

## St Clement's Bible Study Notes: Exodus

### Exodus 1-2: The situation of Israel

**Main Point:** Even in the darkest situations, God is patiently and graciously working out his promises to his people.

**Main Aim:** Don't give up on God's promises; keep praying for him to fulfil them.

Exodus 1-2 explain what has been happening since the end of Genesis and set the scene for the rest of the book. All the way through, we see the surprising way God works out his promises. In Genesis 12:1-3, he promised Abraham a people, a land, and blessing. By the start of Exodus, Abraham's descendants are a numerous people, but they have no land of their own, and instead of enjoying blessing, they're slaves! And the path to freedom and blessing will be fraught with danger and difficulty. Why did God do it this way? He even promised it in Genesis 15:13. We won't find all the answers, but we will see how God relates to his people, teaching them who he is and how they should respond.

These first two chapters seem to be full of setbacks. Firstly, the slavery. Then, the baby boys are killed. Then, although Moses is miraculously saved, his plan to lead a rebellion and free his people fails at the first attempt, and he's off the scene for 40 years. But the final verses are the key: God heard, God remembered, God saw, and God knew. Here are a few questions to help you think through the passage as you plan your study. It might be a good idea to focus only or mostly on chapter 2.

- **How does this follow on from Genesis (1:1-7)?**
- Jacob (Israel) and his 11 other sons had come to join Joseph in Egypt because of the famine in Canaan. 400 years later, their descendants are numerous but enslaved.
- **Read Genesis 12:1-3. Which of the promises have been fulfilled? Which have not?**
- **Why does Pharaoh enslave the Israelites, and then kill the boys (1:8-16)?**
- He's afraid of them because God is making them so numerous and strong, so he tries to control them by forcing them into slavery.
- Interestingly, this slavery actually enabled the Israelites to retain their separate identity – perhaps they would otherwise have been absorbed into Egypt and lost as a people...no Jesus!
- Killing the boys removed the military threat, and would have eventually cause genocide. (Though, as it turns out, it's the women Pharaoh should have been afraid of in these chapters – the midwives, Moses' mother, Miriam, and Pharaoh's own daughter all oppose him.)
- **Why do the midwives act as they do?**
- They fear God, not Pharaoh. Shows that there are those within the Israelites who know God even before Moses is called.
- Are they deceptive? Not necessarily. But there's no moral judgement here – we're just to marvel at how God preserves his people.
- **What do we see of God's grace in 2:1-10?**
- So much! Moses' mother trusts God, keeping her son at huge personal risk (see Heb 11:24-26).
- She has the idea about the basket, and the crocodiles don't get him.
- Pharaoh's daughter finds him and has compassion on him – who else could keep him? And Miriam is there to bring him back to his mother!

- Moses grows up understanding Egyptian customs and politics and is prepared for his future role. We're not quite sure how much he knew about his part in God's future rescue plan, but it seems he had some kind of inkling – his mother had saved him because she noticed something different about him (see also Acts 7:20), he'd had a uniquely privileged upbringing, and the 400 years of slavery were almost up...
- **Do you notice any shadows of Jesus here?**
- The saviour is born? And see Matthew 2:13-18 – King Herod tried to kill Jesus by murdering all the baby boys in Bethlehem, but he escaped – to Egypt!
- **What are we to make of Moses' actions in 2:11-14?**
- Again, no comment on whether he's right or wrong, but he's not swimming in glory – he takes matters into his own hands, loses control, kills someone, then is mocked, then runs away in fear! An unlikely saviour!
- But on the plus side, Moses identifies with his people, despite his privileged upbringing. And he knows there's a plan to save the people and he's involved (see Acts 7:23-25) – he just goes about it in totally the wrong way.
- **What do we see of God's grace in 2:15-22?**
- Again, so much! Moses escapes from Pharaoh, and then gains a whole new family and employment!
- He has also learnt humility the hard way. The Moses we meet in chapter 3 is very different to the cocky prince of chapter 2.
- **By the end of chapter 2, Israel is in a worse state than ever before: not only is she still suffering brutal enslavement and the murder of her baby boys, but her best hope for salvation has vanished into the desert, and God seems absent. How do the people respond (2:23)?**
- We're told that the people cry out to God! Hadn't they been doing this for the past 400 years? We don't know. Maybe they'd been trying to get out of slavery their own way, and only now does the desperateness of their situation cause them to remember God in a big way.
- **In what 4 ways does God respond to their cry (vv.24-25)? What does this tell us about him?**
- He hears their groaning, he remembers his promise, he sees everything that's going on, and he knows – he understands.
- God is faithful, all-knowing, compassionate, sovereign, caring, wise, patient... and he can't be controlled by us! His ways are sometimes incomprehensible, and not the ways we would have chosen, but we can trust him to always do what is best.
- Also, the Pharaoh who knew Moses has died. This paves the way for Moses to return without being killed – God's timing of answering prayer is perfect.
- **We all experience dark days, when it seems like God has forgotten us or doesn't care. How do these chapters encourage us? How should we respond? How should we not respond?**
- Cry out to God! Trust his promises (e.g. John 16:33, Romans 8:28, Revelation 21:4)! Trust his character! Wait! Hope!
- Don't despair, give up, turn away from God, or sinfully take matters into your own hands.
- The darkest day was when Jesus died. We can look back to that and know that God hasn't forgotten us, that he cares, that he's trustworthy, and that he's working for our good no matter what.

