Exodus: God’s Glory Revealed

A Connections Study Guide

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## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 1:1-22: Present in Suffering</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 2:1-25: The Rescuer</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 3:1-4:17: The Names of God</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 4:27-31: God Cares</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 5:22-6:13: Redemption</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 7:1-10:29: The Finger of God</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 11:1-12:5: Passover</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 13:17-2: The Discipline of Dismay</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 14:1-31: He Stretched Out His Hand</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 15:1-21: Mercy and Redemption</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 16:1-36: Bread of Heaven</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 17:1-7: Living Stone and Living Water</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 17:9-16: The Lord Is My Banner</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 18:1-27: Delegating</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 19:1-25: Glory Revealed</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 20: The Ten Commandments</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 21-23: The Book of the Covenant</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 24:1-11: The Heavenly Banquet</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 25-27: I Will Dwell Among Them</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 28-29: A Royal Priesthood</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 31:1-18: Work and Rest</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 32:1-35: The Test of Faith</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 33:7-34:8: The Essence of God</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 34:9-35: Radiance</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 35:1-35: All Those Who Are Willing</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God’s Miraculous Signs</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Exodus is more than a book: the movement from slavery to freedom is the central theme of the Bible and the singular purpose of God’s redemptive plan. Ever since Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden God has been trying to set humans free from sin. Jesus confirmed that “the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). In Exodus God literally frees the Israelites from slavery, but he also frees them from their slave mentality. In the desert, Israel becomes a nation. God teaches them how to be his people, how to worship him, and how do be set apart from the world. The wilderness is like a boot camp for a people who need to shake off the attitude of slavery and don the attitude of God’s representatives. They need to learn what it means to worship the one true God and to be his “treasured possession.”

God chooses a humble shepherd to lead them, a man with no political agenda other than to serve God. Moses may be humble, but he shows incredible faith, strength, resilience, mercy, and wisdom. The 40 years he spends in the desert as a shepherd parallel the 40 years he will spend leading God’s people through the desert to the Promised Land. From the moment he learns God’s name, Moses enjoys a personal relationship with God we have not seen since Abraham. Moses foreshadows another good shepherd whom God will send to lead his people. Like Jesus, Moses serves as teacher, intercessor, priest, and prophet. He spends more time in God’s presence than any human being since Adam. Through Moses we glimpse the type of relationship we are meant to have with God.

Here are some of the key themes we’ll encounter in Exodus:

- **God’s Glory:** Who is God? What does it mean to be in relationship with him?
- **A Holy Nation:** What distinguishes God’s people? What does it mean to be his chosen nation?
- **Redemption and Mercy:** What does it mean to be redeemed? How does God show his loving kindness to his people?
- **Miraculous Signs:** How does God reveal that he is the one true God?
- **Leadership:** What do we learn about leadership from Moses?
- **Covenant:** What is the significance of the covenant that God ratified with his people on Mount Sinai?
- **Tabernacle:** What does it mean to dwell with God and to worship him?

As we move through this remarkable story, we’ll wrestle with questions of our own such as:

- Where is God in my suffering?
- How do I know God cares for me?
- What has God rescued me from?
- What does it mean to belong to God?
- What am I a slave to? Am I willing to let go and follow Christ?
- What does it mean to me to be redeemed?
- Do I trust God to provide for my needs?
- What is my attitude of worship? Do I give freely and generously?
- How have I experienced God’s awesome presence and power in my life?
Day 1

Exodus 1:1-22

The book of Exodus begins with a promise fulfilled. We heard time and again in Genesis God’s promise to make the descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob fruitful and numerous. In Exodus 1 we are told that after 400 years in Egypt the Israelites “became so numerous that the land was filled with them.” To the Israelites this was evidence of God’s favor; to the Egyptians this was cause for concern. Suspicion of foreigners is common in the human political psyche. Centuries have wiped out the memory of Joseph and the new rulers of Egypt only see the Israelites as a pestilence and a threat. It’s also a time of abundance when Egypt was growing and building, so they needed slave labor. They solved both problems with one solution: enslave the Hebrews. By this time there were hundreds of thousands of them living in Egypt—a free workforce.

We tend to forget that this time of trouble was part of the covenant that God created with Abraham. In Genesis 15:13-14 God said: “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions.” Later, God told Jacob to go to Egypt where he would make his family into a great nation, and then God promised to bring him back again (Gen. 46:3-4). God made two promises to Jacob: 1) I will be with you in Egypt, and 2) I will bring you out of Egypt. Both of these promises are fulfilled in Exodus.

The first indication we have that God has not forgotten the Hebrews is the story of the Egyptian midwives. The king of Egypt tells Shiphrah and Puah to kill the Hebrew male babies, but the midwives feared God more than the king and did not follow his orders. The narrator tells us that “God was kind to the midwives.” He rewarded their faithfulness by giving them families of their own—they were fruitful and multiplied. This interesting little story tells us that God was not absent in the Israelites’ suffering. He was about to do something important and he was going to use whomever he needed to—even Egyptian midwives! The second clue we get that God had a plan occurs in chapter 2 when a Hebrew mother puts her male baby in an arc and sends him down the river. Miraculously, he’s found by Pharaoh’s daughter and adopted. That mother knew that God’s hand was in the saving of her child. We know what he was being saved for.

God is always at work, even in our suffering. God never promises us that we will not endure hardship; he only promises that he will be with us in our pain and that he will deliver us. I’m sure that many of the Israelites believed that God had forgotten them in their years of slavery, but there were probably just as
many who kept hope alive by retelling stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their covenant with the one true God. How would the Egyptian midwives have developed their fear of God if not in secret conversations in birthing tents with Hebrew women? It’s difficult to keep our faith alive when we are wandering in darkness or experiencing intense pain. The Bible tells us that God is with us in the darkness and the pain—and he will lead us out.

**Passage for Meditation**

Exo 1:20

“So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. When the Israelites first settled in Egypt they prospered; then their fortunes took a dramatic turn and they became slaves. Has there been a time in your life when you thought you had everything and then it was taken away? How did you cope? Where was God in your disappointment and suffering?

2. The Egyptian midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, took an outsized risk by defying the direct order of the king of Egypt to kill all the male Hebrew babies. Would you have taken such a risk to disobey an order you knew to be immoral? Have you taken a stand in the past based on your values or faith?

**Imaginative Exercise**

Imagine what Hebrew parents might have told their children during the long period of slavery about the covenant with Abraham and God’s promises. Write out your own statement of faith based on your understanding of God’s promises.
Moses’ parents are unnamed in this chapter, though we discover in chapter 6 that their names are Amram and Jochebed. All that we are told is that they are of the house of Levi, which will become important later on in the story. The details of Moses’ rescue are significant. Like the infant Jesus, he was saved from the edict of a vicious ruler who had ordered the murder of all first born males. He was placed in an “arc” and floated down the Nile River, echoes of God’s saving of Noah and his family. Like Joseph he was raised in the Egyptian palace so that he could learn their ways and save his people. Like ripples in a pond, God’s story repeats throughout history; if we pay attention we can see the patterns and recognize his hand.

The narrative of chapter 2 races through the years of Moses’ early life, pausing to tell two stories that are interrelated. The first is the story of Moses’ killing an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew. The narrator gives us a clue that even though Moses was raised by the Pharaoh’s daughter, he still associated with the Hebrews: “One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their labor” (emphasis mine). His instincts take over and he commits murder. The next day when he tries to break up a fight between two Hebrews, one of them says “Who made you ruler and judge over us?” (Exo 2:14). This is an obvious foreshadowing of the role that Moses will play in the desert, but here Moses has appointed himself the judge—he is not yet acting under God’s authority.

Moses leaves Egypt and flees to Midian—far from Pharaoh’s notice. He will become a humble shepherd and not call attention to himself. One day he is sitting by a well when he comes to the rescue of the daughters of Jethro, a priest. Like the other story, this brief encounter shows Moses as a rescuer. It is in his nature to act when he sees an injustice. We begin to see why God selected Moses to lead the Israelites. He has many years to go before he’s ready, but he has the right stuff.

The chapter ends with the line “So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.” In chapters 1 and 2 we have been given clues that God has not forgotten the Israelites or his covenant promise, but here it is stated explicitly. God will rescue Israel just as he rescued Moses and as Moses rescued the Hebrew man and the Midianite women. Rescue is an important theme not only of the book.
of Exodus, but also throughout the story of God’s people. God is always rescuing his creation from the consequences of sin and disobedience. The line in chapter 2 that says “The Israelites groaned in their slavery” reminds us of Paul’s thought in Romans 8: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (v. 22-23). Paul is referring to the groans of a creation enslaved by sin that needs rescuing (redemption). We all need to be rescued, we need a savior. The Hebrews are about to meet theirs.

Passage for Meditation
Exo 2:23-25
“During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.”

Questions for Reflection
1. Think about all the ways that God has rescued you. What did he rescue you from? What did he rescue you for?
2. In the story of Moses, God uses his mother and sister as his rescue patrol. If they had not acted out of love to protect Moses, he would have been put to death. Who has God used to rescue you? Whom have you helped to rescue?

Imaginative Exercise
In two circumstances, Moses acted to protect those who were being mistreated. Think about a social justice issue that you are passionate about. Do something this week to act on your “holy discontent.”
We’ve all had those days. We woke up thinking it would be an ordinary day, unaware that something would happen that would change our lives forever. Moses woke up thinking about sheep; he went to sleep thinking about confronting Pharaoh on behalf of the Almighty God. That’s what I call a life-changing event. Nothing could prepare Moses for his encounter with the burning bush. He’s not a priest; he’s never been to seminary and doesn’t understand the proper way to address the Almighty. So he does what we would do: he asks questions, he asks for proof of who God is, and then he tries to get out of it.

We recognize certain tell-tale signs that his is a genuine encounter with the living God that we’ve seen in Genesis. We’ve already seen that God can appear as fire in Genesis 15 when God appears in Abraham’s dream as a smoking firepot. When God calls his name, Moses answers “Here I am,” the same response we’ve heard from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Most importantly, God introduces himself the same way he did to the patriarchs: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” As a Hebrew Moses would recognize that appellation from stories his mother and sister would have told him. But this encounter with God is different in some significant ways. This is the most protracted dialogue between God and a human we’ve seen yet. Moses gets more face time with God than any human since Adam. But most remarkable of all, God tells Moses his name.

After instructing him to take off his sandals, God introduces himself. Moses is appropriately frightened at this point and hides his face. God announces his mission to save the Israelites and Moses is the guy he has chosen to lead them. Moses responds “Why me”? God doesn’t really answer his question because it’s irrelevant, but we can certainly see why God has chosen Moses. Moses is a Hebrew who has also been raised in Pharaoh’s palace. Like Joseph, Moses learned the Egyptian language and culture from the inside and knows how to conduct himself in Pharaoh’s presence. But he’s no aristocrat—he’s spent the past decades being a shepherd in the very land where God wants him to lead the Israelites: “When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.” Moses knows Egypt and he knows the desert. He has, as we would say today, many marketable skills!
The next question Moses asks is audacious: “What is your name?” In the Ancient Near East knowing someone’s name was extremely important information. You could address them directly and ask things of them. Someone’s name was their most prized possession—their identity. God has already introduced himself as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob,” so isn’t that enough? The clue lies in the Hebrew names for God used in this passage. The word *Elohim* is the generic Hebrew name for God. It could refer to any powerful god. God responds to Moses’ question with the name *Yahweh*, translated “I am who I am.” Names usually indicate family of origin. God’s proper name, “I am who I am,” is self-referring, meaning that God has no origin outside of himself. It also exists in both the present and future tenses, meaning that God is and will be. In John 8:58 Jesus claims the same name as God: “before Abraham was born, I am!” To his Jewish audience this would have been an unmistakable reference because John uses the same verb that is used in Exodus 3:14. God is the great “I am”; God is a verb.

But the Almighty, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient ruler of the universe cannot be described by just one name. The Bible uses many names to refer to aspects of God’s character: El/Elohim (Mighty One), El Shaddai (God Almighty, All Sufficient), El Eyon (God Exalted, God Most High), El Olam (God Eternal), Adon/Adonai (Master, Lord). God then directs Moses to use his other names to identify himself to Israel: “The Lord (*Adonia*), the God (*Elohim*) of your fathers—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” These names they would recognize; *Yahweh* they would not. God has revealed his name to Moses in a moment of what theologians call “special revelation.” Because in his name is power. Jesus told his disciples: “And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13). That’s the power of praying in the name of Jesus. God’s names not only describe his attributes, but they can also ascribe his attributes to those who use them properly. This is why the second commandment is, “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God” (Exodus 20:7).

It’s important that Moses name God appropriately when he confronts Pharaoh so he will recognize the power of the one who sent Moses with this message: “So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go.” God’s about to put on a show. A little shaken, Moses asks an understandable question, “What if they do not believe me?” Again, God proves he is who he says he is and turns Moses’ staff into a snake. He causes Moses’ hand to have leprosy and then heals it. He turns water into blood. We suspect he does these things to give Moses a little preview of the plagues to come, in case he has any doubt about God’s ability to pull it off.

Then Moses succumbs to one final human moment and begs God to send someone else. He makes a lame excuse about being slow of speech, though we’ve seen no indication of that so far. I believe he’s just scared out of his wits. I feel a little sorry for Moses here. He just wanted to be a shepherd. He had a nice little life with his family. Now he has to go back to Egypt where they want to kill him, convince the Israelites to follow him, and convince Pharaoh to let them go. Moses isn’t the first person in the Bible to be asked by the God of the universe to do something he really doesn’t want to do. Abraham must have had a sleepless night before he had to take his son, Isaac, to Mount Moriah to sacrifice him. Joseph wrestled with God the night before he had to face his brother, Esau. God had to assure Jacob that it
would be alright to move his family to Egypt. God asks us to do things that we’re not comfortable doing because he is El-Shaddai, God Almighty. “I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do.”

