such leaders as can be models for behavior for the rest of the community. Though imperfect, these leaders can appropriately point others to the perfection of God.

If such leaders are to be chosen and then to act in Israel, there must be mechanisms for self-examination and reform. There must be – our third theme – open communication. Jethro can draw on his ethos as a father-in-law and leader to challenge Moses’ unrealistic self-appraisal (or even messianic tendencies). Actually, the Bible is deeply concerned about the tendency of leadership to overextend itself. Thus the law of the king in Deuteronomy 17:14-20 closely restricts royal power, even though monarchy was a divinely sanctioned institution. The leader must play the role of representing God to the people and the people to God and thus must be interested in the honor of God and the well-being of the people. The leader’s own interests must take second place, a very difficult challenge to undertake.

At the same time, Jethro shows here concern for Moses’ well-being. The community needs the gift of leadership – radical democracy simply does not work. To keep leadership as a gift means that we must find ways to encourage, train, and help leaders. They are not cannon fodder or lightning rods for our frustrations, outcomes that Jethro fears and tries to forestall.

Punchline

One of the greatest challenges for a church is finding, empowering, and retaining good leadership. Good leaders in the Christian sense not only are able to inspire others to follow them, but they are radically committed themselves to following God. As such, they lead humble lives, earnestly seeking to be good people in the fullest sense. Good leaders are good persons who lead well.

This story identifies some of the threats to good leadership: detachment from real-world concerns, over-estimation of one’s importance or abilities, a need to control everything that happens, and unwillingness to listen to others. To his credit, Moses in these stories manages to escape these traps, but only because he listens to someone wiser than himself.

This story also challenges our easy assumptions that we have nothing to learn from the outsider. Sometimes the outsider recognizes the extraordinary gift we have received better than we do. That fact calls for sober reflection as we try to tell our story to others.

For further reflection

1. What makes a good Christian leader? Can you give examples? How can we help those who have the gifts of leadership develop those gifts?
2. When is criticism of leaders legitimate? When is it illegitimate?
3. How can we better tell the story of God's grace to outsiders? What attitudes, practices, or beliefs would we need to acquire to do so?
4. What can we learn from outsiders about our faith? Does it help to listen to their feedback as we also share our faith with them?
5. How can we help our families experience God's presence more fully? What about those members who seem distant from God?

Lesson 9: Community-Building 301: Norms and Goals (Exodus 20-23)

In the third and last lesson on community, we recognize that we are what we do. Norms of behavior matter, and the reasons behind them matter. Mindless adherence to rules will destroy a community, and so will the anarchy of values. The Ten Commandments give us a way forward by connecting what we do to what God has done and by orienting us to the most basic needs humans have as we live together.

Outline

- A. The Ten Commandments (20:1-21)
- B. The Covenant Code (20:22-23:33)
 - 1. Preamble (20:22-21:1)
 - 2. Rules about slavery (21:2-11)
 - 3. Rules about injury through negligence (21:12-34)
 - 4. Rules about damage to property (21:35-22:15)
 - 5. Rules about interpersonal relations (22:16-23:9)
 - 6. Rules about worship (23:10-19)
 - 7. Conclusion: Promises of God's help (23:20-33)

The laws of the Covenant Code cover many aspects of life, and it is not always easy to see how they are organized. The outline proposed here is somewhat arbitrary because the laws lead one to another on the principle of association (“since we’re talking about X, let’s mention Y”). Still, the position of some of them is very striking. For example, when 21:17 places cursing parents amid rules against manslaughter, Exodus emphasizes the seriousness of disrespect of parents. Or when 22:21 forbids mistreatment of aliens right after laws against bestiality and idolatry, we understand that care for the aliens is extremely important. The sequencing of the laws reveals the assumptions behind the laws by showing how Israel connected one law with others.

Storyline

The former slaves, having learned to trust God and their leaders, now receive some basic norms for behavior. They previously lived in a world in which a few powerful persons make all the decisions and disregard the well-being of those beneath them. The need to survive in such a situation had taught them behaviors that, though understandable, did not make for the long-term well-being of the community. They must learn new habits, new commitments, and new relationships. God, therefore, gives Moses the law.