## Exodus 3-4: The call of Moses

**Main point:** The holy God graciously equips weak people to serve him.

**Main aim:** Serve God humbly, recognising his holiness and relying on his grace.

After 400 years of suffering people and a silent God, the moment has finally come: the rescue plan is kicking into action. And in a very unexpected way! Moses is now 80 (Acts 7:30), having spent the past 40 years shepherding in the backwater wilderness of Midian. He's probably totally given up on even seeing his people again. Yet it's at this point that God calls him to lead the Israelites out of slavery.

We see that the intervening 40 years have changed Moses. No longer is he the impulsive, self-confident prince – he's now desperate to stay out of the lime-light, coming up with endless excuses as to why he's not the man for the job. We may wonder why God bothers with him at all – but his apparent weakness means that when he does eventually set out back to Egypt, he's relying on God to be the rescuer – not himself.

Chapter 3 also contains God's mind-melting revelation of his name: 'I AM', which in Hebrew, sounds like 'Yahweh' (written as 'LORD' in our Bibles). Names in the Bible as used to tell us something about the person. But God is unfathomable, immense, infinite. What one word could describe him? This is the beauty of 'I AM' – God just 'is' – unchanging, independent, and his character is revealed as we look at his words and actions – at who he 'is'. John picks up on this same language in his gospel, where Jesus makes numerous 'I AM' statements, claiming divinity, e.g. John 6:20, 8:58; also 6:35, 8:12, 10:9, 10:11, 11:25, 14:6, 15:1.

You might just want to focus on chapter 3 – here are a few questions to help you prepare!

- **What does 3:1-6 teach us about God? Do we remember this as we approach him through Jesus?**
- God is holy and pure, but also merciful. The bush should have burnt up – and so should Moses!
- We often fail to recognise God's holiness, and wander on in thoughtlessly as we approach him in prayer. We too deserve to be burnt up – it's only God's incredible grace in making us clean through Jesus that will enable us to stand before him on the last day.
- **Think back to chapters 1-2. How does 3:7-10 answer the questions posed by those chapters?**
- God hasn't been sitting back and ignoring his people through all their sufferings – he's seen, heard and known all of it, and now the time is right for him to step in and rescue them, bringing them to a land of blessing and freedom.
- **What does I AM mean? How would this encourage Moses and the Israelites? How does it encourage us?**
- The immutability of God – he doesn't change – he just 'is'! Eternally! So he will always keep his promises and can always be relied upon. We, on the other hand, are in a constant state of 'becoming', changing from one thing into another, often unwilling or unable to keep our word.
- The aseity of God – he's self-sufficient, doesn't need us, he 'is' in and of himself. He existed before everything, and is independent of his creation and sovereign over his creation. We, on the other hand, are dependent on him for our existence. This means that he is qualitatively different to us, worthy of our worship, and can't be swayed by any outside influence. What he decides, he will always bring about.