We cannot perform God-sized tasks under our own power. If we truly know God, understand his character, and know all his names, then we know that we can do amazing things through him.

**Passage for Meditation**

Exo 3:16-17

“Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt. And I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—a land flowing with milk and honey.’”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. The image of God in the burning bush is one of fire that does not consume. This seems to be a fitting image for the way God lives in us: a burning passion that does not consume or destroy. Have you ever experienced God this way? Is there a passion in you that won’t be extinguished?

2. Think about the significance of your name, what it tells people about you. Reflect on the names of God: Elohim, Yahweh, El-Shaddai, Adoni, El-Elyon. Why did the authors of the Bible need to use so many different names for God? What names for God do we use today?

**Imaginative Exercise**

Imagine yourself in front of the burning bush, barefoot and frightened in the presence of Almighty God. What is God asking you to do for him? What is your response?
When President Thomas Jefferson asked Meriwether Lewis to lead a small team to discover a water route to the Pacific Ocean through unexplored territory, Lewis knew that he did not have the requisite skills for such a journey. Lewis was a brilliant tactician and naturalist, but he wasn’t a strong leader or outdoorsman. He knew that he did not have all the skills that would be necessary for such a large undertaking. He selected his former army commander, William Clark, to co-lead the expedition for his leadership, navigation, and mapmaking skills. They stand out as one of the most successful leadership teams in American history. Together they led a group of 30 men across the continent with no map and little idea of what they would encounter. They complemented each other perfectly and never disagreed once about a decision. This is how I imagine Moses and Aaron: a formidable team with just the right combined skills to lead such an unprecedented expedition.

I imagine that Moses had great angst about returning to Egypt. First, he’s been away for a long time, living in a foreign land. He must re-establish his relationships with his family and with the Hebrew people. Second, he has to confront Pharaoh and ask him to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Third, he has to lead a group of hundreds of thousands of people on a journey into the desert with no specific itinerary other than worshipping on Mount Sinai. Lewis and Clark had one year to prepare for the requirements of a trip through unexplored territory; Moses did not have any time to prepare. But God had been preparing for hundreds of years.

God had a plan, and he gave Moses a partner. Aaron will be the prophet to Moses’ God (Exo. 4:16) when they speak to the Israelites and to Pharaoh. This is a significant metaphor that God uses here, because Moses will establish the role of the prophet in the desert when he no longer speaks directly to the people. Almost on cue, Aaron appears and greets Moses. If Moses had any concerns about Aaron’s willingness to take this on, they evaporated with the kiss of greeting he received from his brother.

Together, Moses and Aaron met with the elders of Israel. Aaron did the talking while Moses performed the signs God had showed him. Miraculously, “they believed.” Let’s try to put ourselves imaginatively into this scene. The Israelites have been in Egypt for over 400 years, but we don’t know how many of
those years they have been slaves. God has been silent since the days of Jacob, but they continue to pray—to cry out and groan as we are told in 2:23-24. Then one day Aaron appears with his long-lost brother, Moses, and they tell them the story of the burning bush, the staff-turned-snake, and God’s plan to rescue them and punish Egypt. The tribal elders do not react with skepticism, as Moses had feared. They don’t doubt what they have heard at all—they are astonished. This is the God of their fathers, the God of the covenant, the God of deliverance. What I find touching is that what they are most excited about is not their freedom and finally leaving Egypt—it’s that God cares about them: “And when they heard the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped.”

If Moses had any doubts that what God told him was true, they were erased by the response of Aaron and the elders. They recognized the truth of God’s character as it had been revealed to their patriarchs. They had been preparing for the moment when God would show up—and he did! God really does care.

**Passage for Meditation**
Exo 4:31
“And when they heard that the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped.”

**Questions for Reflection**
1. Think about a time when you felt God had answered your prayer. What did it feel like to know that the God of the universe cared about you?
2. God gave Aaron to Moses as his partner, because he knew that no one person would be equipped with all the skills necessary to lead such an unprecedented exodus. The same is true in ministry today—we need ministry teams made up of people with different spiritual gifts. Read Romans 12:4-6 and think about a ministry you’ve been part of where people of different gifts worked together for a common cause. Make a list of the individuals and the gifts they brought to the team.

**Imaginative Exercise**
Is there something that you believe God is calling you to do, but you feel inadequate for the task? Is there a ministry you would like to start, or a cause that you would like to do something about? Make a list of your “dream team,” the people with the right gifts and skills to pull this off. Now pray to God to deliver the right people for the right task.
Day 5

Exodus 5:1-21

Moses and Aaron deliver the speech to Pharaoh perfectly: they start with a request to let the Israelites go into the desert for three days to worship God. We’ve seen a similar event in Genesis 50 when the Egyptian dignitaries escorted Joseph and his family to Canaan to bury their father, Jacob, so there is a precedent. But this Pharaoh knows nothing of this historical event; in fact, he claims “I do not know the Lord.” Moses and Aaron first use the proper name, Yahweh, that God told Moses, which has never been spoken before, so it’s not surprising that Pharaoh doesn’t recognize it. Then they switch to the more generic “God of the Hebrews” to be more explicit.

But Pharaoh’s objection isn’t really that he’s never heard of this God. His objection is two-fold: 1) As a god himself (he believed he was the son of the sun god, Ra), Pharaoh doesn’t “obey” other gods, and 2) he doesn’t want to lose his workforce. Of course, God had predicted that Pharaoh would not acquiesce to this request (3:19); he wanted a chance to reveal Pharaoh’s true character to the Israelites and to the Egyptians, and leave no doubt about who was the true God.

Think about it: if Pharaoh allowed the Israelites to leave for three days to worship their God, the Israelites might get the impression that he’s a benevolent ruler. They might lose their will to leave the life of slavery that they know to journey into the desert, which they don’t know. It’s human nature to choose the known over the unknown, even if the known isn’t so great. We see this behavior in abused women, for example, who choose to stay with their husbands and put up with the physical and emotional abuse rather than risk being on their own. Instead, Pharaoh makes their lives harder by making unreasonable demands and beating the Hebrew overseers. When challenged, Pharaoh’s true character is revealed. The Israelites realize that staying is not an option. They cannot go backward, only forward.

What they don’t realize is that this is just the beginning. The stage is set for a showdown between Pharaoh and God. Moses is new on the job, the Israelites are scared for their lives, the Egyptians are tightening their grip—tensions are high. The way out of Egypt will require unimaginable human suffering. Not because that’s what God wants, but because that’s what it takes to win freedom from an oppressive regime. We’ve seen it time and time again throughout human history that freedom comes at
a high cost. We must keep that in mind as we read about the plagues that God brings upon Egypt, and when we witness the death and destruction brought by wars. God tried diplomacy first, but Pharaoh would not negotiate. War is often the unfortunate consequence of human greed and pride.

A battle is about to be waged for the freedom of the Hebrews—a spiritual battle. In Ephesians Paul tells us to be prepared to wage spiritual warfare against the evil forces in this world: “Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (v. 11-12).

**Passage for Meditation**

Exo 5:3

“The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, or he may strike us with plagues or with the sword.”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. We know from our own country’s history that freedom comes with a cost. As Christians we know this all too well; our freedom from sin was purchased by Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, Paul says, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price.” What does Paul mean by this? How does this idea change the way you view your life?

2. Did you know there are 27 million people in slavery in our world today? We think of slavery as an ancient practice, but it is still with us in the form of economic, sexual, and political bondage. Visit the website [www.freetheslaves.net](http://www.freetheslaves.net) to learn more about modern day slavery. Pray for the work of this organization and many others like it that are fighting to win the freedom of millions of people (mostly women and children).

**Imaginative Exercise**

Imagine being a slave who has no control over your own life. Try living one day imagining yourself as someone who is powerless over the most mundane details of his/her life such as when to eat, when to work, and when to rest. As we see in Exodus, slavery also involves humiliation. How would your self-image suffer under slavery? Keep a “slave journal” about your imaginative experience.
Sometimes we get frustrated with God because we know that he’s up to something in our lives, but we just don’t know what it is. We want him to just reveal the whole plan to us so that we can understand our present circumstances. This is where we find Moses at the end of chapter 5: he’s getting grief from the Hebrews because their lives just got harder because of Moses and Aaron. So, he asks God “Why? What’s the point of all this?”

So God lays out his plan, but it’s greater than anything Moses could imagine or comprehend. He begins by reminding Moses of who he is: “I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they resided as foreigners.” God reminds Moses that he is the God of the covenant who is about to fulfill his promise to his chosen people. Notice that this promise goes far beyond just releasing Israel from slavery. Our clue comes in 6:6-7: “I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God” (emphasis mine).

This is the first appearance in the Old Testament of the word “redeem.” As Christians we recognize this word as being part of our language of faith. Peter states, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish” (1 Peter 1:18-19). In Galatians 3:14 Paul argues, “[Christ] redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.” So what does it mean to be “redeemed”?  

This is a word that would have been familiar to those of that time and place. It was a legal term in the Ancient Near Eastern patriarchal society that revolved around the family unit. The patriarch of the family had the right and obligation to redeem, or buy back, family members who were impoverished or enslaved. Sandra Richter defines it this way: “Redemption was the means by which a lost family member was restored to a place of security within the kinship circle.” In Exodus 4:22, God tells Moses, “Then say to Pharaoh, ‘This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, ‘Let my son go, so he may worship me.’” This reference to Israel as God’s “son” takes on new significance in relation to redemption. As Richter puts it, “Yahweh is presenting himself as the patriarch of the clan who has
announced his intent to redeem his lost family members.” He not only intends to buy freedom for Israel, but also to bring them back into his household, to be their God. In Isaiah 43:1, God proclaims: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.” In fact, all of Isaiah chapter 43 is a celebration of God’s redemptive plan for his people. And it begins here in the book of Exodus.

But even when God reveals this plan to Moses he does not yet see the big picture. Neither do the Israelites, who continue to complain about their misery. We do tend to get caught up in the petty concerns of our day-to-day existence and miss the amazing things God is doing in our lives. God has revealed his plan to us—the Bible is the blueprint of God’s kingdom. In it we can see that God has redeemed us and the extraordinary life that he offers us as part of his family. We should live as redeemed people, not as slaves.

Passage for Meditation
Exo 6:6
“I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with might acts of judgment.”

Questions for Reflection
1. What does it mean to you to be redeemed by God? Read Isaiah 43 and reflect on how Isaiah answers this question.
2. William Dumbrell points out that in the Ancient Near East, redemption meant that the redeemed was indebted to the redeemer. “By redemption, Israel passed into the service of the one whose service is perfect freedom.” Paul called us “slaves to Christ.” Reflect on what it means to serve God in “perfect freedom” and to be a slave to Christ.
3. The act of redemption in the Ancient Near East required a price to be paid. What was the price that God paid for our freedom? What does redemption mean to us today?

Imaginative Exercise

Write a psalm of praise in the spirit of Isaiah 43, as one who was a slave but now is free.
Pharaoh himself provided the reason for the plagues when he responded, “Who is the Lord that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go” (5:2). God accepts his challenge: “And the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it” (7:5). As I mentioned earlier, this is a battle between the spiritual forces of good and evil—God against god. As we watch the plagues unfold, it’s like watching the events of the first chapter of Genesis in reverse. Instead of bringing order to chaos, God is bringing chaos out of order. God has the power to both create and destroy. While it isn’t pleasant to observe, there is no doubt that he is the Almighty God.

We notice that the plagues come in threes. Each set of plagues has a purpose and begins with the phrase “Then the Lord said to Moses.” The first set proves the inferiority of Pharaoh’s magicians. It’s no coincidence that God starts by turning the water of the Nile River into blood. The Nile is the source of life for the Egyptians. When the magicians try to match God miracle-for-miracle they come up short and confess, “This is the finger of God” (7:19). The second set demonstrates the separation of God’s people from the Egyptians when none of the plagues affects the Hebrews. The third set shows the incomparability of Yahweh. This is especially true of the ninth plague: darkness. The greatest of the Egyptian gods was Ra, the sun god. Pharaoh was thought to be the son of Ra. When the sun disappeared for three days there was no doubt in the minds of the Egyptians or the Israelites who was the more powerful God. God states this as his purpose in 9:14: “I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth.”

A common phrase that we hear throughout the plague chapters is “God hardened his heart,” or “Pharaoh hardened his heart.” This phrase is significant because we hear it echoed throughout the Bible to describe what sin does to the human heart. In an interesting turn of phrase, the narrator says, “When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail had stopped, he sinned again: He and his officials hardened their hearts” (9:34). Pharaoh could have saved everyone a lot of grief if he had just relented earlier. He even admits to Moses, “The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong” (9:27). But this is a false confession because his heart has not changed. We hear this same language in Isaiah 6:9-10: “Go
and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes.” Jesus uses this same language in Matthew 13:13-16 to describe those who, “hardly hear with their ears” and “have closed their eyes.” Pharaoh’s heart has calcified to the point that no sign will be enough to convince him. Only a fatal blow will crush his will, and that’s what God brings with the tenth plague.

**Passage for Meditation**
Exo 9:16
“But I have raised you up for this purpose, that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”

**Questions for Reflection**
1. As people of the new covenant, we don’t like to witness the destructive power of God. We prefer to talk about love and grace, rather than curses and destruction. Even in the midst of the plagues, however, we see God’s mercy: “by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth” (Exo 9:15). What does this tell you about God’s character? How can the story of the plagues help us to understand why God allows evil to exist in the world?
2. Have you ever felt that your heart was hardened? Do you know anyone you would describe as “hard of heart”? What can we do when we realize that we’re hearing but not understanding, seeing but not perceiving?