The Ten Commandments are extremely familiar, but it is helpful to state a few basic principles guiding them. The Ten Commandments rest on some assumptions that we do well to recover.

- ☸ The people of God are a community in which the welfare of each is the concern of all. We cannot view each other as objects to be used, but as fellow heirs of the saving acts of God.
- ☸ God works to establish justice in the world. God does not usually validate the power structures as we see them. Therefore, we must question those same power structures so that we can work for their eventual demise and their replacement by a world of

peace. At the very least, we must insure that they do not become characteristic of the church.

- ☸ Justice operates in the family (honor father and mother), in the economy (let everyone rest), in friendships (do not covet or lie), and so, in short, in every human relationship. Our work for justice is, at its core, work to build relationships with as many as possible.
- ☸ Worship of one God leads us to see the people of God as one people. We cannot truly worship God while allowing our brothers and sisters to remain in want.
- ☸ The story of redemption is an ongoing story initiated by God but lived out by us all. In practicing justice in our own lives, we imitate God's acts of deliverance and so become more faithful to our own calling.

The same basic principles guide the laws that follow. Here let us examine just a couple, which illustrate the ways in which laws in the Bible work.

Exodus 20:22-26 introduces the Covenant Code with a law on the building of altars. The law does not specify Jerusalem as the only place for building an altar, for that requirement is a later development. The text does, however, do two things. First, it connects the law to the experience Israel has with God. Since God is awe-inspiring and far beyond human comprehension or control, the altar should not be made of anything humans have heavily influenced. Second, Exodus provides for the real need humans have of reaching God in ways that they understand. Sacrifice is encouraged, not because God needs it, but because humans do.

The following laws, which reflect the agricultural society that ancient Israel was, work on the principle that real conditions must be taken account of, but not to the extent that justice is compromised. The laws do not describe ideals so much as they try to move actual conditions in the direction of ideals, without ever imagining that Utopia will arrive. They thus try to solve real-world problems. For this reason, they allow different possible solutions, as when the penalty for negligent homicide can be either death or a money payment (Exodus 21:29-30). The law is not inflexible; it is reasonable.

Consider another text, then. Exodus 22:20-28. The former slaves must learn not to oppress immigrants among them or widows or orphans. Israel should avoid idolatry in all its forms, as well as the oppression of the poor.

To understand these laws properly, it is important to look at the explanations given for them. Verse 20 reminds Israel that it once experienced the oppression of those afraid of strangers, and that, therefore, they should not repeat that experience now that the shoe was on the other foot. Verse 22 notes that God hears the cry of the oppressed (as the story of the exodus illustrates!), and will continue to do so as long as there are some mistreated by others. Verse 26 notes that God is gracious or compassionate (Hebrew: *channun*), and verse 30 states the overall goal for Israel, that it should be a group of "holy men," a people distinguished for their obedience to God and care for human beings, especially the most vulnerable. Thus the law seeks to build a community that will be as unlike the house of slaves in Egypt as possible.

Punchline

It is easy to bog down in the details of Torah and lose track of its overarching values and goals. In some ways, deep, slow, detailed reflection is immensely valuable because it

reminds us that the meaning of life is in its details, not in vague abstractions or generalizations. But, at the same time, the overarching principles of the Law of Moses are important for us because they apply to us, whereas the details of the law may not.

The first principle to remember is that the behavior of faithful people must always reflect God's basic commitments. God seeks to restore humankind to a relationship with the divine and with themselves, as well as with the rest of creation. Any actions that detract from that desired harmony are suspect.

Second, humans need specific norms to bring about the desired changes in our lives. We do not function on the basis of abstract principles unless we have models (teachers like Moses) and practical, understandable behavioral norms. These laws are not necessarily rigid, and we do not keep them mindlessly. But we do keep them. We recognize that they exist to protect us from each other and from our own lust, self-deception, and will to power.