- God's character is revealed in his words and actions – no one word could describe him. Want to know God? Then look! (Or for us, read!) The whole Bible is full of demonstrations of God's character. And he's exactly the same today as he was then, because he doesn't change!
- Jesus is 'I AM' (see John's gospel!), and he too is the same 'yesterday, today and forever' (Hebrews 13:8).
- **What do we learn here of God's plan (3:18-22)? Why do you think God tells Moses what's going to happen?**
- The elders will listen to Moses and they'll ask Pharaoh to let them go, but Pharaoh is going to resist. God will then perform miracles, and eventually Pharaoh will let them go. The Egyptians will then load them with gifts as they leave Egypt!
- This is an encouragement for Moses for when times get tough, and it seems like Pharaoh is never going to relent – God's explained that it'll be difficult, but it's all part of his great plan and will end in victory.
- **What excuses does Moses make (3:11-4:17)? How does God answer each one?**
- 3:11 – 'I'm a nobody!' But it doesn't matter who Moses is – God doesn't answer his question – all that matters is that God is with him! Grace!
- 3:13 – he's worried that because he doesn't know God's name (perhaps as a result of his unusual upbringing?), the Israelites might not believe him – so God reveals his name! Grace!
- 4:1 – he's worried they still won't believe him! So God gives him 3 signs to perform! Grace!
- 4:10 – he's worried that he's not the right man for the job because he's no public speaker! So God tells him he made his mouth and can do what he wants with it. Grace!
- 4:13 – he just doesn't want to do it! So God says Aaron can be his voice. Grace!
- **Does Moses' attitude surprise you? Why is he afraid? He's just been commissioned and equipped by the Almighty God!**
- We are at heart disbelieving and self-centred. Moses is fearing man, not God. Yes, Pharaoh was powerful, and his magicians eloquent, but what is that in the face of God?
- **How can we be like Moses here? What do we need to remember?**
- We have been commissioned by the Almighty God to live for him and spread the gospel, and equipped to do this through the Holy Spirit – yet we make excuses, forget God's holiness, doubt his power and goodness, and focus on our own weaknesses instead of his strength...
- Humility is good, but true humility isn't about saying 'Oh, I could never do that', but 'God is more than powerful enough to use a weak person like me to achieve his purposes'.
- Remember God's grace, God's holiness, God's power, God's unchanging promises...
- **How does God graciously intervene in each of the 4 stages of Moses journey back to Egypt? [You probably won't have time to discuss this but it might be useful to think about these verses just in case someone asks!]**
- He tells Moses the time is right to go (4:18-20).
- He explains what will happen (4:21-23) – Pharaoh's hard heart is in God's sovereign control but also his own responsibility. Israel is still the firstborn in spite of years of slavery, and Pharaoh's punishment fits his crime.
- He reminds Moses of the importance of keeping the covenant, and permits Zipporah to save him (4:24-26). These are very strange verses, but it seems that Moses had disobeyed God by not circumcising his son.

- He directs Aaron to Moses and makes him favourably disposed towards him (4:27-31). The elders believe the signs and go with the plan – Moses’ fears have come to nothing.

## **Exodus 5-6: Moses before Pharaoh**

**Main point:** God graciously teaches his people through adversity.

**Main aim:** In adversity, look for opportunities to grow in faith and godliness.

Moses has at last made it back to Egypt. He’s been reunited with his older brother Aaron, and together they’ve explained God’s rescue plan to the delighted elders (4:27-31). So now it’s just a matter of getting the ok from Pharaoh! But things are going to get worse before they get better. Much worse.

Yet Moses and the Israelites shouldn’t have been surprised at this. God had told them that Pharaoh wasn’t going to let them go without extreme measures (3:19-20). Their response of despair is understandable, but unjustified. We might not be suffering under a despotic king, but we too experience adversity, whether directly or indirectly related to our identity as God’s people. This passage has much to teach us about our own sinful reactions.

You might want to focus on chapter 5, dipping into chapter 6 where helpful! Grey sections are more for your own information in case questions come up.

- **How does Moses’ initial request to Pharaoh in 5:1 differ from what God commanded in 3:18?**
- He doesn’t bring the right delegation – it was supposed to be the elders, but he just brings Aaron.
- ‘The God of the Hebrews met with us’ is much less threatening than ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel’ – Hebrews is the recognised name for them in Egypt, and ‘God met with us’ would have been understood by Pharaoh as a theophany.
- ‘Let us go a three days’ journey to sacrifice’ is different to ‘Let my people go’. Perhaps the three days would have eased Pharaoh in to letting them go the whole hog.... Or perhaps it means that they’re going to travel for 3 days to get to the place where they’re going to hold this festival?
- Moses does then say what he was meant to say (5:3), but by then the damage has been done. Moses also adds something God never said – the threat to his own people.
- Is he trusting in himself instead of God? Reminiscent of striking the rock...
- Yet by antagonising Pharaoh, Moses is fulfilling God’s promises – God is sovereign over our sin!
- **How does Pharaoh react to Moses and Aaron’s request?**
- He doesn’t fear Yahweh at all – he thinks he is more powerful himself (5:2-3)!
- He thinks only of himself and the benefit he has in keeping slaves (5:5-6).
- He asserts his authority over them by making their job much harder – ‘I own you, how dare you ask anything of me! Your God is nothing.’ (5:7-9).
- **How do we see the same attitude in our world today? In ourselves? What will be the end result?**
- People may be much more polite than Pharaoh, but their attitude is the same – they don’t know or care who Yahweh is, and scoff at his commands and warnings. They foolishly set themselves up as rival gods, believing that they are in control.
- One day, everyone, including Pharaoh, will bow before the Lord Jesus (Philippians 2:10), some, with joy, others, with horror.
- **How do things turn out for the Israelites (5:6-19)?**

