

BIBLE CHALLENGE

A 4 week study of the book of Exodus

Moses and Exodus (Exodus 1-12)

The story so far: This week we begin the next book of the Bible, the book of Exodus. As this book, like Genesis, is foundational for much of what is to come in the rest of the Bible, we'll be spending some time with it. Exodus begins more than 400 years after the conclusion of the book of Genesis, probably around 1550 BC at the time of two Pharaohs whose names may be familiar to you: Seti I and Ramses II. The mood in Egypt at the time was not dissimilar to that in modern America: there was a rising sense of nationalism and a growing mistrust toward foreign elements within their borders.

When Joseph went to Egypt he gained a position of authority. As Exodus opens, all that has changed. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are now slaves under Pharaoh's control.

Watch, as we go through Exodus, for the way in which:

- The book revolves around twin focal points: the escape from Egypt (the name "Exodus" means "going out") and the giving of the Ten Commandments;
- God, who had focused primarily on a particular family in Genesis now forms that family into a people, the precursor of a nation;
- The question, "Who will be your God?" is dealt with repeatedly.

Monday:

Read Chapter 1:6-22

What to look for:

- God's promises, originally made to Abraham, once again appear to be in jeopardy. God can hardly make Abraham's descendants into a great nation, give them land, and bless the world through them if they are slaves in a foreign country.
- Note how the issue of who is to be obeyed, who is to be considered Lord, which will come up again and again in Exodus is raised almost immediately. In verses 15-17 Pharaoh issues an order, but the Hebrew midwives, fearing God more, disobey. Once again, in verse 21, the midwives are blessed because their allegiance is with God rather than with Pharaoh.
- Do you recognize who the heroic figures are at the outset of the story? Midwives...common, ordinary people choosing to stand against an injustice.

Tuesday:

Read Chapter 2: 1-10

What to look for:

- Note the irony involved in that it is Pharaoh's daughter who names Moses...and the name Moses means "is born" which sounds like the Hebrew word for "draw out"... exactly what Moses will eventually do for his people!
- Another bit of irony: in verse 3, the baby Moses is placed into a basket. The only other place in the Old Testament where this word is used is in reference to the ark of Noah in Genesis. That, too, was a rescue vessel through which Noah and his family were saved from drowning so that the whole human race could be rescued.
- Note how it is always the unexpected that God chooses to use: in the opening of Exodus, for instance, it is consistently the women in the story who play the pivotal roles in undermining Pharaoh's plans. Can you spot all the women who have come into play so far?

Wednesday:

Read Chapter 2:11-21

What to look for:

- As if God hasn't picked some unsavory characters to use for his purposes up to this point, now he will be using a murderer for his servant.
- Midian is located on the other side of the Sinai Peninsula, south of the modern state of Jordan.
- Much the same story between Moses and Zipporah plays out previously with Rebecca (eventual wife of Isaac) and Rachel (eventual wife of Jacob).
- In future readings, watch how the remark made to Moses in vs. 14 characterizes the rebellion and resentment the people will continually express toward Moses' leadership.

Thursday:

Read Chapter 3:1-15

What to look for:

- Mt. Horeb is also known as Mt. Sinai ... it is the same mountain with two names. So Moses is at Mt. Sinai (the same mountain where he will receive the Ten Commandments) when he encounters God in the burning bush.
- In vs. 7 God responds to the cries of the people. A careful reading of the previous verses at the end of chapter 2 indicates that the people's cries of anguish are not specifically directed to God. The compassion that God shows for them at this point, then, is not because they first remember or turn to God nor because they are worthy of his compassion. It comes because God is true to himself and the promises he has made in the past. And in vs. 8 God once gain renews his promise.