**Imaginative Exercise**
In the plagues God hit the Egyptians where they were most vulnerable and where they had gods that they worshipped: their water, their crops and livestock, and the sun. If God were to bring plagues upon our country, what type of plagues would hit our country where it would hurt the most? What are our idols of worship?
To 21st century ears the tenth plague seems barbaric: the killing of the firstborn son of every Egyptian. We should recall that at the end of chapter 1 Pharaoh had brought this same sentence against the Hebrews (1:22). And, ironically, it was this same decree by King Herod that forced Joseph and Mary to take the infant Jesus to Egypt (Matt 2:16). God tried to reason with Pharaoh and had demonstrated his mighty power through lesser plagues. Only death would make Pharaoh relent and allow the Hebrews to leave Egypt.

The tenth plague has a name: Passover. It will come to memorialize for the Jews God’s deliverance. He set them apart and spared them from death. Literally, God’s angels “passed over” their houses if they saw the lamb’s blood on the door. In chapter 12 God gives them detailed instructions for how to prepare the Passover meal, which is to become an annual observance called the Festival of Unleavened Bread commemorating the day that God delivered them from slavery into freedom. I’m amazed at the level of detail he provides, even down to what they should wear and how they should eat! Clearly, Passover is more than just a crisis event for the Israelites: it is the beginning of their life as God’s people. It’s the first of many laws and observances to come and the beginning of a new way of life. God is initiating the process of shaping them into a holy nation before they even leave Egypt. He is testing their obedience, but he’s also saying, “Your lives will never be the same after this.”

Passover is to Jews what Easter is to Christians—a celebration of deliverance, of protection from death, of God’s favor. It’s no coincidence that the Last Supper was the Passover meal. Jesus chose this particular occasion to announce the dawn of the new covenant. He told his disciples: “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God” (Luke 22:15-16). It is difficult for us to imagine what it must have felt like for the disciples to hear Jesus say: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20). His words are an echo of Exodus 24:8: “Moses then took the blood, sprinkle it on the people and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with these words.’” And Moses’ words are an echo of the Passover when the lamb’s blood saved the Hebrews from death and initiated a new life as God’s people. Jesus connected the dots for them so they
could see that his death would be the fulfillment of a promise that God made that night in Egypt. In Colossians 1:19-23, Paul connects the dots for us: “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel.”

I’m blown away by God’s faithfulness. His love truly does endure forever (Psalm 107, 118). He never gives up on us and always keeps his promises. In this day and age we have woefully short memories. We think in terms of years, but God thinks in terms of centuries and eons. We get frustrated if God doesn’t answer our prayers immediately. The Hebrews waited 430 years in Egypt for God to hear their cry. God remembered his covenant and delivered them in a spectacular way. But deliverance does not come without suffering. Passover is a stark reminder of this. It was blood that bought the freedom of the Israelites from Egypt and it was Jesus’ blood that bought our freedom from sin and death.

**Passage for Meditation**

Exo 12:24-27

“Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendents. When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’ Then the people bowed down and worshiped.”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. What has God delivered you from? If you were to observe your own Passover meal, when would you celebrate it and what would it represent for you?

2. Read Exodus 24:8 and Luke 22:20. Put yourself in the place of the disciples as they sit at Jesus’ feet on Passover and hear these ancient words being spoken. In this passage from Exodus, Moses and the leaders of the Israelites ate and drank in the presence of God. The disciples must have realized that they were doing the same. Reflect on the significance of that connection.

**Imaginative Exercise**

Read Psalms 107 and 118. Write your own psalm of praise for God’s deliverance.
In My Utmost for His Highest, Oswald Chambers coins the phrase “the discipline of dismay” to capture that moment immediately following the disciples’ decision to follow Jesus. Mark 10:32 says, “They were on their way to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid.” We can imagine that moment: after the excitement of leaving their lives behind to follow this strange but captivating man, they are staring at the back of his head thinking, “What have I done?” They don’t know who he is or where they are going. Chambers writes: “There is an aspect of Jesus that chills the heart of a disciple to the core and makes the whole spiritual life gasp for breath. This strange Being with His face “set like flint” and His striding determination, strikes terror into me. He is no longer Counsellor and Comrade, He is taken up with a point of view I know nothing about, and I am amazed at him. At first I was confident that I understood Him, but now I am not so sure. I begin to realize there is a distance between Jesus Christ and me; I can no longer be familiar with Him. He is ahead of me and He never turns around; I have no idea where He is going, and the goal has become strangely far off.” In the early days of our walk with Christ we have to just keep going even though it may seem strange and a bit frightening.

I imagine this is how the Israelites are feeling about leaving Egypt and following Moses, a man they barely know, to an undisclosed location for an undisclosed purpose. After the adrenaline rush of the Passover, now they face a long walk into the desert. God knew this would be their reaction. He didn’t lead them on the short path through Philistine country because he knew that the first scuffle would send them running back to Egypt! There is always that moment right after we make a major decision that we think “I can still go back,” when the familiarity of the past threatens to overcome the excitement of the future.

In anticipation of this, God provides comfort and assurance in two ways. The first is that Moses brings with them the bones of Joseph. As the narrator explains, the Israelites had sworn to Joseph that they would carry his bones out of Egypt so he could rest with his family. This would have served as a reminder to the Hebrews of the covenant with God and served as continuity between past and present. Another visible sign was God’s physical presence in a pillar of cloud by day and pillar fire by night. “Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.”
What an amazing gesture on God’s part! Like the disciples following Jesus, the Israelites were literally following God. To them he was Emmanuel, “God with us.” As Chambers reminds us, “God does not tell you what He is going to do; He reveals to you Who He is.” God revealed himself to the Hebrews to be a living God who cares about them and will never leave them. Even though they did not know where he was leading them, they were comforted by his presence.

Chambers argues that if we have not experienced the almost debilitating fear of following Christ that we are not true disciples: “If we have never had the experience of taking our commonplace religious shoes off our commonplace religious feet, and getting rid of all the undue familiarity with which we approach God, it is questionable whether we have ever stood in His presence. The people who are flippant and familiar are those who have never yet been introduced to Jesus Christ.” We live in an age of comfort and convenience, but the Christian life is not supposed to be comfortable or convenient. Like the Hebrews, when we accept Christ we must be prepared to leave behind what is familiar and faithfully follow God into the unknown future.

Passage for Meditation
Exo 13:21
“By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.”

Questions for Reflection
1. Have you ever experienced the “discipline of dismay” that Chambers describes? Has there been a moment in your walk with Christ when you felt uncertain or hesitant? What comforted you during that time?
2. Think of a time when you left the familiar for the unfamiliar. Describe how you felt during the time after you left what you knew but before you had settled into your new situation. How does this memory help you to empathize with the Israelites as they are leaving Egypt?
3. Do you agree with Chambers that we must leave the familiar in our walk with Christ in order to truly follow him? Does this frighten you or excite you?

Imaginative Exercise
Write a narrative from the perspective of either an Israelite leaving Egypt or a disciple in the first hours of following Jesus. Try to capture the sense of fear they must have felt and the doubts they had. What kept them going?
Ancient Near Eastern cultures had a fear of the sea. They believed that the sea was not only in the deeps below, but also in the sky above. Surrounded by water, they feared the chaos that would ensue if the waters were ever “unlocked.” Consider this passage in Job: “Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, ‘This far you may not come and no farther; here is where you proud waves halt’” (Job 38:8-11). Their greatest fear came true when God flooded the earth in Genesis 7:11: “on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened.” Other ancient cultures had a flood story in their mythology, but their myths suggested that the gods could flood the earth on a whim, or if they got angry with each other. Humans were helpless against death by water.

That God controlled the sea was important for these early believers to understand. As Sandra Richter puts it: “Throughout [God’s redemptive] story there is a recurring theme of Yahweh’s rescuing his people by delivering them from the sea.” He saved Noah and his family from the flood and then made a covenant with him never again to destroy all life on earth. Against this mythological backdrop we can better appreciate how the Hebrews felt when they saw Moses part the Red Sea. It was more than an escape route for them; it was proof of God’s power and benevolence. We will see God’s deliverance through water again in the book of Joshua when the Israelites cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land:

So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them. Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water’s edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away. (Joshua 3:14-16)
The image of the Israelites crossing on dry land while the waters of the Red Sea or the River Jordan stood at attention is astounding to us today, but it must have seemed unthinkable to the Hebrews. It was proof positive that God was who he said he was: “And when the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant” (Exo 14:31).

Richter points out that these Old Testament stories of deliverance from water are an important lens through which we should read the story of Jesus calming the storm in Matthew 8:24-27: “Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We’re going to drown.’ He replied, ‘You of little faith, why are you so afraid?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, ‘What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!’” We can better understand why the disciples were amazed by this feat. They knew their scripture and had heard about Moses and Joshua parting the waters, but those men acted under the initiative of God. Here, Jesus acted under his own initiative. Richter explains: “this event is one of the clearest declarations of Jesus’ deity in the New Testament. It is Yahweh who said at the dawn of creation: ‘thus far you shall come, but no farther’; and it is only Yahweh the Son who could stand and remind the Sea of Galilee of the same.”

Passage for Meditation
Exo 14:13-14
“Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

Questions for Reflection
1. Recall the tsunami of 2008 that struck parts of Asia or the tsunami in Japan following the earthquake in 2011. With these images of watery destruction in our minds, we can certainly understand why the ancient cultures feared death by water. In an instant whole towns were destroyed. How does our faith help us to deal with such devastation? Where is God in the midst of natural disasters?
2. In the passage above, Moses tells the Israelites to “stand firm” and to “be still.” Our natural inclination in times of great fear is to run. The Israelites were even ready to return to a life of slavery rather than face the uncertainty of escape! Have you ever experienced this desire to run rather than to stand firm in your faith? How can we overcome this fear through faith in God’s mighty power?

Imaginative Exercise
Think about water in all its forms. To the Israelites it inspired fear. What does it represent to you as a Christian? What spiritual qualities does it symbolize? Write a narrative or poem in praise of water and what it means in our life with God.
Yesterday’s meditation focused on the way that God delivered the Israelites from the water of the Red Sea. The other part of that story is that once they had crossed, he used the water to destroy the Egyptian army just as God used the waters of the flood to destroy the wicked in Genesis. God can both save and destroy at will. It is this image of God as Divine Warrior that the song in chapter 15 celebrates in its opening stanzas. “In the greatness of your majesty you threw down those who oppose you. You unleashed your burning anger; it consumed them like stubble” (v. 7). Verses 1-12 are all about God’s power to bring vengeance on their enemy. They focus on characteristics of God involving strength: “The Lord is my strength and my defense”; “The Lord is a warrior.” They set him above all other gods in power and glory: “Who among the gods is like you, Lord?”

When I read this chapter I imagine the Israelites, still flush from the adrenaline rush of crossing the Red Sea, dancing and singing with abandon. It was the world’s biggest party! Hours earlier they were complaining to Moses: “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt?” (14:11). Now they are high-fiving each other and celebrating God’s goodness.

But the mood of the song changes in verse 13 as they shift their focus from the past to the future. The image of God switches to that of Divine Shepherd who will lead them through peril to the Promised Land. The language also makes an important theological shift. In verse 13 we are introduced to two significant terms: “In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed” (emphasis mine). The phrase “unfailing love” is a translation of the Hebrew word hesed. Some versions translate this as “loving kindness” (ASV), “mercy” (KJV), “loyalty” (CEB), “merciful love” (The Message), and “steadfast love” (RSV). As you can see, it’s a difficult word to translate into English. In her book The Gospel of Ruth Caroline Custis James calls hesed “one of the most potent words in the Old Testament.” She argues that it “sums up the ideal lifestyle for God’s people. It’s the way God intended for human beings to live together from the beginning....the kind of love we find most fully expressed in Jesus.” William Dumbrell
points out the similarity between the Old Testament word *hesed* and the New Testament word *charis*, or “grace,” both meaning “unmerited favor.”

The other important term in verse 13 is “redeemed.” We’ve seen this word before, in Exodus 6:6-7: “I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will *redeem* you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God” (emphasis mine). We discussed the significance of the concept of redemption in the patriarchal societies of the Bible. When we put together the terms “unfailing love/kindness” with “redeem” we begin to get a picture of the redemptive story that is unfolding. We should hear echoes of Paul in Romans 5:8: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” The Israelites recognized that God delivered them out of love and redeemed them so that they could return to him and dwell with him. They express confidence that the Lord will lead them to his “holy dwelling” and will protect them in the journey. “You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance—the place, Lord, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, Lord, your hands established” (15:17).

The language of this song of exodus—the image of God as Shepherd, of divine protection, and of the certainty of deliverance—is echoed in one of the greatest psalms:

> The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  
> He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
> He leads me beside quiet waters,  
> He refreshes my soul.  
> He guides me along the right paths  
> For his name’s sake.  
> Even though I walk  
> Through the darkest valley,  
> I will fear no evil,  
> For you are with me;  
> Your rod and your staff,  
> They comfort me.  
> You prepare a table before me  
> In the presence of my enemies.  
> You anoint my head with oil;  
> My cup overflows.  
> Surely your goodness and love will follow me  
> All the days of my life,  
> And I will dwell in the house of the Lord  
> Forever. (Psalm 23)

This is what it means to belong to God.
**Passage for Meditation**

Exo 15:17-18

“You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance—the place, Lord, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, Lord, your hands established. The Lord reigns for ever and ever.”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. Sometimes we want God to be the Divine Warrior who protects us from evil, and sometimes we want God to be the Divine Shepherd who guides and comforts us. Is this true in your life?
2. What does it mean to you to belong to God?

**Imaginative Exercise**

Write your own version of Psalm 23 or the song of Moses.
The jubilation of the exodus quickly faded in the desert heat. All the people can think about is survival, so they do what comes naturally—they complain bitterly and romanticize the past: “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death!” Every time they complain, God provides abundantly. In chapter 15 they complained about not having drinkable water, so Moses throws a stick in the water and it turns sweet. Then God leads them to an oasis with “twelve springs and seventy palm trees” (15:27). When they complain about not having enough to eat, the Lord says “I will rain down bread from heaven for you.” God always gives them so much more than they asked for.