- They're in a terrible situation, being beaten for not performing an impossible task. Things are much worse now than they were at the start.
- **How do Moses and the Israelites react to their predicament (5:20-23, 6:9-12)?**
- The Israelite foremen blame Moses (5:21) and Moses blames God (5:21-22).
- The ordinary Israelites have given up – they won't listen to any more promises (6:9).
- However, on the plus side, Moses does at least take the situation to God (5:21), and obeys God in speaking words of encouragement to the people (6:9).
- But when they refuse to listen, Moses then seems to totally lose heart – 'I just can't do it – my own people won't even pay attention to me, so why on earth would Pharaoh?' (6:12).
- **Look back to 3:19-20, 4:21, and 4:30-31. Why should the Israelites, and Moses, have reacted differently?**
- God had already told Moses that something like this was going to happen, that Pharaoh wouldn't give up without a fight. And Moses had passed this on to the people, who believed it (4:30-31)! They shouldn't have been surprised at this hardship, but rather expected it, and seen it as God fulfilling his promises! But they heard only the promise they wanted to hear – 'I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt' (3:17).
- If they had really taken on board *all* of God's word to them, then instead of despair at this point, they would have persevered, continuing to trust that God was in control and fulfilling his ultimately good purposes. Their faith-muscles would have been stretched as they practised trusting God through adversity.
- **How do you react when adversity comes? Do you blame God, or think he doesn't care, or doubt his power or his goodness or his faithfulness? How does 1 Peter 4:12 encourage you? How does God want us to respond to adversity?**
- We are to expect suffering. God has promised it! Jesus suffered, and so will his followers. But every trial is an opportunity to grow in godliness. God is refining us.
- Think of yourself like an orange. It's only when you're squeezed that the juice inside comes out – will it be sweet or bitter?
- **In 6:2-8, what is the repeated word? List everything that God has done and will do. How should this have encouraged the Israelites?**
- I appeared and established. I have heard and remembered. I will bring out, deliver, redeem, take, be, bring, give.
- God does *everything*. The only sensible response is faith and hope.
- **How does this apply to us?**
- God has done everything for us in Jesus: brought us out from slavery to sin, delivered us from hell, redeemed us for eternal life. He has promised that we will one day enjoy perfect rest in his kingdom. No matter what happens in between, this is our hope. We can trust him.
- **Why is this genealogy here?**
- It's proving how Moses and Aaron are related to the patriarchs, and important for the high priestly line after Aaron.

## Exodus 7-10: The Plagues

**Main point:** God rightly brings judgement on his enemies, but shows undeserved grace to his people.

**Main aim:** Beware of cultivating a stubborn hard heart, lest we too fall under God's judgement.

Back in 5:2, we saw Pharaoh unwisely setting himself up against Yahweh: 'Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice?' The LORD is now going to show Pharaoh exactly who he is, as he brings judgement upon Pharaoh and the country he rules. This week we're looking at the first 9 plagues. Jumpy's handout helpfully points out the repeated patterns in the sequence of plagues: they're arranged as 3 groups of 3, with the first in each group being announced to Pharaoh in the morning, the second in each group being announced at an unspecified time, and the last in each group happening with no warning at all. In 6 out of the 9 plagues, Pharaoh promises to let the people go, but then changes his mind once the plague ends. The repetition is almost frustrating – we're left wondering how Pharaoh could possibly be so stupid! It's clear to everyone else, including his magicians and court officials (see 8:19, 10:7), that Yahweh is winning the contest – yet Pharaoh stubbornly continues in his disobedience. Why?

The answer lies with his hard heart. The issue of Pharaoh's hard heart is a source of confusion for many. Sometimes we're told that God hardened it; sometimes, that Pharaoh himself hardened it; and sometimes, simply that his heart was hard. What's going on? Try not to get too bogged down; ultimately, the relationship between God's sovereignty and our choices is a mystery. But what is clear from these chapters, and from the rest of Scripture, is that yes, God is totally in control of everything, but our choices are also real, and so Pharaoh is responsible for his actions and deserving of judgement. It's ok to be somewhat puzzled by this – if we could fully understand it, then we'd be God – remember Deuteronomy 29:29: 'The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever.' Romans 9:14-21 might also be helpful (though it could just add to the confusion): ultimately, it's up to God what he does with his creatures – none of us deserve his grace. If people in your group are really struggling, point them to the cross. There we see God using the horrifically sinful choices of the Jews and Romans to sovereignly display his love and grace in glorious, unambiguous technicality. If he did that, then surely we can trust him with everything else.

Unless your group are really keen, don't try reading all 4 chapters out loud! One idea might be to read and discuss 7:1-13, then silently skim-read the rest to get the general idea, then focus on the plague of hail (9:13-35) in more detail. I've included some notes on the rest of the plagues but it's more for your personal understanding in case questions come up!