Third, the law exists to protect the weak. Moves to eliminate ethical behaviors and personal accountability always hurt the vulnerable long before they hurt those who scream the loudest for "freedom." Law guarantees freedom, while lawlessness reduces freedom, often to the vanishing point.

Fourth, God trusts human beings to make sense of the law. We do not grope in the dark, confused as to what we should do. We have the ability to reason, to feel, to act, to learn, to correct, and thus to grow as people. We should exercise those abilities.

For further reflection

1. The laws of Exodus foster respect among humans. What are ways in which Christians can build mutual respect? What threatens our doing so?
2. What are practical ways in which we could better interact with the vulnerable among us? What do we do well in this regard? What less well?
3. What is the connection between honoring God and treating people well? In what ways can faith and people of faith improve the well-being of people in communities, even if they are not religious?
4. The flexibility and reasonableness of God's norms for us, as exemplified in the Law of Moses, only work when religious communities can exercise good judgment over time. How can we do so? How would we foster the type of open communication necessary to build up the practices of good judgment?

Lesson 10: Work for Liberated People (Exodus 25:1-40, 31:1-11)

The former slaves must learn to work, no longer for the sake of oppressive masters, but for the sake of growing closer to God. The purpose of the Tabernacle was not to build a house for God, who after all needs no such abode, but to create a place where humans can, based on their own understandings of time, matter, and space, meet the God who transcends all three. In building this sanctuary, Israel learns again what meaningful work would be.

Outline

- A. Invitation to work (25:1-9)
- B. Building the Ark of the Covenant (25:10-22)
- C. Building the Table of Shewbread (25:23-30)
- D. Building the lampstand (25:31-40)
- E. Appointing skilled workers (31:1-11)

Chapters 25-31 are a long section describing the tabernacle and its furnishing. This lesson considers the section's introduction and the appointment of the actual craftsmen. By doing so, we should be able to think a bit about how Exodus describes the redemption of work as the liberated slaves experience it.

Storyline

Exodus describes the Tabernacle and its contents twice, emphasizing the great importance Israel attached to the building as a location for meeting God. The long, loving descriptions of the building may seem confusing or mind-numbing to us, but to ancient readers, they were undoubtedly fascinating.

The fascination existed for them because they saw temples and other sanctuaries as places unlike any other because in them the distance between heaven and earth seemed shorter and easier to traverse. Thus a great many psalms, for instance, celebrate the beauty of the temple. Psalm 84 is the most obvious example. The architecture, plant life, and inhabitants (human and animal) of the temple reminded the faithful of Eden and thus of heaven itself. So it will be with the tabernacle, Exodus believes. God meets people in places on earth.

But what is most striking about Exodus 25 is not the elaborate description of the furniture but that it would be built at all. The former slaves, who have doubtless toiled to erect the extravagant monuments of the Egyptian gods – deities who cared not at all for the fate of Israel or other vulnerable people – may now give of what they have to build a place where they can meet God.

This story in Exodus appears where it does as a description of the first time Israel must work after its liberation. Its toil will no longer be for others, but for itself and for its God. No longer will the pagan values of beauty and truth prevail, but something freer and holier will become reality. This is the message of these chapters.

So, this text is about the redemption of work itself. Since we humans spend most of our lives working or resting in order to work, it would be nice to believe that that work had

meaning. To work for a noble end, for a life of meaning – that would be one of the greatest possible blessings. And so it is for Israel in this text.

In reading this text, it is important to pay close attention to motivation clauses (“because,” “so that”) and other references to human desires and commitments. So verse 2 allows Israel to bring whatever gift it wants (“whatever his heart volunteers”) within certain broad categories. (Presumably these goods, some of them expensive, were among the reparations they took from Egypt on leaving the land.) Verbs of work appear over and over (“they will make”; “they will do”; “you will make”). No longer will the slaves toil mindlessly; they will be artisans for their own God, the liberator of all creation.