There is testing going on in the early days of this relationship. The Israelites are testing whether God will really provide for them and keep them from harm (see Psalm 78:18-19). God is testing whether the Israelites will follow his instructions and trust him. I find this chapter just a little humorous. God (through Moses) instructs them to gather only as much manna as they need each day because God will provide more in the morning. Being slaves, the Israelites’ instincts tell them to hoard, so they disobey this order and discover that manna doesn’t keep overnight. When Moses tells them to double up on the sixth day because there will be no manna on the Sabbath, some people go out gathering on the seventh day anyway. Moses must have felt like a camp counselor at this point: “How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions?”

God knows that human nature is to forget (or misremember) the past, so he instructs the Israelites to keep an omer of manna for the generations to come “so they can see the bread I gave you to eat in the wilderness when I brought you out of Egypt” (16:32). This omer of manna makes an appearance in Revelation 2:17: “To those who are victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna.” But the significance of the manna goes beyond a small sample kept in a jar. Like so many things in the Old Testament, the manna in the desert points toward a greater reality that is fulfilled in the New Testament. In the prayer that Jesus teaches the disciples, he includes the words “Give us today our daily bread” (Matt 6:11). The disciples would have recognized this reference to the manna in the desert. God gives us exactly what we need and we should trust him daily. More importantly, Jesus uses the manna to describe himself: “I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died.
But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which people may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (John 6:47-51). He reiterates this point during the Last Supper when he picks up the unleavened bread and says, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). In the desert and at the Passover meal, God’s message is “remember.”

Bread serves as a thread that runs throughout the Bible to remind us that God does provide, even in ways we do not understand or recognize. The narrator of Exodus tells us that God provided manna for the Israelites for 40 years in the desert. It was their constant companion, to the point where they forgot its origin. We must strive to look around us and recognize the manna from heaven God continues to provide: the check that comes when we needed it most; the phone call from a friend at a critical moment; a passage of scripture that feeds our soul when we are spiritually hungry. What a wonderful metaphor for all the ways in which God showers us with his grace every day.

**Passage for Meditation**
Exo 16:33
“Take a jar and put an omer of manna in it. Then place it before the Lord to be kept for the generations to come.”

**Questions for Reflection**
1. In what ways are we like the Israelites who complained even though God provided them with all they needed? What is the solution for this human condition?
2. Meditate on Jesus’ words in John 6:47-51. Do these words take on new meaning for you after reading Exodus 16? What is the “bread of life”?

**Imaginative Exercise**
Draw a picture of your life as the desert and identify the manna that God provides you every day.
Day 13

Exodus 17:1-7

Thirst is the greatest danger of desert life, so desert dwellers become expert at knowing where to find water. In our study of Genesis we discussed the importance of wells. Since the Israelites are on the move, they would not have bothered with digging wells, so they needed to find good sources of water at each stop. God instructs Moses to strike a rock with his staff in front of the elders so they could see water come out of the rock. He used the same staff that turned into a snake and turned the Nile River to blood, so this should have been an impressive sight. Psalm 78 describes it this way: “He split the rocks in the wilderness and gave them water as abundant as the seas; he brought streams out of a rocky crag and made water flow down like rivers” (v. 15-16). As usual, God gives abundantly. This was an object lesson to the Israelites to trust that God will provide for them (though they never seem to learn this lesson). In the book of Numbers, God once again instructs Moses to bring water from a rock, but this time he tells him, “Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water” (20:8). Instead, Moses strikes the rock twice, as he did before. God is not amused: “Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them” (Num 20:12). Moses acted under his own impulse rather than following God’s instructions to the letter. So we understand that the act of bringing water from the rock is a big deal. But why?

Think of all the verses in the Bible that describe God as a rock. There are too many to mention here, but a few that you might check out are: Deut. 32:31, Psalm 71:3, 2 Samuel 22:32, Psalm 18:31, Psalm 19:14, Isaiah 26:4, Psalm 62:2. You get the picture—the rock is a common image that biblical writers used to describe the strength of God. Jesus also used the rock as an image for faith. In Matthew 7 he tells the story of the man who built his house upon the rock: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house upon the rock” (v. 24). In 1 Corinthians 10:4, Paul suggests that Christ is the rock that provided water for the Israelites in the desert: “for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.” Peter describes Christ as the “living Stone” and suggests that those who follow him become living stones as well (1 Peter 2:4-5). Here we see another intriguing link between the Old Testament and the New Testament. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, Jesus tells her that God is the source of living water: “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water” (v. 10). God is a living stone that pours fourth living water.
This is one of the things I love about the Bible: seemingly simple stories are rich with theological meaning. We considered how manna from heaven becomes an enduring symbol of God’s provision. Here we see that the rock and the water are both powerful images of strength and divine blessing. Imagery is such an important aspect of the Bible. I recommend resources such as the Zondervan Dictionary of Biblical Imagery that you can reference when you run across an image that seems significant, or that recurs in the Bible. Even though we don’t live in the desert, these images can still have meaning for us. When you read Psalm 19, what does the author mean when he refers to God as “my Rock and my Redeemer”? Is God your Rock? When you read Psalm 42 and encounter this image: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God,” what are the “streams of water” that you long for? These images give us language to describe our relationship with God—to understand the mysterious in familiar terms. What does it mean to add the adjective “living” in front of stone or water? Can a stone live? Is water alive? God transcends the limitations of this physical world, so neither is he bound to physical realities in our imagination. He is the fire that does not consume. This inspired Isaiah to write, “When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze” (43:2). These are powerful images of what we can do through Christ. They are images of hope.

**Passage for Meditation**

Exo 17:6

“I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will come out of it for the people to drink.”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. Read Psalm 78:12-40. What is the psalmist saying about human disobedience and God’s merciful nature? Why does God continue to provide for the Israelites in the wilderness even though they constantly complain? Why does he allow them to test him?

2. Using a Bible search tool, search for the term “rock.” Why do you think the rock was such a powerful metaphor for God in the Bible? Do the same for “water.” What does the combination of water and rock signify?

**Imaginative Exercise**

What images would you use to describe God from today’s world? Think of things that would mean as much to us as water and rock meant to those who lived in the desert.
The Lord is my Banner

Day 14

Exodus 17:9-16

This is one of the most memorable images in the Bible for me. Moses sends his most trusted soldier, Joshua, to lead the Israelites in battle against the Amalekites while he stands on a hill “with the staff of God.” Let’s pause and consider why that detail is important. Earlier in chapter 17 we saw God produce water from a rock when Moses struck it with his staff—the same staff that God used in Egypt. There is power in the staff of God. There is no question who defeated the Amalekites that day. That’s why Moses built an altar and called it “The Lord is my Banner.” They were fighting under God’s banner. Psalm 20:5 says, “May we shout for joy over your victory and lift up our banners in the name of our God.” In the Ancient Near East banners signified that an army was fighting under the power and resources of a king.

Another brave warrior recognized that he was merely the vessel God would use to bring victory in battle. When young David fought the Philistine Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 he said, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head” (v. 45-46). If we think about it, this rag-tag group of Israelites—who until very recently had been slaves in Egypt—going up against the warlike Amalekites is roughly comparable to the David and Goliath situation. The fact that they defeated the Amalekites could only be attributed to God. This must have been as astonishing to the Hebrews in the desert as David’s victory over Goliath would be to their descendants.

Another remarkable aspect of this story is the fact that Moses had to stand on a hill and lift his arms in order for the Israelites to win. Aaron and Hur stood on either side of him and held up Moses’ hands throughout the battle. I find it curious that God needed Moses to win this battle. Why depend on the stamina of an 80-year-old man? We have to look at everything that happens in Exodus as an object lesson for the Israelites. God is teaching them about himself and about how to be a godly nation. There’s no question that God has the power to defeat the Amalekites, but he can’t fight all their battles for them. They must learn how to work together. They will encounter many more hostile groups in their journey through the wilderness and in the Promised Land.
Moses, Aaron, and Hur provide a great example of teamwork. We not only need God to help us, but we need other people. There are no solitary heroes in the Bible. We are not meant to be lone rangers, either. We are meant to be in community with others who can lift us up when we are weak or tired. I’m reminded of the story in Mark 2:4 when the friends of a paralytic lowered him down through the roof to where Jesus was. Mark says, “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven’” (v. 5). Jesus rewarded the faith of the group by healing the man on the mat. In comparison, the paralytic by the pool in John 5 tells Jesus that he has no one to lower him into the water that is believed to have healing properties. Is he alone because he has not cultivated friendships? In this world there are so many people who are alone and need others to bring them into the presence of the healer. Like Moses, we need loyal friends who will lift up our hands so that we can do God’s work.

**Passage for Meditation**

Exo 17:11-12  
“As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses’ hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset.”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. Can you think of a time when you depended on God’s strength to get you through a tough situation? Where would you build an altar and plant the Lord’s banner in your past?
2. Who would you call on to lift you up in a time of weakness? Have you cultivated those kinds of Christian friendships in your life?

**Imaginative Exercise**

Create a banner and decorate it with symbols of God’s provision in your life.
Delegating

Day 15

Exodus 18:1-27

Thomas Cahill calls Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, the world’s first business consultant! This is an apt description of the sound management advice he provides to Moses. In chapter 17 we saw how Moses needed Aaron and Hur to hold up his hands during battle. In this chapter we see that he needs help adjudicating the petty disagreements that arise with a group the size of a small city. I find this episode comforting. There’s so much here for us to pay attention to.

Jethro serves in the role of priest and spiritual advisor to Moses. He offers a burnt sacrifice to God in thanks for God’s deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. After the difficult events they have been through, Moses probably needed a reminder to stop and celebrate the good things that had happened. But Jethro also reminds Moses that he is a single human being who cannot possibly handle everything by himself. All leaders, whether they are pastors or CEOs, need to be reminded of this. Moses is wearing himself out trying to be available to everyone who needs him. Jethro gives him permission to delegate some of his duties, within certain parameters. He gives sage advice for creating a sustainable organization. Even Moses needed a counselor and executive coach.

Jethro’s advice comes in two parts. 1) Moses must retain his place of authority. He is God’s representative to the people and that must never be jeopardized. This part of Moses’ job description is going to increase once they reach Sinai, so he needs to free himself from some of the other tasks to focus on his role as prophet. 2) Moses must select a group of trustworthy, capable, godly men and coach them in how to judge the people according to God’s “decrees and instructions.” We don’t know what these are since the law has not yet been handed down from Mount Sinai, but we assume that God has provided Moses with some sort of management manual. Once the elders have been properly trained, they can be empowered to judge the people under the supervision of Moses. What an elegant solution.

Chapter 18 seems a bit procedural compared to what comes before it (God provides water from a rock and defeats the Amalekites) and after it (they reach Sinai and hear the voice of God). But that’s what I like about the Bible—even the seemingly mundane details matter. Israel is learning how to function as a cohesive unit. When they reach the Promised Land they will need to govern themselves. The judges that
Moses appoints in the desert are the forerunners of the judges who will lead Israel in the book of Judges. Leadership is an important part of any organization, but especially the church. Jethro makes the point that the judges must be men of excellent moral character: “men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain” (v. 21) Similarly, Paul cared very much about the moral character of the leaders of the early church. In 1 Timothy 3 he describes the ideal “overseer”: “Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect” (v. 2-4). He had a hand in selecting these people so that he could entrust them with the care of his flock.

We can all learn a lesson from Jethro, especially those of us in ministry within the local church. Like Moses, we might be tempted to do everything by ourselves. When you care passionately about something it’s difficult to trust it to anyone else. Not only do we burn ourselves out that way, but we are also robbing others of the opportunity to serve. There are many jobs in God’s kingdom; we should find the role that’s right for us and help others to find the role that’s right for them. By appointing a group of judges, Moses increased the capacity of the entire group. Our first concern should always be, “What’s best for God’s kingdom?”

**Passage for Meditation**

Exo 18:22-23

“Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied.”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. Think about the most efficient and effective organization you have worked for. What type of leadership and management philosophy did they use? Was it similar to the structure that Moses puts in place?
2. Why is moral character so important in the leadership of the church? Are you aware of examples where pastors or church leaders did not exhibit Christian character? Read Ezekiel 34:1-5. What does God have to say to the bad leaders of Israel?

**Imaginative Exercise**

Draw an organizational chart of your church. Who are the leaders? Do you see areas in the church that lack leadership, or where one person is carrying the burden by themselves? Consider sharing your concerns with your pastor.
Day 16

Exodus 19:1-25

In this chapter the Israelites reach Mount Sinai. This is the mountain where God revealed himself to Moses in chapter 3. It’s also the place where God promised to bring the Israelites once he delivered them from Egypt (3:12). God has been progressively revealing himself to humans throughout Genesis and Exodus. To Abraham he appeared in various forms: a smoking firepot, visitors, dream visions. He also appeared to Isaac and Jacob in dreams; Jacob had two theophanies while he slept: one was God appearing at the top of the stairway from heaven and the other was as his wrestling partner. To Moses God appeared as a burning bush. To the Israelites he appeared in a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. God had carefully disguised himself in order to interact directly with humans, but no one had seen God directly. That would be like looking directly at the white hot sun—dangerous. Now the Israelites are standing before God’s mountain and are as close to him as anyone has been since Adam and Eve. God is careful not to let them come too close or they will die, but he wants them close enough to hear him and to feel his presence. God has been calling them since Adam and Eve left Eden and he’s so excited to have his children back home that he’s trembling!

The opening exchange sounds almost like a marriage proposal: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (19:5-6). And the people say, “We will.” Here God declares his intention to establish a lasting covenant with Israel that will set them apart from all other nations. They will be a “holy nation.” But what does it mean to be “holy”? This is the question that God will answer in the rest of the chapters of the Pentateuch (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). It begins with three days of preparation. They must purify themselves to prepare to be in God’s presence. This ritual cleansing will become a regular feature of their worship. This act of preparation has been lost through the centuries. We might put on our “Sunday best” to go to church, but we don’t prepare ourselves spiritually to be in God’s presence. We don’t ask “am I holy”? Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 2:9 of what God promised that day at Mount Sinai: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who
called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” We are God’s beloved, his chosen ones, his holy nation, and we should act like it.