- **Read 7:1-13. How does 7:1-7 follow on from chapter 6? What hints are there of God's ultimate purpose in sending these plagues?**
- Moses is very down-hearted and discouraged – God is graciously reminding him of his promises and plans.
- God's ultimate aim is his glory, as in everything. And he will be glorified here through the miraculous signs and wonders of the plagues (v.3), through redeeming his people from slavery (v.4), through bringing deserved judgement on the Egyptians (v.4), and through the Egyptians eventually acknowledging him as the LORD, Yahweh, Israel's covenant-keeping God (v.5).

- This only happens because Pharaoh's hard heart has led God to perform great and terrible wonders. It doesn't seem fair to Pharaoh, but he is doing it himself too – he's responsible (as we'll discuss later)! And God being glorified and showing his love for his people is a really good thing!
- **How do vv.8-13 set up the whole plague narrative?**
- Pharaoh is totally unbelieving, not even giving Yahweh a look in – even though he's obviously more powerful than anything Egypt has to offer. Pharaoh isn't looking for a miracle to convince him, just a way to discredit Moses (which of course doesn't work!)
- There is real power of evil at work, but God is much bigger! It's a very lop-sided battle between God and the gods of Egypt.
- **Skim read the 7:14-10:29. How are the plagues organised?**
- 3 groups of 3: 1st in group has Moses going to Pharaoh in the morning (7:15, 8:20, 9:13), 2nd starting 'Go to Pharaoh' (8:1, 9:1, 10:1), 3rd without warning (8:16, 9:8, 10:21).
- There's a progression – the first 2 are replicated by the Egyptians (7:22, 8:7) but the third one can't be (8:18-19). But Pharaoh's heart stays hard. (Also 9:11 – the magicians get boils too!)
- There's a distinction between the Israelites and Egyptians (8:22, 9:4, 9:26, 10:23).
- **Why do the Israelites live in Goshen (see Genesis 45:10, 46:28-34)?**
- It was where they'd originally settled in Joseph's time – maybe he chose it because it was good grazing land and near him? Also, as shepherds, they were 'an abomination' to the Egyptians and needed to be separate (8:26). Did this perpetuate both their discrete ethnicity and their slavery?
- **What is the significance of the first plague? How does Pharaoh react?**
- The Nile was practically a god to the Egyptians – but God is Lord of it!
- It seems so ridiculous – the people are digging along the Nile for water, for a whole week – but Pharaoh won't budge. Passive – his heart is hardened – because his own magicians can do the same. He doesn't think God is anything special.
- **What is different and similar about the second plague?**
- Again the magicians can do it, but they don't seem to be able to make it stop. Pharaoh is desperate and says he'll let the Israelites go if only God stops the plague.
- But then Pharaoh refuses to acknowledge God – he hardens his own heart this time, and won't let them go after all.
- **How does the third plague give us further insight into Pharaoh?**
- Now, the fact that his own magicians can't do it but say it's 'the finger of God' won't move him, whereas before it was them being able to replicate the plagues that convinced him Yahweh was nothing to worry about. Again, passive – his heart is hardened.
- **How does Pharaoh then change from plague to plague?**
- 4th: says they can go (but not very far) but then breaks his promise and hardens his own heart even after God relents.
- 5th: checked to see if the Israelites had been spared (9:7), but his heart was still hard.
- 6th: God hardened his heart – and he wouldn't listen, even though the magicians were afflicted...
- 7th: seems to repent and says they can go (9:27-28), but Moses knows he's not genuine (9:30), and again, after God relents, Pharaoh hardens his own heart.
- 8th: his servants know that it's a lost cause and try to reason with him before the plague comes, and he seems to agree to letting them go, but only the men, so it's no use! The locusts arrive, and Pharaoh seems to repent again (10:16), but then God hardens his heart again, and he won't let them go!