- In this passage God refers to himself twice (three times if you include vs. 16) as the “God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”. In vs. 7 God also identifies Moses’ people as “my people.” The God of past generations intends to be the God of the present generation as well, and involve himself in the lives of the people he claims as his own.
- What is Moses’ response? How is it similar to your response when God calls you to a task or ministry that seems beyond your desire or capacity?
- What is God’s promise (vs. 12)? How might that impact you as you carry this verse with you today? Note also, that in addition to God promising to be with Moses, his promise is also that after Moses has succeeded and has returned to this place, he will realize that it had been God’s doing all along.
- In vs. 14, in providing Moses with his name, God makes it clear that his character is one of dependability and faithfulness. This is not a new God for the people, but the God of their fathers who “is”. In telling Moses to give his name to the people, God is providing them a means to worship him. In John 8:58-59, Jesus applies God’s name to himself, stirring up controversy with the religious leaders of his day.

Friday:

Read Chapter 4:1-17

What to look for:

- Moses is continuing his protests to God’s call, which he began in yesterday’s reading. Note each of his individual, specific reasons for wanting to back away from God’s call: (3:11, 3:13, 4:1, 4:10, 4:13). Which one sounds most like you? What shortcomings do you perceive in yourself that you allow to disqualify you from God’s service?
- Note how it is not the abilities of the person but the presence of God’s power that makes the ministry successful. It is not the eloquence of the speaker but the fact that it is God’s word that is spoken that gives it its effectiveness.
- Note again how Moses in all his protesting is another example of God’s choosing of the weak, unwilling and unexpected as his servants. God, even when he reaches the point of anger in the face of Moses’ protests, continues to be patient and generous with him. But he does not let Moses off the hook; Moses will still be responsible for what God has asked him to do.

Monday:

Read Chapter 5:1-9

What to look for:

- The key to this passage, and the plagues which you will begin reading about tomorrow, can be found in verse 2, Pharaoh's question, "Who is the Lord?" Remember, we said at the beginning of Exodus that that would be the question that keeps coming up throughout the book. Here it is now on Pharaoh's lips.
- The gods of Egypt, as well as other gods in the ancient world, were always aligned with those who held power, i.e. the monarchies and the ruling class. How odd, then, from Pharaoh's point of view that the God of which Moses speaks would choose to bind himself to a band of helpless slaves, and then send someone to the most powerful person in the world to demand their freedom. What might that suggest to you about how God relates to the poor and the powerful in our modern day power structures?
- Note how things become worse rather than better because of what Moses has done.

Tuesday:

Read Chapter 7:1-13

What to look for:

- Pharaoh's question from yesterday, "Who is the Lord?" is the underpinning for what begins to happen in today's reading. All of what is about to transpire is intended to answer that question. In light of Pharaoh's belief that he is all powerful, God will demonstrate who is really in charge.
- Note in vs 3a the first reference to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. That image will appear again and again, in 7:13, 7:22, 8:15, 8:19, 8:32, 9:7, 9:34 and 35, 10:20, 10:27. If you combine the phrase "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" in verse 3 with "I am the Lord" in verse 5 you come to realize that it is a question of lordship. Not only is Pharaoh not all powerful over Egypt, he is not even all powerful over his own heart. Pharaoh is not even lord over his inner self.
- Note also in vs 5 that God states clearly what all of this is going to be about: Showing Egypt who is Lord.

Wednesday:

Read Chapter 7:14-17, 20-22a; 8:1-2, 6-8, 13-21, 24, 28-32

What to look for:

- Note how Pharaoh responds to each of the plagues.
- Note how in 8:8 Pharaoh appears to soften his stance. Moses acts on his request for prayer, but note how Pharaoh responds to this in vs. 15.
- Note in verse 8:15 who is responsible for Pharaoh's heart hardening now. God first hardens Pharaoh's heart back in 7:3, but now allows it to soften some in 8:8. God gives Pharaoh a chance to respond and what does Pharaoh do? He hardens his won heart. He responds to God's willingness to back off with his

own hardened unbelief. Which, of course, leads to the next plague.