On the third day they woke up to thunder and lightning, a trumpet blasting, and a thick smoky cloud hovering over the mountain. I can’t imagine how frightening this must have seemed. As they approached, smoke billowed up “like smoke from a furnace and the whole mountain trembled violently” (v. 18). This image of God is the opposite of the Gentle Shepherd. There is no mistaking his awesome power. The writers of the Bible had another word for it: “glory.” In 2 Chronicles 7:1 we see God’s glory on display in his new temple: “When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple.” Isaiah had a similar experience of God’s glory in his vision: “And they were calling to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke” (Isaiah 6:3-4). The Israelites came to view this image of God in all his glory as comforting, even in its terrifying imagery. In Psalm 18:6-16, the psalmist describes God in mythic terms as the awesome and terrifying ruler of heaven and earth who breathes fire and causes earthquakes when he’s angry. To the psalmist in Psalm 144, there is something comforting about a God who can rescue him in such a dramatic way: “Part your heavens, Lord, and come down; touch the mountains, so that they smoke” (v. 5). It is a reminder that no God is greater than our God. God’s glory is his strength. As Hannah says in her poem in 1 Samuel 2:8-9: “For the foundations of the earth are the Lord’s; on them he has set the world. He will guard the feet of his faithful servants.” At the foot of Mount Sinai the Hebrews experienced firsthand the awesome glory of God for the first time and began a personal relationship with the creator of the universe.

There is also a warning implicit in being in the presence of God’s glory. We may be a bit put off by God’s instructions to kill anyone who touches the mountain: “Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death. They are to be stoned or shot with arrows” (v. 12). In our permissive society this type of immediate corporal punishment seems unthinkable. But God is trying to teach them boundaries. They must learn to obey him. God had told Moses, “If you obey me fully and keep my covenant...” He didn’t say, “If you obey me most of the time...” Disobedience has dire consequences, as we’ve seen in Eden, in the flood, and in Sodom and Gomorrah. As Hannah reminds us, “The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up” (1 Samuel 2:6). We don’t get the positive benefit of a relationship with God without any of the negative consequences. That’s why God knew that he needed to establish a covenant with his chosen people. There needed to be clear expectations. That’s why he handed down the Ten Commandments.

**Passage for Meditation**

**Exo 19:4-6**

“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”
Questions for Reflection

1. What does it mean to you to be “holy”? Describe some examples of what holiness looks like today.

2. Read Psalm 18 and Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2. What do these two passages tell us about God’s power? Why do these writers find this image of God comforting?

Imaginative Exercise

Write a psalm in which you describe God’s awesome power. What imagery would you use to convey this aspect of God’s character?
No biblical words are as familiar to us as the Ten Commandments, or the “Ten Words” as they were known in Hebrew. They are engraved on our minds and hearts just as they were engraved in stone on Mount Sinai. In a stunning act of simplification, God boiled all the laws of his universe down to ten. They are unalterable and undeniable, for as Thomas Cahill suggests, “They were always there in the inner core of the human person—in the deep silence that each of us carries within.” God knit them into his creation from the beginning and knit them into our souls. And before they were carved into stone they were spoken by God directly to the people. I imagine that as that dusty group of people stared up at the smoky mountain and heard the thunder speak these words, they thought “Of course. This sounds familiar.”

While the Ten Commandments were unprecedented in ancient religions, they are not unprecedented in the Bible. We’ve seen or heard all of them before in Genesis and Exodus. Since the Garden of Eden God has been teaching his children what it means to be in relationship with him. He’s proven time and again that he is the one true God—most spectacularly in Egypt. He commands the elements, he makes mountains tremble. To worship any other god would be foolish and ungrateful. Before God spoke the words “Thou shalt not murder” he exiled Cain for murdering his brother Abel and he told Noah “And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being” (Gen 9:5). God reminds the Israelites that even God rested from his work when he created the world in six days. If God can take a day of rest, then so can his people. God’s personal relationship with the patriarchs in Genesis sent a strong message that family matters and that they should honor their lineage. The final straw in Sodom was not sexual immorality back a lack of hospitality to strangers. God cares how we treat one another. All of the prohibitions in the Ten Commandments are written into God’s story if we pay attention.

Through the ages scholars and religious leaders have analyzed the Ten Commandments to find a system, a key that will unlock their meaning. Some have divided them into two groups of 5—those related to God and those related to humans. Some have seen three groups, much like in the plagues. Some consider the first four to refer to our relationship with God and the last six referring to our relationship with others. The modern church tends to agree with the latter system. I don’t think we’re
supposed to get hung up on categorizing the Ten Words. They are elegant in their simplicity yet profound in their meaning for human society. God didn’t just want the Israelites to memorize a group of laws—he wanted them to ingest them so they would get into their blood stream and be deposited in every fiber of their being.

Jesus says as much in his response to the teacher of the law when he asks him “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” Jesus responds, “The most important one...is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mark 12:28-31). The interesting thing about Jesus’ response is that neither of these is one of the original Ten Commandments! The first one is from Deuteronomy 6:4. God reminds the Israelites: “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts” (Deut 6:6). It represents the sum total of the commandments: love God with all that you are. The second “commandment” that Jesus cites is nowhere in the Ten Commandments. It is from Leviticus 19:18: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus mentions it again when he’s speaking with the rich man in Matthew 19. When the man asks him what he needs to do to have eternal life, Jesus says “keep the commandments.” The man asks “which ones?” (a clear sign that he doesn’t yet understand their meaning), and Jesus lists just the ones relating to how to treat other people, including “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 19:19). Is Jesus adding to the original Ten Commandments, or merely summarizing them? The answer is both. In John 13:34 he tells his disciples: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” Where God boiled all the moral laws down to ten, Jesus boiled them down to one: love. I suspect that what he was trying show the rich young man is that his wealth was a barrier to loving others. Wealth is usually obtained by stealing, lying, and coveting, so the odds are that he’s not kept those particular commandments. We do tend to get hung up on the letter of the law and miss the point of the Ten Commandments as a whole. If we love God then we must love others. It’s a syllogism: God loves people and we love God; therefore, we must love people.

Looking back on that day at Mount Sinai from our privileged vantage point in history, it’s easy to see that the fledgling nation of Israel was in kindergarten and this was their first lesson. School was in session and they are about to learn what it means to be a “holy nation.” They will fail the test time and time again, but thankfully God is a forgiving teacher.

Passage for Meditation
Exo 20:20
“Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.’”
Questions for Reflection

1. C.S. Lewis argued that the proof that God exists lies in the fact that all humans believe there is a moral order in the universe—an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Would you agree with that? Do you consider the Ten Commandments to be universal truths?

2. When they heard God speak the Ten Commandments the Israelites were afraid. Moses tells them that the fear of God will keep them from sinning. Proverbs 1:7 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” And Proverbs 19:23 says, “The fear of the Lord leads to life.” Reflect on the meaning of “fear” in these proverbs and what Moses was trying to explain to the Israelites.

Imaginative Exercise

Some people question whether the Ten Commandments are still relevant in our society. Reword the Ten Commandments in today’s language to show how you would counter that argument.
Day 18

Exodus 21-23

Chapters 21-23 contain the societal laws or “ordinances” that support the Ten Commandments. This set of laws is referred to as the Book of the Covenant. It is the constitution for the fledgling nation of Israel. This is the part where most Christians tune out because we don’t believe these laws apply to us. This is certainly true, but it is important that we understand what they represent and what God was doing at this crucial point in history.

We should step back and consider the significance of the covenant that God referred to in 19:5 when he said “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.” We’ve heard the word “covenant” before; the first time was the creation covenant with Noah in Genesis 9. God also offered a covenant to Abraham starting in Genesis 12 where we first heard the word “nation”: “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you” (v. 1-2). Throughout the book of Genesis God reminds Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob of the covenant he has made with their family to give them land and descendents as numerous as the stars, sand, and dirt. In Exodus 2:24 we are told that God heard the groaning of the Israelites “and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob,” so he intervened in history to rescue his people. So the covenant that God offers them on Mount Sinai appears to be a continuation of the covenant that already exists—the fulfillment of the promise that God made to Abraham hundreds of years before.

But there’s something different about this covenant. With a few exceptions, the Abrahamic covenant required only loyalty to God and faithful obedience. Abraham did leave his home in Ur to go to Canaan and he did circumcise his entire household. Jacob also acted on God’s command and went where God told him to go. But other than these actions, the patriarchs were left alone to live their lives as they saw fit, according to the cultural norms of their time. Now, God formalizes the agreement and lays down some hefty laws that the Israelites must follow to the letter. If they obey fully, they receive God’s protection and provision; if they disobey, they receive unimaginable curses. What changed?

The answer lies in the type of covenants that God created with Abraham and with the Israelites. The covenant was a common form of agreement in the Ancient Near East. For example, Jacob and Laban
created a covenant between them in Genesis 31. The covenant usually carried certain expectations for both sides, like a modern contract. Most of the time, covenants were between a powerful party (known as the “suzerain”) and a subservient party (known as the “vassal”). The covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was a land grant covenant that was (for the most part) unconditional. The covenant ratified at Mount Sinai is a suzerain/vassal covenant that is conditional. God follows the protocol of the typical suzerain/vassal covenant that would have been familiar to the Israelites and the surrounding cultures to send a powerful message about the weight of this unprecedented relationship.

I won’t go into the detail of the suzerain/vassal covenant, but it is important to understand that a conditional covenant must contain, well, conditions. That’s what we see in chapters 21-23. God has promised to make them his possession (vassal) with all the privileges and protection that status brings, but they must act accordingly. In the words of Sandra Richter, “God the suzerain of the universe would make Israel a nation by making a treaty with them. By means of their association with him as suzerain, Israel would become a nation—a vassal nation.” Her point is that God extended this amazing privilege to Israel when they were still a “rabble of slaves.” They had done nothing to earn this privileged status. He didn’t say to them, “obey me and then I will free you from slavery.” God made the first gesture; all he asked for in return is their love and loyalty. In the New Testament they call this “justification”: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Sanctification is the process of living into the life Christ offers us at the moment when we say “yes” to him. The Israelites are now being shown what life with God will look like if they accept his offer.

We will spend more time on the meaning of the laws that God lays down when we get to Leviticus, but here in Exodus it is important to recognize that God is defining what it means to be a “holy nation” set apart from other cultures. We must remember that the Israelites have been living in a foreign country for the past 400 years. They must be cleansed and purified of all foreign influences. God has to get specific about what that means exactly. It’s like when we tell our kids to clean their rooms. Our definition of clean and their definition of clean might be very different. So, it’s better to give them a list of tasks: make your bed; pick up your clothes off the floor, fold them, and put them away neatly; empty your trash can; and dust your furniture. Here God is giving the Israelites a list of dos and don’ts that are unmistakable in their specificity. They also reveal what God cares about. He cares about justice, fairness, and taking care of the weak. He protects the women, the slaves, and the poor. In return for their obedience, God will set them up in a land of their own and provide them divine protection. This seems like an unbelievable deal, but it will be a long journey for these people from being a “rabble of slaves” to a “holy nation.” But now they have a blueprint of what it will look like to be the people of God.

Passage for Meditation
Exo 23:20-22
“See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive our rebellion, since my Name is in him. If you listen carefully to what he says and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you.”
Questions for Reflection

1. In the verse quoted above, God promises to send an angel ahead of them to lead them to the Promised Land. Similarly, Jesus told his disciples that he would send a “Counselor” or “Advocate” to “guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). We have come to understand this as the Holy Spirit, who enables and empowers us to live a godly life. Do you feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in your walk with Christ? Do you find comfort in knowing that God does not leave us alone to find our own way?

2. What do you notice about the type of laws God focuses on in chapters 20-23? If you had to characterize them, what words would you use? Who do they benefit? What do they tell us about what God cares about?

Imaginative Exercise
Create a personal covenant with God. What does God promise you as his “treasured possession”? What does he expect of you in return?
Every covenant needs to be ratified by both parties. In chapter 24 this happens in two ways. Once Moses comes down from Mount Sinai and shares the Book of the Covenant with the people, they affirm their obedience: “Everything the Lord has said we will do” (v. 3). Then he built an altar, sacrificed burnt offerings, sprinkled half the blood on the altar (representing God) and half the blood on the people. Moses’ words, “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with these words” (v. 8), should sound familiar to all Christians: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20). In both cases, the blood consecrates a covenant between God and humans that will change the course of history.

There is another connection between chapter 24 and the Last Supper—the sharing of a meal. In many ways this is as significant as the blood ritual. In Exodus God allows Moses and the elders to ascend Mount Sinai unharmed in order to eat in the presence of God. Seventy-four men climbed into the divine cloud for the meal of their lives. We aren’t told much about the experience other than: “they saw God, and they ate and drank” (v. 11). So short it could have been a tweet! What an amazing gesture on God’s part; this was more than just an invitation to dinner—it was an invitation into relationship. Eating together is such an intimate experience and this becomes a central image that represents the kingdom of God throughout the Bible. In Psalm 23:5 David exalts God’s generosity: “You prepare a table before me.” Isaiah uses the image of the banquet to show that God provides his people with the finest that he has to offer: “On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines” (Isaiah 25:6). Jesus frequently dined with people, especially the outcasts, showing that God wants to be in relationship with all people. In Luke 14:12-14 he makes this connection explicit: “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” Revelation puts an exclamation point at the end of this image of the heavenly banquet.
when the angel declares, “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” (Rev 19:9).

So, with all this as backdrop the disciples must have been floored when Jesus stood up at the Passover meal and ratified the new covenant in their presence. They knew then (if they hadn’t already figured it out) that they were in the presence of God, the same God who dined with Moses and the elders on Mount Sinai. God was inviting Israel into fellowship with him and Jesus was inviting us all into eternal fellowship. Paul reflects on the significance of this meal in 1 Corinthians 11: “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes....So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together” (v. 26, 33). When we celebrate Holy Communion, we celebrate our citizenship in the Body of Christ, just as the Israelites celebrated their new status as citizens of God’s holy nation by eating at the table prepared for them by the God of the universe.