It is also important to notice what God promises to do. Besides accepting the Israelites’ work as a valid religious act, God will use their work to build a place for communication, will empower workers when they work for this greater cause, and will give adequate instructions for the building of the Tabernacle (“according to the pattern you have seen”). Israel need not guess about what it should do.

Punchline

Recovering a meaningful religious view of work is one of the greatest tasks of our time. When human beings are measured solely by what they bring to the company’s bottom line, when accountability is a euphemism for rigid obedience to superiors, and when it is possible to dismiss a person’s work as meaningless after it no longer meets some external demand, human dignity suffers. Community withers and eventually dies. This is especially true when work loses any connection to religion. We begin to live divided lives in which one part of what we do is always at odds with another part. Such is, in many ways and for many of us, the modern condition.

Exodus hints at a better way. According to this view of work, work exists for the sake of the human beings, not human beings for work. Thus we can rest, and we can labor in a rhythm that allows for the richest, noblest aspects of life. We need not be always pursuing more and more but can give to others so as to enrich their lives. We can use our skills to the glory of God, even in the creation of art that has no “purpose,” at least not an easily measurable one. Work takes on new meaning. Thus religion is not just what we do when we stop working. Work can also be a religious act.

Recovering this point of view will be difficult. It seems too obscure, too foreign to our experience, too pie-in-the-sky. But surely it is more practical than the dominant view of things we have, according to which we measure ourselves by what we own (or can borrow for) and display before others. The view of work that Exodus 31 (especially) assumes can be liberating, not just for ancient Israel, but also for us.

For further reflection

1. In what way can your skills and resources help others discover God and live in harmony with other people? Try to make a realistic inventory in order to answer this question.
2. What about your work challenges your faith? What builds up your faith? Can your work be so devastating to faith that you would choose between them? Under what circumstances?

3. Laziness is a sin, but excessive work can also be if it comes from either greed or fear. When is much work too much work? What rules do you have in your own life for determining this?
4. Exodus 31 describes human creativity in service of God. Describe how the creativity of others has helped you see God and/or yourself better.

Lesson 11: Standing in God's Way (Exodus 32-33)

How does a religious leader respond to serious communal failure? Moses pleads with God for healing and forgiveness for Israel. The dialogue between Moses and God reveals new depth to their relationship as based on their communication "face to face."

Outline

- A. Finding new ways to worship Yahweh (32:1-6)
- B. Moses debates God (32:7-14)
- C. Moses confronts the people (32:15-35)
- D. Waiting for a way to worship Yahweh (33:1-6)
- E. Footnote: Moses and the "tent of meeting" (33:7-11)
- F. Moses debates God (33:12-16)
- G. Moses and God agree (33:17-23)

This familiar story takes place in three location: at the foot of Sinai, where Israel sinned; atop the mountain, where Moses speaks with God; and at the tent of meeting, outside the camp, where God also spoke with Moses. Location matters here as the story explores the theme of the presence and absence of God.

Storyline

This story interrupts the two descriptions of the Tabernacle by describing a time of idolatry, in which Israel breaks its covenant with Yahweh by trying to manage the absence of God. Although they did not fashion the golden calf as an alternative for God – they probably meant it to symbolize the pedestal on which God would stand – Israel in effect tries to reduce God to something they could understand and manage. Understanding God is always a challenge, and trying to manage God is a sin.

More interesting than Israel's sin are the reactions of Moses and God. They have a conversation about what to do. Ignoring idolatry would destroy the community's identity. Yet, destroying the community would nullify God's promises to the ancestors and would make the exodus seem like a cruel trick perpetrated on helpless slaves. There must be some accountability, and yet the one who must be most accountable is God. Hence the various debates between Moses and God, both of which Moses wins because he offers the stronger theological case.

What is this case? Moses makes several arguments against destroying Israel:

- (1) Doing so would prove the Egyptians right in making God out to be a tyrant (32:12).
- (2) God has promised the ancestors to bless the nation of Israel, and God keeps promises no matter what (32:13).
- (3) God commissioned Moses to deliver Israel, again a divine commitment that should not be broken (33:12).
- (4) God's grace can only be known if Israel is forgiven and the promises are kept (32:16).