- In 8:19, the magicians are starting to come around; they can see God's hand in all this.
- After plague #4 Pharaoh relents again in 8:28. But how does Pharaoh respond to Moses' willingness to pray for him? See 8:32. Note how, in all of these responses, apart from the very first case in which God hardened Pharaoh's heart, never again does it clearly say that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Clearly Pharaoh is responsible for doing some of his own hardening. So...on to more plagues tomorrow.

Thursday:

Read Chapter 9:1-3a, 6-14, 18-23, 27-28, 34-35; 10:3-4, 8-11, 13, 16-29

What to look for:

- These are plagues #5 through #9
- Note in 9:20-21 that some of the officials are catching on to the fact that when God speaks something is going to happen.
- In 9:27 Pharaoh finally repents...this is the first time he has come to the point where he acknowledges his sin. But in verse 34.... In what way is this like our own relational pattern with God, turning to him in times of need, but forgetting him and our own confession when circumstances lighten up?

Friday:

Read Chapter 11:1, 4-5a; 12:1-3, 7, 12-15, 17, 29-32, 37-42

What to look for:

- This is the final plague.
- Note 11:4-5a. Remember back at the beginning of the book of Exodus the Egyptians had decided to slaughter the Hebrew children (which was why Moses had been hidden in reed boat). Now it is coming back around to them as the final plague will destroy, not all their children, but the first-born.
- Before the final plague arrives, we are told of the establishment of the Passover.
- Note 12:1-3 and vs. 7: compare to Romans 3:23-26. As the blood of an innocent lamb offered salvation to the first born of Israel, the innocent blood of Christ offers salvation to all.
- Note also 12:15a, the unleavened bread.
- This is where the Jewish celebration of the Passover comes from. Jesus was celebrating the Passover with his disciples on Maundy Thursday, the night he was betrayed, when he reinterpreted the symbolism and instituted Holy Communion.

Journey into the Wilderness (Exodus 13 - 19)

The story so far: Having dueled with Pharaoh through 10 plagues, Moses has finally won freedom for his people. The final plague – the death of the first born of Egypt – has resulted in Pharaoh letting the people go and the institution of the Passover. As our readings begin this week, the people are on their way out of Egypt to the land God had promised their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so long ago.

Monday:

Read Chapter 13:17-14:4

What to look for:

- The most direct route to the land God has promised his people would be northeast from the Nile River delta and along the Mediterranean coast (13:17). But God does not lead them that way. Instead he leads them by way of the desert road toward the Red Sea. A better translation for “Red Sea” would be Sea of Reeds – the marshy area through which the Suez Canal now passes, rather than the large body of water known today as the Red Sea, which separates Africa from Arabia.
- Reference is made to the bones of Joseph, the one who had been responsible for bringing his father and brothers to Egypt 400 years before.
- Vs. 21-22 indicate God’s reliable leadership over his people and his constant presence with them
- Note the two reasons God gives for leading the people on this particular route: (1) the people may lose heart and want to return to Egypt if they were to encounter heavily fortified resistance along the way of the Philistines, the main highway from the Middle East into Egypt. (2) If the people head for the wilderness, Pharaoh will think they are trapped and will be tempted to go after them. This will allow God to “gain glory” over Pharaoh and establish clearly who is the Lord. (Remember what we said at the beginning...the central theme of Exodus is “Who will be your God?”)
- Note that God does not force Pharaoh to do what Pharaoh would rather not do. Pharaoh is given the choice to follow whatever course he chooses, and as a result the power and purpose of God will be made clear.

Tuesday:

Read Chapter 14:5-14, 21-31

What to look for:

- As Pharaoh changes his mind yet again and pursues the Israelites, note their reaction (vs. 11). This is one of countless times in the coming years that their faith will waver, their doubts take hold, they will want to blame Moses for having gotten them into this, and they will prefer to return to Egypt and slavery rather than live a life of trust in God. How do we willingly take on a yoke of slavery to sin rather than risk a life of trust in God?
- Vs. 13 and 14 – It is not a matter of the Israelites saving themselves, even with God’s help. No effort on their part will be

needed. Only the Lord will be the one who will be fighting; the Israelites won't strike a single blow. This is the most radical kind of trust, to let God be in full control and realize that he doesn't need our help. What would it take for you to let God be in control of your life to that degree for the rest of this week?