I find it astonishing that one minute the mountain is shaking and spewing smoke, and the next minute Moses and the elders are enjoying a meal together. But that tells us a lot about God’s character. God is unquestionably the Almighty Creator who has the power to create and destroy, to bless and to curse—but he is also a loving Father who desperately wants to be in relationship with us. I imagine him as the host who is excited to lay out his best spread for his family. The banquet is such a powerful image of God’s kingdom. Not only is God generous, but he is also inclusive. All are invited into intimate fellowship with God and with each other. We have a standing invitation to join God at his table in the clouds. What a beautiful vision of heaven.

**Passage for Meditation**

Exo 24:8-10

“Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.’ Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky.”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. Think about the most joyous meals you have had with friends and family. What made those experiences so rich and memorable? How can you compare those meals with your relationship with God? Do you feel the same joy, the same ease in his presence?

2. Reflect on Jesus’ metaphor of the banquet. What does this tell us about how we are to treat others and show them God’s love for them?

**Imaginative Exercise**

If you were to host a Luke 14:12 meal, whom would you invite? Consider hosting a meal in your home when you invite people you don’t know, or would not normally invite to a party.
I Will Dwell Among Them

Day 20

Exodus 25-27

So what do people do once the wedding is over? They live together. Once the Israelites say “I do” to God and they have enjoyed the wedding banquet, now it’s time for God to move in. We cannot underestimate the significance of these chapters where God lays out the blueprint for his dwelling place, his tabernacle. God has not been physically present with humans on earth since the Garden of Eden. He’s made brief appearances, but in chapter 25 God announces his intention to dwell with his new nation: “Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them” (v. 8).

Many of us gloss over the details of the structure that God provides to Moses, but they provide valuable clues as to God’s plan. Like a craftsman, he gives very precise instructions on how the tabernacle will be built. First comes the ark of the covenant, which will contain the tablets on which the Ten Commandments are written. Anyone who has seen the film The Raiders of the Lost Ark is familiar with this piece. God gives us a clue as to its purpose: “There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites” (v. 22). The ark will be God’s throne from which he will speak with them and rule over them like a king. The ark will be placed in the inner most chamber of the tabernacle, called the Holy of Holies (or Most Holy Place), separated by a curtain. Only the high priest will be allowed to enter this most sacred space (so sacred that he must wear a bell to let the other priests know that he’s still alive!). But the ark is portable, so God’s throne can travel with the Israelites and go ahead of them to assure them of his presence.

Next comes the altar, which will reside in the Holy Place—a square area in front of the Holy of Holies where only the priests can go. The altar will hold the bread of Presence. The Holy Place also contains seven lamps that the priests must keep burning.

The tabernacle itself is a tent, which is appropriate since the Israelites are still nomadic. Once they are firmly planted in Canaan and live as a united kingdom under David, then God will sanction the building of a permanent temple. For now, he needs to be able to move with them. But even though it’s a tent, it’s built to God’s specifications.
Finally, there is to be a courtyard outside the tabernacle where the people can approach God and offer him their burnt offerings. Like on Mount Sinai, God wants the people close but not too close. There must be some separation. The tabernacle is designed to represent the way that God wants to live with his people, the way he has wanted to live with them since he created the world.

In his book *Finding the Lost Images of God*, Tim Laniak points out the similarities between the details of the tabernacle and the description of how God created the earth in Genesis 1-2. “Moses was fully aware that the tabernacle was meant to be a carefully designed and sanctioned microcosm of the world God built and inhabits. It was a second divinely conceived building project, reminding worshipers that the whole world is God’s sanctuary.” Laniak points to the parallel between the seven speeches of God to Moses as he gives him the detailed building instructions and the seven days it took God to build creation, ending with the Sabbath. He calls out attention to similar words and phrases referring to light, water, gold, onyx, and cherubim in both Genesis and Exodus. In chapter 26, the detail for the lamp stand contains garden imagery: “Hammer out its base and shaft, and make its flowerlike cups, buds and blossoms of one piece with them...Three cups shaped like almond flowers, with buds and blossoms are to be on one branch” (v. 31, 33). Similarly, in Solomon’s temple we see “on the walls all around the temple, in both the inner and outer rooms, he carved cherubim, palm trees and open flowers” (1 Kings 6:29). God’s dwelling place is a combination of earth and heaven. As Laniak explains it, “The temple furnished a unique glimpse of heaven on earth, while simultaneously reminding worshipers that God’s temple was earth itself.”

This detail has powerful implications for our understanding of God’s plan. It was always God’s plan to live among us, to dwell with us. When the living conditions in the Garden of Eden were marred by sin, he patiently waited until his people were ready and he created a garden in the desert and dwelled with them once again. When that arrangement went awry because of sin, he dispensed with the physical structure and sent his son to dwell among us in the flesh: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). At the moment of Jesus’ death Matthew tells us, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (27:51). No longer is there a separation between God and his people. We can dwell in God’s presence directly without the fear of death! We can approach the Holy of Holies (no bell required!). We see this vision of heaven-on-earth in Revelation when John describes the New Jerusalem: “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (21:3). There is no more temple “because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (21:22). There is a new heaven and a new earth—a new Garden of Eden the way God had always intended it to be. And the clues to this magnificent vision are there in the tabernacle if we only pay attention.

**Passage for Meditation**

Exo 25:7-8

“Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.”
Questions for Reflection

1. Tim Laniak points out that “God’s temple is the earth itself.” Have you ever been somewhere in nature when you felt God’s presence? What was that experience like? Did you feel like worshipping God?

2. Church worship spaces are designed to reflect our relationship to God, the idea of separate but together. Do some research on the design of different church worship spaces (such as Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant) so that you have a better understanding of how they relate to God’s design of the tabernacle.

Imaginative Exercise

Spend some time in a church worship space reflecting on the meaning of the design and arrangement of the room. Then go to a natural location and reflect on the earth as God’s tabernacle.
In chapters 25-27 we saw how God defined sacred space for the Israelites. From Mount Sinai he instructed Moses on how to build the tabernacle so that God could dwell among them, yet remain separate and holy. In chapters 28 and 29, God instructs Moses on who will be the sacred people among them who will intercede for Israel with God. So far, Moses has served the function of both prophet and priest, but now Aaron and his sons will be consecrated as the priestly family who will perform all sacred rituals in the tabernacle. We should recall that in chapter 19 God told Israel: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (v. 5-6). From the beginning, God’s intention was for Israel to be a holy community that could minister to the whole world. The first step toward becoming a kingdom of priests is to establish the professional priesthood.

God selects Moses’ brother, Aaron, to be the high priest of Israel. Moses and Aaron are from the tribe of Levi, so the Levites would become the priestly tribe of Israel. Like sacred space, sacred people are to be set apart from the rest of society. That’s why they must wear such ornate outfits, purify themselves, and be consecrated for their sacred duties. God makes it clear that their “sacred garments” are necessary for them to serve as priests (v. 4). Each piece of the priestly outfit serves a particular purpose. Protestants sometimes wonder why Catholic priests dress in such ornate outfits; we need only read Exodus 28 to understand its origin. Their garments serve not only to set them apart from others, but also to honor and glorify God with their beauty (v. 2). Ask any pastor what it feels like to put on their robe and sash for preaching and they will tell you that it is a humbling experience that reminds them they are in the service of the Lord. When they stand before the congregation they are there to speak for God, not themselves.
The most fascinating piece for me is the “breastpiece of decision,” or “breastpiece of judgment” as it’s also translated. It was gold, blue, purple, and scarlet with 12 precious stones representing the 12 tribes of Israel. It also contained Urim and Thummim, which were stones of divination for determining God’s will. The Bible says, “Whenever Aaron enters the Holy Place, he will bear the names of the sons of Israel over his heart on the breastpiece of decision as a continuing memorial before the Lord” (28:29). Not only is the function of the breastpiece to discern God’s judgment for Israel, but it is also to keep Israel always before the Lord. It reminds me of how mothers will wear rings with the birthstones of their children so that they are always with them; this shows God’s great affection for his children. Isaiah reminds us of this: “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands” (49:15-16). We often put our palm over our heart to show affection. God shows his affection for us by keeping us close to his heart.

It is also significant that the priests symbolically “bear the guilt involved in the sacred gifts the Israelites consecrate” (28:38). For Christians this detail connects the priesthood with Christ. The author of Hebrews makes an extended argument that Christ is the ultimate High Priest who bore the sins of the world. But in Christ the priest and the sacrifice are one: “But when Christ came as high priest of all the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place one for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption….For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence” (Heb 9:11-12, 24). Christ is all in all: priest, sacrifice, prophet, and king. What was once separate was made one in Christ.

Imagine what it must have felt like for Aaron and his sons to be chosen by God to be his representatives on earth. When they put on their sacred garments and had blood splashed on them, they took vows of purity, holiness, and submission. They promised to bear the sins of their fellow Israelites. They promised to be God’s hands and feet on earth. After Christ’s death and resurrection tore the curtain of the temple, we all became priests who could approach the holy throne. Peter reminds us: “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). Like the Hebrew priests, we are all called to be holy, to submit ourselves to Christ, and to be his hands and feet on earth. Christ is the High Priest and we are a kingdom of priests who intercede for others and strive to do his will.

Passage for Meditation

Exo 29:44

“So I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar and will consecrate Aaron and his sons to serve me as priests. Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am the Lord their God.”
Questions for Reflection

1. Think about the modern role of the pastor. How does your impression of what pastors do compare with the description of the priesthood in Exodus? Does this change your perception of the work of the pastor?

2. Have you ever considered yourself to be a priest of Christ? What does that mean to you? How would that change your behavior, decisions, or lifestyle?

Imaginative Exercise

Interview your pastor and ask him/her what it feels like to serve God professionally. What did it feel like to be consecrated in God’s service? What does it feel like to put on their robe and stand before God’s people?
Day 22

Exodus 31:1-18

I find it interesting that chapter 31 begins with God's appointing of the work crew to build the tabernacle and ends with his commandment to rest. These both might seem like small details but they carry great meaning for us as the people of God. It began in the Garden of Eden when God “took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Gen 2:15). God gave Adam work to do to express his gratitude to God for creating him. God gave him a purpose. For Adam, work was a form of worship. But Adam also had the Garden to enjoy at his leisure. We were created for work and for rest.

Fast forward to the wilderness where God has just handed down the blueprint for his tabernacle and there is much work to be done in building it to his specifications. Remember that until recently the Israelites were slaves who were used to hard labor in building Pharaoh’s empire. They were not valued for their skills; they were expendable labor. God handpicked Bezalel and filled him with his Spirit and knowledge so that he would understand how God envisions the tabernacle to be built, the stones to be cut, and the wood to be crafted. In fact, he inspires (meaning “God breathed”) all the workers who will build his dwelling place. I love this little detail. It reminds me that when we are doing the work that God intends for us, he also equips us for that task. How different is our experience of work when we believe that we are working for God rather than for humans? As it was for Adam, our work becomes our worship. Paul takes this idea one step further and calls us God’s “co-workers”: “So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their labor. For we are God’s co-workers; you are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Corinthians 3:7-9). We are all on God’s work crew and each of us has a role to play for which God has handpicked us and equipped us.

God follows his comments about work with his commandment to keep the Sabbath. Why would he give so much focus to the idea of resting? He’s already included it as one of the Ten Commandments, so why does he feel the need to repeat it? There is much in the idea of Sabbath that we need to unpack. I’ve already mentioned that biblical scholars believe that God makes seven speeches to Moses while he was on Mount Sinai (remember he’s there for 40 days and 40 nights), and that those speeches correspond with the seven days it took to create the world. On the seventh day, God rested from his work, so the...
seventh speech is about observing the Sabbath. God makes this connection himself: “It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested” (31:17). So we can clearly see the connection between God’s rest and our rest, but why is the idea of rest so important that this particular commandment carries the death penalty if broken?

In her book *The Epic of Eden*, Sandra Richter explains that in the Ancient Near East conquering kings rested after their victories, signifying their supremacy. “In the ancient Near East, a king who had proven himself a king ‘rested.’ In the same manner, Yahweh, who had proven himself the lord of the cosmos by his acts of creation, rests.” She goes on to point out that the concept of rest must have seemed unthinkable to a generation of slaves whose every waking moment was spent laboring for someone else. The idea of taking a Sabbath every week was revolutionary. Their value does not lie in their productivity; it lies in their belonging to the creator of the universe. So while God gives us work to do, he does not want us to derive our identity from our work. Resting from work shows the world that we rest in the one who does all things. As Paul said, “So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.” Working seven days a week without rest sends the signal that we do not trust God to provide. Of all the commandments, this is the one that nearly everyone in our workaholic world breaks. Most of us don’t murder or steal, but we are all guilty of not resting.

In God’s kingdom we all have a job to do and work is a form of worship. But we are also commanded to rest to fend off the impression that we are self-sufficient. If God can rest from his work, so can we. “This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am Lord, who makes you holy” (Exo 31:13). This is to be a “lasting covenant” between God and his people. Jesus reminds us of this covenant promise in Matthew 6: “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown in the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?…But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (v. 28-33).

In other words, rest in the Lord and he will give you what you need.