- 9th: he says they can go but without their livestock – making sure they'll return! God then hardens Pharaoh's heart again, and he explodes in anger.
- **Read 9:13-35. How does God show grace here?**
- He gives due warning to the Egyptians, so that those who believe can get their animals and themselves to safety (9:20).
- The Israelites aren't afflicted by the hail at all (9:26)!
- **What is the attitude of the people in v.21? What does this attitude lead to (vv.22-25)?**
- They ignore God's clear and gracious warning, proudly assuming he's no threat to them.
- The result is total devastation. Everything and everyone is destroyed. Their attitude looks insane to us – how could they be so ridiculously self-assured? Their judgement is deserved. Our righteous God must punish those who, like Pharaoh, would usurp his throne.
- **How do we see this same attitude in those around us? How should we respond?**
- This plague is a stark picture of what we see going on around us all the time – people stubbornly ignoring God and his gracious warnings. We even do it ourselves.
- Pray! And continue, like Moses, to speak God's word to people, even when, like Pharaoh, they insist on rejecting his truth. One day judgement will come – until then, there's hope.
- **Pharaoh seems to acknowledge the error of his ways in 9:27. But what is really going on in his heart? Are we ever guilty of false repentance?**
- He's not sorry at all – he just wants the plague to stop. As soon as it does, he refuses yet again to let the Israelites go, thus bringing yet more plagues upon his people.
- Sometimes we're only sorry for our sin because it has bad effects on us and on those around us. We're not sorry because we've grieved the heart of God. Say I gossip about someone. Am I sorry? Or am I only sorry if they find out and are hurt by it?
- **Compare 9:34, 9:35, and 10:1. Is Pharaoh responsible or a helpless pawn in God's hands?**
- Think about hail. We know hail is caused by ice crystals building up in clouds. But here God says he's going to send it tomorrow (9:18). So what's the cause? God is the primary cause of everything, but the secondary cause is also true – he uses secondary causes to achieve his primary cause.
- The primary cause of Pharaoh's hard heart is God's will, but he uses the secondary cause of Pharaoh stubbornly hardening his own heart to achieve it – both are true. Why did that couple fall in love? Because their genetic make-up was complementary... and because God planned it to be. Why did I choose Manchester? Because I liked the course... and because God planned for me to go here.
- Pharaoh gets into a habit of hardening his heart. How often do we think 'I'm not controlled by this, I can stop anytime...'? We get to the point where we have no freedom anymore, because we've taken it away ourselves.
- It's possible to tell 2 stories about Pharaoh's heart, just like the hail. In one story he is responsible through his choices, and in the other God is judging his sinful choices and stubborn heart by making his heart even harder.
- **How are we in danger of hardening our hearts? What is the remedy?**
- Bad habits which we think we can break but actually control us. They could be habits of action, word, or thought.
- We need to recognise our sin, repent, and ask for the Holy Spirit's help to change.
- We need to help each other to do this, pointing out blind spots of hardness. And we need to be humble enough to accept this help from others!

## Exodus 11:1-13:16: The Passover

**Main point:** Only faith in the sacrifice of a perfect lamb can save God's people from judgement.

**Main aim:** Trust and rejoice in God's provision of Jesus, our Passover Lamb.

Here we have it: the Passover, the Exodus, the event the Israelites have been longing for throughout all their long years in Egypt. At last, God is fulfilling his promises of Genesis 15:14 – freeing his people from slavery, judging their oppressors, and loading them up with possessions. But instead of a happy story of victory, it's a sobering reminder of what happens when the holy God comes in contact with sinful people.

There's a lot of repetition in these chapters; we're told what's going to happen, then what actually happens, and then how it will be commemorated. Why? It's a hugely important event! Not only does it display God's grace power as he keeps his promises, but it demonstrates the pattern for salvation – it is the clearest Old Testament shadow of Jesus' death.

I've suggested some sections to read, but don't feel tied down!

- **Read 11:1-10. What is so significant about the firstborn? Why are all the firstborn of Egypt killed?**
- God had already hinted at this in 4:22-23 – Israel is his firstborn son, and because Pharaoh refuses to let them go, God will kill his firstborn. Also, the previous Pharaoh had killed the Israelite baby boys in chapter 1.
- As the representative of his people, what happens to Pharaoh happens to all the rest of the Egyptians too. This sounds harsh, but they were sinful too, deserving of God's judgement, as we all are.
- They're killed because God himself comes (11:4) – this isn't just a sign done by Moses in God's power – this is God! And sinful people cannot withstand his presence. The Egyptians don't stand a chance.
- **Why does God make a distinction between Egypt and Israel (11:7)? See Deuteronomy 7:6-8.**
- We've seen it all the way along with the plagues. It's not because they're better than the Egyptians – it's because they're his people, and he's keeping his promises to Abraham.
- Ultimately it's for God's glory. He is shown to be holy in his judgement on the Egyptians, and gracious in his rescue of the Israelites.
- **Are we ever tempted to think we deserve God's grace because we're 'better' than others? That we believe in him because we're nicer or cleverer or 'cleaner'? How do these verses humble us?**
- There is nothing in us which makes us worthy of salvation, just as there was nothing in Israel. It's all about God and his faithfulness, so he gets all the glory.
- **Why might Moses be angry (11:8)?**
- Maybe he's just really frustrated at the pride and blindness of Pharaoh? He doesn't want Egypt to be destroyed, he just wants the Israelites to be free! And he's warned Pharaoh so many times – it's infuriating!
- **Read 12:1-13. What is the significance of the various instructions the Israelites have to obey?**
- The lamb is without blemish (12:5) – has to be a 'perfect' sacrifice. And by living in the house with the family, it is identified with the family – a substitute (12:6).