- Note the change in the people's attitude in vs. 31. This will also be a pattern throughout the rest of the book: The people complain, God acts to save them, they rejoice and believe, only to complain again later. "What have you done for me lately, God?"

Wednesday:

Read Chapter 15:22-25, 27-16:4, 17-21, 31

What to look for:

- Once again the people begin to complain and rebel, this time because they have no water to drink, and then because they have no food to eat. Apparently, despite God's actions on their behalf to this point, they have yet to learn anything about him, or to trust him. They owe everything to God and yet they are discontent and dream once again of slavery with an idealized, unrealistic "memory" of how good they had it.
- The manna God provides is a test. It is the ultimate faith food in that God gives it and if he doesn't give it they don't eat. They can't hoard it, they can't store it, and they can't get a week's worth of manna and keep it so that it'll be there when they need it. They have to live on faith and trust, day by day, one day at a time, which is to say they must live by faith one day at a time.
- Compare this passage to what Jesus says about himself in John 6:32-35, 48-51. We can't hoard Jesus either, or get enough of him to tide us over for awhile – we need to feast on him everyday. To live on the Bread of Life is to live by faith.

Thursday:

Read Chapter 17:1-13

What to look for:

- They're complaining again...they've been given water when the water they found was bitter, they've been given food from heaven when they were hungry...but it's not enough. It's never enough. When faced with a difficulty, they never cease to lose their trust in the God who has provided for them. Sound familiar?
- This is the first of many battles to come for the Israelites before they enter and settle in the land God has promised to them. The point of these stories and others like them is not that God is warlike or that he gives his blessing to bloodshed carried out in his name. This story expresses the confidence that God does not stand apart from the world in which we live, nor absent himself from the painful realities of life. He works in and through sinful human beings, since there are no other kinds, to accomplish his

plans. We'll talk more about Holy wars when we come to the book of Joshua.

Friday:

Read Chapter 19: 1-11, 16-20

What to look for:

- They have now reached Mt. Sinai, the place where God first met with Moses, and the place where he will give them the law in the form of the 10 commandments. This spot is the location for the rest of what happens in the book of Exodus, and the Israelites won't move from this place until we're into the book of Numbers.
- Note how God now reviews all he has done for them. Note also in vs. 4 how God does not say he has brought them to this mountain, but that he has brought them "to myself". In the end that's what God wants, for people to come to him.
- Note vs. 5 and 6...Israel's special responsibility will be to minister on behalf of the whole world. That is always why God claims us and gives us status as his chosen people, so that we will serve, not ourselves, but the world.

Wilderness Wanderings (Exodus 20 - 40)

The story so far: The Israelites have escaped slavery in Egypt through God's mighty hand, and he has led them to himself on Mt. Sinai, where they are about to receive the law of the covenant. Already, they have alternated repeatedly between trust and mistrust, between faith and doubt. That pattern will continue.

Monday:

Read Chapter 20:1-21

What to look for:

- Note that this is one of two places in the Old Testament where the 10 Commandments are recorded. The other is in Deuteronomy 5:6-21.
- Note in vs.1-3 how the Ten Commandments begin. It underlines the issue that has been at stake since the beginning of the book of Exodus: "Who will be your God?" What God says in these commandments is what God has been trying to say throughout the book to this point: "I am the Lord your God." He is the one who claims people. He is the one who delivers and sustains them. This one is the lord who is both determined deliverer and devouring fire.
- The first commandments deal with our vertical relationship, our relationship with God. The remaining commandments deal with our horizontal relationships with others. If our vertical relationship is not right the inevitable result is that our horizontal relationships will not be right either.