**Passage for Meditation**

Exo 31:16-17

“The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested.”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. Do you view work as a divinely-inspired gift? What skills and talents has God given you? Are you using them to their fullest?
2. Do you regularly take a day of rest? If not, how could you work this into your schedule as an act of faith?
Imaginative Exercise
The idea of Sabbath is a time of rest, no matter the quantity. Look at your typical week and identify one hour a day that is your Sabbath hour. Then identify one day a week that is your Sabbath week. Try to maintain this schedule for one month and journal about the experience of resting in God.
The Test of Faith

Day 23

Exodus 32:1-35

This is one of those chapters that is difficult for us to read, like chapter 3 of Genesis when Eve eats the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. We want to step through the pages and shout “No! Don’t worship the calf! Moses will be back soon.” Like children, the Israelites get restless when Moses is gone for 40 days. With nothing to focus their attention, they demand an idol to worship. This may be a throwback to their lives in Egypt—it’s what they know. They are still infants in the ways of faith and they only believe what they can see. Aaron, the newly consecrated high priest, is unprepared for the rebellion and acquiesces to their request, but quickly suggests they offer burnt offerings to the Lord. This blending of Yahweh and pagan worship is seen again in 1 Kings 12 when King Jeroboam made two golden calves and placed them at the altars in Bethel and Dan. He even uses the same words as Aaron: “Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt” (v. 28). Jeroboam also institutes a festival and sacrifices burnt offerings to the Lord. This sacrilege sets up the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel forever. What Jeroboam did deliberately, Aaron did in a desperate effort to appease the crowd until Moses returns. But the result is the same: God’s anger burns against them.

This chapter introduces many important themes that will persist throughout the Old Testament. The first and most obvious is disobedience. Even though the Israelites had seen and heard God on Mount Sinai, they didn’t really believe. Even though they had taken the vows of the covenant God offered them, they really didn’t believe. Even though their elders had eaten in the presence of the Lord, they didn’t really believe. When their leader was gone so long, they clamored for something tangible to believe in. The author of Hebrews defines faith as “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (11:1). They failed their first test of faith. Israel would fail the faith test many times throughout its history, and calamity would inevitably follow. The plague that God brings upon them in the desert is minor compared to the consequences of disobedience they will suffer in the future. Psalm 106 memorializes this history of sin: “We have sinned, even as our ancestors did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly” (v. 6). We are not only held accountable for our individual sins, but also our national sins.

The sin of the people accentuates Moses’ role as mediator. God’s immediate reaction to their rebellion is to destroy them and start over with Moses. We’ve seen this before with Noah and Abraham. In fact, God’s words to Moses remind us of his promise to Abraham: “Then I will make you into a great nation”
Like Abraham does for Sodom and Gomorrah, Moses intercedes for the people and tries to assuage God’s anger. He reminds God of the covenant promise with Abraham, Issac, and Israel (Jacob). God relents and does not destroy them. So does God actually change his mind? The answer is most likely “no.” God is testing Moses’ loyalty to his people and preparing him for his role as prophet and mediator. From this point forward, God will never again address the people directly; he will only speak to them through a prophet. This is symbolized by Moses’ bringing the tablets down the mountain, containing the actual words of God: “The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets” (v. 16). When he sees what the people are doing, Moses smashes the tablets, signifying the breaking of the covenant. We see this same symbolic action by another prophet in the book of Zechariah: “Then I took my staff called Favor and broke it, revoking the covenant I had made with all the nations. It was revoked on that day, and so the oppressed of the flock who were watching me knew it was the word of the Lord” (v. 10-11). But Moses returns to God and pleads their case for forgiveness, cementing his role as their intercessor.

It’s easy for us to criticize the Israelites for their disobedience. But I don’t read chapter 32 as willful disobedience—I read it as impatience and shortsightedness. They did not ask Aaron to make a golden calf for them—that was his solution. In the absence of God and Moses, they asked to be led: “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him” (v. 1). They are a young nation with little history to go on. The stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are in the distant past and they still have a slave mentality. That’s why God made them wander in the desert for 40 years; they needed to build their faith muscles and learn to trust God and their leaders. That is the most difficult test of our faith: to continue to hope and trust in the absence of any visible signs. We have our own golden calves today—those things that we put our faith in just in case God doesn’t show up and fulfill his promises. Faith is a test of patience and belief in God’s everlasting Word.

**Passage for Meditation**

Exo 32:33-34

“The Lord replied to Moses, ‘Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin.’”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. What are our golden calves today? How can we avoid idol worship and stay focused on God?
2. Have you ever felt God’s absence and wondered if he would ever return? Can you empathize with the Israelites in their fear and impatience?

**Imaginative Exercise**

Draw a picture of some of the idols you worship. Moses threw the golden calf into the fire. Destroy the picture you created as a reminder that you should only worship God and trust in his promises.
Day 24

Exodus 33:7-34:8

I am blown away by the close, intimate relationship that Moses enjoyed with God Almighty. Reading Exodus it is sometimes easy to forget that this is the Lord of the universe rather than a close friend that Moses is speaking with. We get that impression from the Tent of Meeting, a place where Moses goes to speak face-to-face with God. We are told that “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (v. 11). The whole camp knew that when Moses went there, and the cloud covered the tent, Moses was with God. What a beautiful witness to the relationship God was offering them. The Tent of Meeting is a physical manifestation of prayer, when we meet with God and have an intimate conversation with him.

We are allowed to eaves drop on the conversation on Mount Sinai when God informs Moses of the people’s disobedience. Moses pleads with God to go with them to the Promised Land. God has already told Moses that he will send an angel to guide them because God doesn’t trust himself not to destroy the people on the way out of anger. Moses uses their close relationship to persuade God to stay with them: “If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people” (v. 13). He also uses God’s own logic to plead his case: “What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” (v. 16). God relents “because I am pleased with you and I know you by name” (v. 17).

What an astonishing exchange between a human being and the Lord of the universe. No other god in any other religion would have acknowledged a single human being by name and enjoyed such a personal relationship with him. This is not just about what distinguishes the Israelites from all other people on earth, but also about what distinguishes God from all other gods. In a moment of tenderness, God reveals himself fully to Moses at his request: “show me your glory” (v. 18). God responds, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence” (v. 19). This scene will be the culmination of God’s first revelation of himself to Moses when he appeared in the burning bush in chapter 3. From within the mysterious fire that does not consume, he revealed his name for the first time. Now, he reveals himself fully. We should pay careful attention to the words in this passage for they give us valuable clues to God’s character. Moses asks God to show him his “glory,” which means “essence.” This seems like a rather audacious request to make from
someone who has been in God’s presence multiple times. But he’s asking to see the essence of God, or as the Irish like to say, “Who’s he when he’s at home?” God replies that he will cause his “goodness” to pass by. So, the essence of God is goodness and it is so magnificent that Moses can’t look at it directly. God directs Moses to chisel out two more stone tablets and bring them up on the mountain. God is giving the Israelites a second chance, a second set of commandments. God truly is good.

Then God passed by and tenderly covered Moses with his hand so that he would not die from exposure. I’d like to pause and consider the phrase “God passed by.” This becomes an important signal phrase throughout the Bible that God is near. We see it again in 1 Kings 19 when the prophet Elijah is hiding in a cave. God tells him, “To out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by” (v. 11). In John 1:36, John writes “When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God!’ This was John the Baptists’ affirmation that they were in the presence of God himself. In Luke 18 a blind man also recognizes the divinity of Jesus as he passes by: “They told him, ‘Jesus the Nazarene is passing by.’ The blind man shouted, ‘Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy’” (v. 37-38). Both John the Baptist and the blind man recognized that they were in the presence of God, that God was near. Jesus’ first words in the book of Mark make this point clearly: “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (1:15). God is as near as he’s ever been.

Then God proclaimed his name to Moses and paints a self-portrait: “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (34:6-7). Here we see God in all his glory. In his essence God is compassionate, forgiving, and loving. This doesn’t change no matter how much we sin. God doesn’t change. He goes on to say, “Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished” (34:7). Like any good parent, God loves his children but must punish them for wrong doing. The Israelites have just made a whopper of a mistake by worshiping a golden calf, so they must suffer the consequences. But that doesn’t mean that God doesn’t love them. He is still willing to create a lasting covenant with them and make them his treasured possession. Throughout the Old Testament we see repeated cycles of sin followed by repentance followed by God’s forgiveness and reaffirmation of his love for them. If anything, God is patient.

In this passage in Exodus we see the hope of the world. God cares for us as individuals; he knows us by name and wants to spend time with us. He is tender and loving towards his children. God is compassionate and merciful, willing to forgive us anything if we just come to him with repentant hearts. Even though God forgives us and loves us, we must still pay the consequences of our sin. But Jesus promised to be with us always (Matt 28:20); even when it feels like God is absent, he is nearby. He will pass by if we only ask: “show me your glory.”

Passage for Meditation
Exo 34:5-7
“Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving
wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”

Questions for Reflection

1. Make a list of God’s attributes based on his self-description. Where have you seen these aspects of God’s character evident in your life or the life of your family?
2. When have you felt God was near? Have you ever experienced anything like the intimacy with God that Moses had? Do you feel close to God during prayer?
3. Have you seen the effects of sin on generations of a family? Does this help you understand God’s statement, “he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents”? What have been the consequences of sin in your life?

Imaginative Exercise

Listen to the words of the Third Day song, “Show Me Your Glory.” Make the words of this song your prayer to God.
Day 25

Exodus 34:9-35

Author John Ortberg writes in his book Love Beyond Reason about the God of second chances: “If there is one way that human beings consistently underestimate God’s love, it is perhaps in his loving longing to forgive.” He relates this aspect of God’s character to the concept in golf of taking a mulligan—a do over. “He is the God of the do-over; the Lord of the second chance.” That’s what Moses and the Israelites realize in chapter 34—he really is a God of compassion and grace, abounding in love and faithfulness. When Moses asks God to travel with them to Canaan, God reaffirms his covenant promise. Of course, after the golden calf incident, God also reminds them of the rules. Moses inscribes a second set of tablets to replace the ones that had been broken. God gives Israel a mulligan.

One of my favorite passages of scripture is from Joel 2:25: “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten.” We all have times in our lives that we regret, time lost due to our own mistakes or those of other people. The prophet tells us that God will restore those years—not in actual time, but in do-overs and second chances. God is teaching Israel a valuable lesson here about his capacity to forgive and restore. This time he restores the tablets of the Ten Commandments; later in the story he will restore the kingdom of Israel itself. “I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world” (v. 10). God gives second chances but not leftovers. Despite their disobedience Israel will get the best that God has to offer. And so do we.

Notice a subtle change in Moses’ language here. When he first pleads for God to go with them in chapter 33, he refers to himself separate from the rest of the group: “How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” (33:16 emphasis mine). After witnessing God’s glory, Moses uses the more inclusive word “us”: “Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance” (34:9). Like the priest who bears the sins of those for whom he makes sacrifices, Moses takes the sin of Israel upon himself as he intercedes for the people before God. Moses has been changed in his 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai; his attitude toward the people has changed and he’s been changed physically.
When he comes down off Mount Sinai, his face is radiant because he has been in the presence of the Lord. The next time we see this radiance will be in Matthew 17 when Jesus took Peter, James and John up on a high mountain and was transfigured: “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light” (v. 2). Moses and Elijah appear beside him—the two figures in the Old Testament who came as close to God as humanly possible. The transfiguration of Jesus was meant to show the disciples that Jesus truly was the son of God, but it also showed them that humans can be transfigured as well. In Isaiah 60, the prophet shows us a beautiful image of what it will be like to stand in God’s presence: “But the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn….Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy” (v. 2-5). Psalm 34 presents a similar image: “Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame” (v. 5). The radiance comes not only from the incredible light of God, but also from the beauty within us. In Ephesians 5:25-28, Paul argues that God’s intention all along was to make us all radiant: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”

But the Israelites were not ready for Moses’ radiance; he had to wear a veil. They are still in a state of sin. But in 2 Corinthians 3 Paul declares a change has come, whereby we can stand in the presence of glory through the Holy Spirit. “Therefore, since we have such hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (v. 12-16). The people of Israel could no longer stand before the Lord because of their sin, and they could not even stand before Moses unless he wore a veil. Through Jesus Christ our sin was taken away and we can stand before him unveiled and radiant.

**Passage for Meditation**
Exo 34:10

“Then the Lord said: ‘I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the Lord, will do for you.”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. Has God given you a mulligan to restore a part of your life you thought was gone forever? Do you see him as the God of second chances?
2. Think of a person or persons whom you would describe as “radiant” in their faith. What do they have that makes them radiate faith and joy? How could you be like them?
Imaginative Exercise
Make a list of things in your life that you would like to do over. Select one that you would most like a second chance for and make this part of your daily prayer time.
All Those Who Are Willing

Day 26

Exodus 35:1-35

When I read chapter 35 I see a beautiful vision of what the church is supposed to be: “All the Israelite men and women who were willing brought to the Lord freewill offerings for all the work the Lord through Moses had commanded them to do” (v. 29). The Israelites all contributed to the building of the tabernacle through their resources or their labor. Notice that the phrase “who were willing” is repeated throughout the chapter. Even though God could have just created the tabernacle himself like he created the world, or he could have forced the Israelites to work (like Pharaoh did in Egypt), he wants them to participate willingly. We see this in the very beginning of the chapter; even though God commands them to bring their offerings, he says “Everyone who is willing is to bring to the Lord an offering” (v. 5). The Common English Bible translates “willing” as “give freely” and “eager to give.” The English Standard Bible and Revised Standard Bible translate it as “a generous heart.” Why is it important for the Israelites to give freely, eagerly, and generously?

The command to be generous runs throughout the Old and New Testaments. In Deuteronomy Moses reminds the people to be generous to the poor: “Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to” (15:10). He goes on to say why they should be so generous: “Give to them as the Lord your God has blessed you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you” (v. 14-15). Our motivation to give should come from our gratitude for all that God has done for us. We are redeemed people; that’s all the motivation we should need to be generous. Jesus echoes this sentiment in Matthew 10:8: “Freely you have received, freely give.” Our attitude of giving is important to God. Moses said, “do so without a grudging heart.” Paul agrees: “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7). I imagine the Israelites eagerly offering their gold and jewelry to build the tabernacle, giving their best to God. Those who didn’t have valuables to contribute gave whatever they had or helped in the work of building. God wants whatever we can give, but he wants us to give freely and cheerfully.