- Blood on the doorposts – shows the angel of death that a sacrifice has already taken place in that house (12:13).
- Unleavened bread (12:8) – they leave in a hurry – they don't have time to let their bread rise!
- Dressed ready for the journey (12:11) – again, it's to do with the rush of leaving – Pharaoh is going to change his mind again...
- **How are the Israelite firstborns saved? How does this point us to Jesus?**
- They're saved through the blood of the lamb – when God sees this, he passes over them (12:13)!
- In a way, the lamb is a substitute for *all* the Israelites in the house, not just the firstborn, because Israel as a whole is God's firstborn son, and they all need to be redeemed from the death of the Passover. This would explain why there has to be precisely the right amount of meat for each person.
- They had to trust God – trust him enough to obey him and put the lamb's blood on the door. With the other plagues, they were exempt simply because they were Israelites – now they're exempt by faith.
- And it's faith in the efficacy of a substitutionary sacrifice. The Israelites were no less guilty than the Egyptians – they deserved death too, when confronted with the holiness of God, but God provided a substitute which took his wrath.
- This points directly to Christ – it's an extremely clear shadow of his substitutionary sacrifice for us at the cross. It demonstrates God's way of working. A holy God cannot dwell with a sinful people – unless the sin is punished and therefore cancelled out. A substitute needs to take this punishment – here, a lamb, later, Jesus. And it's by faith that this substitute takes effect.
- Not one of his bones was broken (Exodus 12:46, John 19:36).
- Jesus is the perfect Passover Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (1 Corinthians 5:7, John 1:29).
- He's the firstborn of all creation, sacrificed for us (Colossians 1:15).
- Only a perfect sacrifice will do – a lamb without blemish, a man without sin.
- When God sees Jesus' blood, he 'passes over' us.
- Jesus redeems us from slavery to sin, and leads us to the promised land of the new creation.
- We commemorate Jesus' death at the Lord's Supper, the new Passover.
- **Read 12:29-42, and try to really imagine what it was like. How would the Egyptians have felt about the Israelites and their God? How would the Israelites have felt?**
- It's total chaos. In one night, every household suffers a death (12:30). Either a lamb was dead, or a son. That's the result of the holy God passing through the land.
- Pharaoh and the Egyptians are beside themselves, urging all 2 million or so Israelites away in the middle of the night and loading them up with gold and silver – anything to get rid of this plague on their nation.
- You'd think Pharaoh has at last learnt his lesson – but as we'll see in chapter 14, this is just another temporary yielding! It's just long enough for the Israelites to get away.
- It must have been terrifying for the Israelites too – would the lamb's blood really work? Would they really make it out of Egypt? But God is faithful, and his people walk out of Egypt through the front door. Yahweh's supremacy over the gods of Egypt is plain for all to see.
- **We might wish we could have been among the Israelites and experienced these remarkable events first-hand. But why are we in a much better position?**
- We have the privilege of knowing Christ! We have the reality, whereas they had only the shadow.

- We can have total confidence in our salvation, because it has already been achieved, 2000 years ago.
- Through Jesus, we are adopted as God's firstborn (Hebrews 12:23), heirs with Jesus of all God's promises (Romans 8:17). It's not about being an Israelite anymore – the way is open to all.
- We have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us – the holy God actually within us! This should be impossible – we should be destroyed like the Egyptians were when God came near – but Jesus' death makes us holy in God's sight.

### **Exodus 13:17-15:21: The Red Sea**

**Main point:** God's people are on the winning side, no matter how bleak things look, because Jesus has already won the victory.

**Main aim:** When the world seems to be winning, persevere in faith, taking encouragement from what Jesus has already done, and what he has promised for our eternal future.

Here it comes: the ultimate show-down between Yahweh and Pharaoh. It's set up brilliantly: Pharaoh urges the people away, and they leave joyfully, sure that their troubles are over, and God will now bring them straight into that land flowing with milk and honey. Pharaoh has other ideas. Maybe he thought they were just going for 3 days, like they'd said before, or maybe his grief had temporarily paralysed him, but when he realises his slaves are gone for good, he mobilises the full might of his great army and sets off in pursuit. It doesn't look good for the Israelites – humanly speaking, this can only end in a massacre by the Red Sea. The Egyptians know it, and the Israelites know it.

But yet again, both sides have failed to take into account the power and faithfulness of Yahweh. Is the One who sent the 10 plagues now going to abandon his people at the crucial moment? His answer is a thundering 'No!' The Israelites are saved through the Red Sea, while the Egyptians are destroyed by it. It's powerful demonstration of the only two destinies available to all people.