- Note how the commandments are not a set of obligations marking a new form of slavery; they are a charter offering freedom. Though the commandments are stated in a negative format, the results are positive. They are not restrictive in that they allow a greater freedom by suggesting that whatever is not forbidden is acceptable. The Ten Commandments function like a fence around a school yard, keeping the children safe from that which could harm them, but allowing them to play whatever they wish within the safety of the fence.

Tuesday:

Read Chapter 24:3-8, 15-18

What to look for:

- Note the response of the people to the Lord's words and laws. Their response will come back to haunt them, and sets up the key question for the remainder of the book. If the first part of Exodus dealt with the issue, "Who will be your Lord?", the second part – and on through the wilderness years we will be reading about in upcoming books – will now focus on "Who will be faithful?"
- Given the history of their reactions to God so far, kind of makes you wonder how long they will remain faithful.

Wednesday:

Read Chapter 32:1-14, 19-29

What to look for:

- The intervening chapters between yesterday's reading from chapter 24 and today's reading from chapter 32 contain God's instructions for the Tabernacle, the place of worship which Israel will carry with them through the wilderness.
- Recall the response the people made to God and his law in yesterday's reading? "Everything the Lord has said we will do, and we will be obedient", is what they said. Compare that to what they are saying now, "Why don't you make some other gods for us?" It is an immediate violation of the first commandment.
- Their desire is for a god that can be grasped and managed, something small enough to be controlled. In what way do we try to make God a projection of ourselves rather than worship a God who is bigger and "other" than us?
- Note how, in vs 9-14 Moses pleads with God and God appears to change his mind. The Bible frequently pictures God doing that as a result of the prayers of his people. Is that because God is fickle, or is it because, even at the expense of consistency, his judgment is colored by mercy? Note how Moses is simply pleading with God to be faithful to his prior deeds and promises. In that sense, Moses is praying for God's will to be done, the will that has been since the promises made to Abraham.
- Note the striking difference between Moses and Aaron (the one who was supposed to help Moses, and speak for him). While

Moses is interceding with God on behalf of a sinful people, Aaron tries to avoid responsibility in the whole affair and shift the blame to the people. Finally this one who was supposed to be so eloquent comes up with the lamest excuse of all: “the golden calf just happened to walk out of the fire!”

Thursday:

Read Chapter 33: 1-3, 12-14, 18-34:10

What to look for:

- Note how at the outset, God is going to keep his promise – they will have the land he told their ancestors they would possess – but he can’t stand to go with them. But Moses challenges God, in effect saying that the Promised Land is no good without the God who promised it. If God is going to keep his integrity, Moses argues, he is going to have to remember that the people belong to him.
- The phrase in 34:7 is not so much a description of a vindictive God as it is a description of the consequences of sin. Sometimes the sin we commit – an example might be domestic violence – not only harms those around us, but continues to inflict harm on the generations that follow us.
- Note how this passage ends with God once again renewing his covenant. (Remember, the term “covenant” means a relationship of promise.) He is offering the people assurance for the long journey they are about to continue. Though it has always been true in every instance of God’s making and renewing his covenant, it is even more obvious now – the covenant is an expression of God’s mercy to an utterly helpless and undeserving people. God renews his covenant only because he forgives and accepts sinners. His grace will sustain this relationship now and in the future in the face of repeated human unfaithfulness.

Friday:

Read Chapter 40:34-38

What to look for:

- Once again the intervening chapters have focused on the construction of the Tabernacle, and detailed instructions for worship.
- Note how, at Mt. Sinai, the cloud of the Lord’s presence had covered the mountain. Now, with the Tabernacle completed, the cloud has filled the place of worship. The final paragraph of Exodus looks backward and identifies how the presence of God has been with the people. But it also looks forward to what is to come. God and his people are on their way again, *together*, toward the goal of the promise.