They didn’t just contribute the material for building the tabernacle, they also contributed their skills. Women spun goat hair to make cloth; wood workers carved the wood for the altars; metal workers...
created lamps and ornamental pieces; engravers etched intricate designs; weavers wove beautiful curtains. For every task there were people with skills to accomplish it. The Bible says that God “filled them with skill.” Just imagine this scene: hundreds of thousands of Israelites working together to build God’s tabernacle. It reminds me of the scene in Nehemiah 3 when we see the Israelites once again working together to rebuild the temple wall in Jerusalem. Each man or family took a section of the wall to rebuild. They worked tirelessly, shoulder to shoulder, to rebuild what had been destroyed. And we are told “the people worked with all their heart” (Neh 4:6). They worked willingly, freely, eagerly, and generously.

Do we work for the church with all our heart? Imagine what we could accomplish if all Christians came together in one accord and built God’s church today. If we all gave generously out of gratitude for what God has given us, if we all contributed our God-given skills and talents, and if we all worked together despite our differences, what could we accomplish? The Israelites built a tabernacle in the desert; a rag-tag group of exiled Jews rebuilt the temple wall; the disciples started the Christian church. What is God calling us to build?

**Passage for Meditation**

Exo 35:29

“All the Israelite men and women who were willing brought to the Lord freewill offerings for all the work the Lord through Moses had commanded them to do.”

**Questions for Reflection**

1. Using a Bible search tool at a website like Biblegateway.com, Bibleresources.org, or Blueletterbible.org, search for all the references to “generous” in the Bible. After reading some of the passages (there are many!), why do you think generosity is so important? What clues were provided in the passage you read?
2. How are you involved in the work of the church? What role is God calling you to play? What has he put on your heart?
3. Would you say that you give with a generous heart? If not, what could you do to change your attitude toward giving?

**Imaginative Exercise**

Design something that you would like to see built in your community. What would it require? Pray that God will provide people with willing and generous hearts to make this vision a reality.
The Glory of the Lord

Day 27

Exodus 39:32-40:38

We have already considered how the building of the tabernacle is reminiscent of God’s creation of the world in Genesis. In this passage I’m struck by the loving and careful way that Moses assembles the tabernacle. Of course, it would be impossible for one man to put all this together, but I suspect the author recounted it this way specifically to draw a parallel with God’s loving and careful detail in assembling the world.

Moses begins by inspecting the work of the people who created all the individual pieces. The Bible says that Moses was pleased and blesses them (39:43); I imagine him saying “it is good”—the phrase that is repeated in Genesis 1. Then like a supervisor, God gives Moses step-by-step instructions on how to set it up and consecrate the tent and the priests. Repetition is a device used throughout the Bible to indicate that something is important. We hear the instructions for the tabernacle repeated three times in Exodus. I can almost hear God saying, “Pay attention. This is important! Details matter!” The ability of God’s people to follow his instructions to the letter will become a crucial part of molding them into a holy nation. We will hear more about that in Leviticus. But God’s instructions also give us insight into what he cares about. What might seem to us to be petty, minor details are actually pretty important to God. The tabernacle is to be his home and he designs and builds it with the same level of care that he designed and built our home.

God blesses their work by filling the tent of meeting: “and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (40:34). After all they’ve been through in Sinai, God does dwell among them and he does lead them in their travels. The significance of this moment cannot be overstated. God is with them—physically! Earlier we talked about the significance of the term “glory”—that it is used to describe God’s essence. The Israelites first experienced this when they arrived at Mount Sinai and the mountain trembled with God’s power. Now that power lives among them. We will see this display of God’s glory again in 1 Kings 8: 10 when Solomon completes the building of the temple: “When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple” (v. 10-11). I like the version of this story told in 2 Chronicles 7:1-2 better: “When Solomon finishing praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the Lord because the glory of the Lord filled it.” The next time we see fire coming
down from heaven is in Acts 2:1-4: “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” The difference between the scene in 2 Chronicles and the scene in Acts is that the people were not in a temple! What connects the consecration of the tabernacle in Exodus and the consecration of the temple in 1 Kings/2 Chronicles with the scene at Pentecost in Acts?

The answer is Jesus Christ (isn’t it always?). In the Old Testament God dwells among the people physically in a tent and then a temple. But God cannot be contained by a physical building and his kingdom cannot expand if his followers are limited by geography. When the kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Persians, Babylonians, and Romans, the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed—twice. God had to make them understand that he was not limited to a physical place; God could not be destroyed. So he came to dwell among us in human form (John 1:14). John says, “We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14 emphasis mine). In Jesus the world saw the essence of God, up close and personal. Jesus was the temple. John makes this abundantly clear in chapter 2 when Jesus criticizes the temple practices: “‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’ They replied, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?’ But the temple he had spoken of was his body” (2:19-21).

Jesus told his disciples that they would be consecrated to carry on his work after his death and resurrection: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This is what we see at Pentecost: the Holy Spirit (the glory of God) filling not a physical place but God’s people. Paul confirms this in 1 Corinthians 6:19: “Do you know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?” When we accept Jesus Christ, we are filled with the glory of God. God dwells within us and empowers us to do the work of the church. No single building can contain us—we are called to go out into the world and bring the church to those who do not know the power, love, forgiveness, and salvation of Christ. Sinai was the moment in history when a rabble of slaves became a holy nation. What began as release from slavery (redemption) led to the greatest commission/consecration God’s people can ever receive: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

**Passage for Meditation**

Exo 40:34-38

“Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. So the cloud
of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels.”

Questions for Reflection
1. The Israelites knew when to travel and when to stay put by following the cloud of God’s presence. How does God guide you?
2. Can you recall a moment when you felt like you were filled with the glory of God? What did that feel like? How did that experience change you?

Imaginative Exercise
Summary

We began the book of Exodus with the Hebrews bound by the chains of slavery in Egypt and we ended by witnessing the glory of God dwelling among them in freedom. Releasing the Hebrews from the bonds of slavery was a painful and bloody ordeal, as dealing with evil always is. They traded their oppressive life in Egypt for the boredom of the desert. But in the stark, barren landscape they learned to depend on God, and a large unruly group of slaves became a nation, fulfilling an ancient promise God made to Abraham. Like a patient teacher, God schooled them in what it means to be holy and how to build his home so that he could dwell among them. He revealed more of himself than in any other single point in history. For by knowing who God is, we learn about ourselves and who we can be with him. Let’s review what is revealed in Exodus.

God’s Glory: Who is God?

In Exodus we learned God’s name (Yahweh) and heard his self-description: “compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (34:6-7). By the time we hear these words we have already witnessed these characteristics in his dealings with the Israelites. Throughout Exodus God progressively reveals who he is: faithful and trustworthy, powerful but loving, unapproachable but intimate, forgiving yet just, patient but angered by disobedience, extravagantly generous and expecting generosity in return. He is like no other God and he expects his people to be different as well.

A Holy Nation: What distinguishes God’s people? What does it mean to be his chosen nation?

As soon as the Israelites reach Mount Sinai they hear these remarkable words spoken by God himself: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (19:5-6). This is a far greater vision than this rag-tag group of slaves can possibly comprehend or fulfill at this moment in history. Of course, this is God’s ultimate plan that is still being fulfilled through us today, but that day at the foot of Mount Sinai it must have seemed impossible to believe. God devotes the rest of the time in the desert to answering the question, “What does it mean to be holy?” It begins with the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant, which gives clues as to what God cares about. He wants us to love him and each other. As the prophet Micah put it so eloquently: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8). Holy also means purity—to be set apart and consecrated for the work of the church. We are all priests who may enter the Holy of Holies and stand in the presence of God. As priests we are to bear the guilt of others and intercede for them.

Redemption and Mercy: What does it mean to be redeemed? How does God show his loving kindness to his people?

When God says: “I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of
judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God” (6:6-7), he is promising to buy back his lost family and return them to his household. This powerful image is at the heart of the gospel—that Jesus paid the ultimate price for our freedom so that we can be with him forever. This vision is beautifully expressed in the song in chapter 15: “In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your dwelling place” (v. 13). The exodus was more than just a flight from Egypt: it was the beginning of the journey home to God. God’s “unfailing love,” or hesed in Hebrew, is equivalent to the New Testament concept of grace: “all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24). We can’t get there by ourselves; we must rely on God just as the Israelites had to rely on God’s favor in the desert. But God proved himself to be faithful, merciful, compassionate, and loving.

**Miraculous Signs:** *How does God reveal that he is the one true God?*

As in all new relationships, there was a lot of testing between God and the Israelites in Exodus. It begins in chapter 3 when Moses asks for proof of what God is claiming to do. From that moment through the rest of the book God performs miraculous signs that reveal who he is (see chart in Appendix). God causes plagues, parts the sea, provides food and water, speaks directly to the people, makes the mountain shake violently and the thunder to clap, reveals himself to Moses, and fills the Tent of Meeting. There could be no doubt in their minds that this was God Almighty, the one true God: “I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth” (9:14). Despite this show of power, the Israelites consistently question and doubt what they have seen. They complain about everything at the first opportunity they broke the first commandment. Fortunately for them and for us, God proves himself to be the Lord of second chances, compassionate and forgiving.

**Leadership:** *What do we learn about leadership from Moses?*

God chose the most unlikely person to lead the greatest exodus the world has ever seen. Moses was a humble shepherd when he stood before the burning bush and tried to talk God out of sending him. But God knew his history and his heart: a Hebrew man raised in the house of Pharaoh who twice came to the rescue of those in distress. God saw gifts in Moses that he did not know he had and he helps the people discover their hidden gifts as well. During the building of the tabernacle he called on everyone to give what they were able and willing, and he used all their skills and talents.

The greatest leadership lesson that Moses learns is to trust God. From the moment he walked off the mountain in chapter 4 Moses was equipped to do the job for which God had called him. He relied on Aaron, Hur, Joshua, and others God sent him as his assistants. His father-in-law taught him the secret of delegation so that he could sustain his focus and energy. But he also realized that he had to build a sustainable organization with the capacity to govern itself once they reached the Promised Land. As the first prophet, Moses discovered the difficult balancing act of delivering God’s message to the people and pleading for mercy. But he developed the most intimate relationship that any human being has had with God except Jesus Christ. He spoke with God as a friend and reflected God’s radiance. What a beautiful model for all of us in our walk with Christ.
Covenant: What is the significance of the covenant that God ratified with his people on Mount Sinai?

We learned that the covenant was a common form of political treaty in the Ancient Near East. So the Hebrews would have recognized the structure and implications of what God laid out for them at Mount Sinai. This conforms to the suzerain/vassal covenant whereby a powerful king agrees to provide protection and provision for a weaker vassal in exchange for loyalty and obedience. This covenant created the structure and expectations for God’s relationship with his people, ratified by the blood of the sacrificed animals and memorialized on the tablets of the Ten Commandments. But we know that it also set the stage for the new covenant, ratified by the blood of God’s own son. God knew that Israel would break the covenant, which they did before the ink was dry. The prophet Jeremiah foretold God’s intention to create a new covenant: “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,’ declares the Lord. ‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the Lord. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts” (31:31-33). God knew that it takes more than obedience to a set of rules to make a nation holy. It requires true transformation from within. That’s the revolution that Jesus came to lead—a revolution of the heart. And when he stood before the disciples at the Last Supper and repeated Moses’ words as he ushered in the new covenant, the disciples knew what that he was the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy. They re-enacted the covenant ratification meal that the elders ate before God as they celebrated the Passover meal together in the presence of Jesus. They fulfilled that night in the Upper Room what had been started in the desert when a dusty group of former slaves said “We will.”

Tabernacle: What does it mean to dwell with God and to worship him?

“Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them” (25:8). With these words God announced his intention to dwell among his people for the first time since the Garden of Eden. In his plans for the tabernacle we hear hints of the Garden and suspect that he is reliving the act of creation. This time, however, the people will create his home to his strict specifications. The design of the tabernacle reflects the nature of their relationship: God will be close yet separate. Only the priests can enter the Holy Place and only the high priest can enter the Holy of Holies. A curtain separates each section, indicating the holy line of demarcation. The people can enter the outer courtyard where they will bring their burnt offerings, but that’s as close as they can get. Clear boundaries exist between God and his people with dire consequences for crossing them. That’s what makes this line from Matthew 27 so astonishing: “the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (v. 51). At the moment of Jesus’ death the curtain of the temple is torn, giving us access to the Holy of Holies. We have hints in the gospel of John that Jesus is the temple. John tells us, “The Word became flesh and dwelled [tabernacled] among us” (1:14). Jesus reveals this in John 2:19-21: “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’ They replied, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?’ But the temple he had spoken of was his body.” This is confirmed in Revelation 22: “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (v. 22). We serve a God who is incarnate—who dwells among and in us. He is Emmanuel, God with us.
God’s Miraculous Signs

Throughout the book of Exodus, God performs miraculous signs to show the Israelites and Egyptians who he is. The following chart compiles all the signs of God’s grace that we see in Exodus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Sign</th>
<th>Attributes of God</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Burning Bush</td>
<td>God is a fire that does not consume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Staff becomes a snake  Moses’ hand turns white  Water becomes blood</td>
<td>God is Almighty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-12</td>
<td>Plagues</td>
<td>God creates and destroys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Pillar of cloud and pillar of fire</td>
<td>God is present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Parting the Red Sea</td>
<td>God is Almighty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Water becomes sweet</td>
<td>God provides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Manna from heaven</td>
<td>God provides abundantly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Water from rock</td>
<td>God provides abundantly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Israelites defeat Amalekites</td>
<td>God protects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Mount Sinai trembles, smoke and fire</td>
<td>God is all-powerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Ten Commandments</td>
<td>God is holy and just</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Elders eat in God’s presence</td>
<td>God is generous, inclusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Plague</td>
<td>God punishes disobedience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>God’s glory passes by</td>
<td>God is goodness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>God’s glory fills the tabernacle</td>
<td>God is present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>