These astonishingly daring arguments convince God (who apparently wants to be convinced anyway). More importantly, they reveal a great deal about the nature of the God whom the freed slaves now serve.

Exodus, and the Old Testament in general, often use the literary technique whereby a character other than God states the things the narrator most wants us to understand. So it is here. Moses, because he has spent so much time in the company of God, can state God's case perfectly well. The case concerns the divine desire to heal and nurture humankind, and Israel first of all. By emphasizing the fact that a human being (Moses) can be aware of God's mercy and patience, even in the face of terrible provocation, Exodus invites us into such a view of the world. Like Moses, we can trust God. And so can Israel.

The story thus gives a very rich understanding of forgiveness and intercession. What does it mean for a righteous person to pray for those who are not? Moses learns the answer when he takes the terrible risk of arguing with God and when he declines the offer of siring a nation of his own. By taking such risks, Moses wins God's favor and even a special degree of revelation, unparalleled in the Bible. He can then plead for the people. This pleading will lead to a renewal of the covenant (chapter 34) and finally the full presence of God. But that story must wait.

In the meantime, what seems clear is that Exodus wishes to portray Moses as someone who has fully internalized the will and message of God. He calls on God to keep promises that seem unkeepable, to forgive persons who seem unforgivable, and to accompany a nation whose companionship is unbearable. The tension between the sinful people and the justice-seeking God cannot be greater than it is here. It can only be resolved when God says, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (33:20).

Punchline

Thus the story of Exodus has come full circle. The man who met the strange God and failed to trust this God's call or to believe that rescue of the slaves was possible now reminds God of those very commitments. The nation that could not sin against God because it had no knowledge of him has now rejected its knowledge, but nevertheless finds mercy. The God who seeks to deliver manages to do so even when doing so means healing a disobedient people.

Obviously, this story concerns the grace of God, expressing the depths of that grace in mind-boggling ways. It does not express grace primarily as a judicial decision or an act of forgiveness. Rather, the story connects forgiveness to God's presence. Absence is a sign of displeasure, presence of harmony. Moses pleads for God to be among the people, to lead them to their new land, to speak to them from time to time, to answer their prayers. Grace equals presence.

This equation seems important for our own lives as well. We should not see grace merely as a sort of get-out-of-jail-free card. Grace is not the result of God's distance from our concerns or unwillingness to hold us accountable. No, grace is about God's willingness to be accountable and to let us be, as well.

For further reflection

1. Under what circumstances is it appropriate to argue with God or seek to change God's mind? How does one go about doing so?
2. How have you experienced God's presence in your life? How about God's absence? What do those terms mean?

3. What does it mean to say that God keeps promises? What promises of God are most precious to you and why?
4. What acts of idolatry can we be guilty of? What would be the antidote to our idolatrous tendencies?

Lesson 12: The Presence of God (Exodus 34 and 40)

Exodus began with an absent God and an enslaved people. It ends with God's overwhelming presence and a people on the road to freedom. Such a transformation has come about because God has taken initiative to save, teach, forgive, and heal. Israel is born anew, it begins a story that continues until this day.

Outline

Chapter 34

- A. The appearance of the merciful God to Moses (34:1-10)
- B. Giving the law again (34:11-28)
- C. Moses' strange appearance (34:29-35)

Chapter 40

- A. Final instructions for the Tabernacle (40:1-15)
- B. Setting up the Tabernacle (40:16-33)
- C. God fills the Tabernacle! (40:34-38)

Chapter 34 concludes the Golden Calf episode by portraying God as giving the Torah a second time so as to restart the process of Israel's growth into a redeemed people. Chapter 40 provides a climax for the entire book as God enters the sanctuary that Israel has prepared. The two stories are closely linked, for without God's forgiveness in chapter 34, the Tabernacle would never have been built and Israel would not have survived.

Storyline

The Golden Calf story takes its final turn after Moses has persuaded God to accompany the people of Israel to the promised land. Exodus 34 tells the story of the second giving of the Torah on Sinai. God offers the gift of law, and thus of meaningful existence, to Israel just after the nation has violated the main provisions of the Ten Commandments (against idolatry and adultery, for example) as a way of reaffirming the ancient promises to make of Israel a blessing to the world.

But preceding the law in 34:1-10 is a revelation of divine glory that gives important insights into the nature of biblical faith. God speaks words to Moses that sound similar to something the priests must later have said in the temple (vv. 6-7). God announces himself as "merciful and gracious, difficult to anger, loyal to the thousandth generation of his friends but just toward his enemies to the 3rd or 4th generation." These characteristics have just been evident as God has forgiven Israel of its turn to idolatry so soon after its liberation. Exodus restates them in order to say that the God Israel serves, though capable of destroying evil, has more up his sleeve. God's chief work is one of redemption. Our chief work is to accept the gift of redeeming love and the life that flows from it.

The mercy of God comes to the fore most obviously in the contrast between the treatment of the righteous and the wicked. The punishment to the 3rd or 4th generation (and, which is it?) does not mean that God places some sort of curse on one person for the sins of his grandparents. It means that, in a society in which most families had several generations living together, God would hold groups accountable for the sins of their

members. But the contrast with the thousandth generation is decisive. No family could include a thousand generations at one time, and thus God's mercy extends forward in time, allowing blessing to extend to future generations when anyone in Israel lives righteously. Righteousness (equals loving God) is thus vastly more powerful than evil, a fact that God recognizes, validates, and supports. God's mercy far exceeds his sense of justice. Indeed, they are the same thing ultimately.

Moses discovers this great truth at this point, even if he has suspected it before. He receives instructions that focus mostly on worship, because it is important in this point of the story to say that God will welcome Israel's presence at the Tabernacle. Their relationship has not ended.

Then Moses descends the mountain to return to the people, but his presence with God has altered his very appearance. There is some question as to just what happened to him. The word used here to mean "shine" (Hebrew: *qaran*) also sounds like the word for "horn" (Hebrew: *qeren*), leading some interpreters (such as Michelangelo in his statue of Moses) to give the lawgiver horns. Apparently, however, the text simply means that Moses' face has begun to glow somehow, a disfiguration that makes him like the angels but a bit frightening to other human beings. It is as though his experience of God at this point, because it has brought him face to face with divine mercy at its greatest depths, has made normal human existence impossible for him. Or rather, Moses has become the first human being who sees what is possible. The rest of us are not ready yet.

Israel is ready, however, to begin to build the Tabernacle, and it does so in chapters 35-40. The last section of the book takes us to the moment of completion, when the hitherto absent, and often seemingly angry God becomes present to people in ways that overwhelm their senses and threaten to change their very understanding of existence. Israel experiences God's saving work at ground zero: salvation is about only one thing, God's presence in one's life.

Punchline

Experiencing the presence of God is the great goal of Christian faith. All else is secondary. But often we experience times of dryness and spiritual emptiness when it seems as though God simply is not present. Sometimes our sins separate us from God, and sometimes the silence is a way of preparing us to serve others. It is not always easy to tell which situation is which.

The greatest tragedy, however, comes when believers no longer care whether God is present or not. When emotional satisfaction or blind obedience to rules we no longer believe in substitute for true faith, then we have lost everything that matters. When we forget that God's mercy conquers everything we risk losing all. Only when we seek to be in the presence of the merciful God and to ask others to join us there can we truly experience the redemption of which Exodus speaks. Only then can we be free.

For further reflection

1. How have you experienced God's mercy in your own life? Give examples.
2. When has God seemed absent to you? What were the circumstances that led to this experience? How did you recover from it, if you did?

3. What are ways we can encourage each other when God seems absent? How can we grow in our sense of God's presence?
4. In what ways does our experience with God make us different from others, or from what we were before? How do we describe this difference?