- **Have a look at the map (page 3). The Israelites were heading for the promised land of Canaan. Why does God send them in totally the 'wrong' direction (13:17)?**
- He knows them! He knows how faithless and flighty they are, and that if they face war with the Philistines straight away, they'll turn back to Egypt. So he's going to take them into the desert to prepare them – to demonstrate to them his power and his character and his holiness, and to deepen their relationship with him.
- **The 'wrong direction' seems to get even more wrong! What situation do the Israelites find themselves in by 14:10-12? How do they react?**
- They're hemmed in – Red Sea in front, Egyptians behind.
- They're afraid and cry out to God (14:10)! Understandable, although God has kept all his promises so far – do they really think he's going to let them die now?! Are they doubting his power or his goodness here?
- They complain to Moses – a repeating theme in Exodus...
- They say they were better off in Egypt – another repeating theme! How quickly they forget just how bad it was for them there.

- Basically, their present difficulty has led them to respond in a totally self-centred, faithless, and ungrateful way to all that God has done for them in the past.
- **How can we be like the Israelites here? Do we lose sight of what we know to be true of God when he seems to send us in totally the ‘wrong direction’?**
- We grumble; we doubt God’s goodness, sovereignty, wisdom, and promises; we cast blame; we become inward-looking and focused on our own problems – we lose sight of grace, and lose eternal perspective.
- **How does Moses encourage the people here (14:13-14)? How does this apply to us?**
- They don’t need to be afraid, because God has already promised to save them from the Egyptians and bring them to the Promised Land (e.g. 3:17). They just need to stand back and trust him to act on their behalf! ‘You have only to be silent’ is literally ‘Shut up’!
- Romans 8:31-39 might be helpful here. God doesn’t promise to save us from physical enemies and danger, but he has promised us eternal safety through Jesus. And that salvation is purely a matter of faith – we just stand back and trust that Jesus has acted on our behalf. Grumbling and doubts are made to look foolish in the face of what God has done for us already – if he gave up his Son for us, then he is surely working for our good and will bring us to our eternal inheritance.
- **Moses has just said that the people don’t have to ‘do’ anything – God will fight this battle for them (14:14). But in the next verse (14:15) they do have to do have to do something – go forward! Why is this not a contradiction?**
- In both verses, all they have to ‘do’ is trust God! Which is actually the opposite of ‘doing’ – it’s letting him do it, humbly acknowledging that they need his help. In v.14 they have to trust that he will be the one to rescue them – they don’t need to panic. Then in v.15 they have to trust that he won’t let the water crash back over them as they walk through the sea. Their outward action in obeying God’s command to ‘go forward’ (14:15) is a demonstration of their inward faith.
- **It can be really difficult to know whether God wants us to wait in faith, or act in faith. How do we know? What should our attitude be?**
- Practically speaking, we pray, search the Scriptures, and push doors. But often it’s what God is teaching us through the process which proves most valuable, just like with the Israelites – teaching us to trust him, whatever happens, because he is faithful and sovereign and loving and almighty.
- **14:3-4, 8, 17-18 and 26-28 are difficult verses. Think back to the study of 2 weeks ago. Why is God justified in his actions towards Pharaoh and his army?**
- Pharaoh got into the habit of hardening his own heart – he chose this course of action for himself. His actions here seem ludicrous – why on earth would he decide to pit himself against the God who has just exercised judgement on all the firstborn in the land? Because he’s got used to doing it – he’s way down the slippery slope.
- He deliberately, proudly, pursues the slaves he’s just released in order to kill and/or re-enslave them. He is guilty and deserving of judgement.
- As the Egyptians drowned the Hebrew boys in the Nile, so God drowns the Egyptians in the Red Sea.
- Remember Romans 9:17-23. God is the creator, and so has the right to do whatever he wants with his creatures in order to display his glory. If he had mercy on everyone, then we would take his mercy for granted because there would be no judgement to compare it with, and some of his glory would be hidden. By having mercy on some and not others, he highlights both his graciousness in forgiveness and his holiness in judgement. His glory is magnified.

- **What are the results of this terrible judgement (14:30-31, 15:9-18)?**
- The tide (quite literally) turns – the beleaguered slaves triumph over their vindictive masters. But it's obviously not in their own strength, but because of the strength of their God, who is revealed to be limitlessly powerful. Thus it is Yahweh who gets all the glory as he graciously rescues his people, and righteously destroys his enemies.
- The Israelites' faith is built up, as is their confidence in Moses (14:31).
- The foolish pride and self-confidence of Pharaoh and his army are shown to be ridiculous in the face of the almighty God. In 5:2 Pharaoh said, 'Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice?' God answered this question many times through the plagues, but Pharaoh refused to listen. Now it's far too late.
- **As Christians in a secular society, we are often seen as being on the losing side. How does the story of the Red Sea encourage us? Challenge us? How does it point us to Jesus?**
- Everyone who was there at the Red Sea fell into one of two camps: either they were saved trusting in God's promise (the Israelites), or they were destroyed because they rejected God and trusted in themselves (the Egyptians). It's exactly the same today. The 'Israelite' camp might look weak and pathetic, and the 'Egyptians' powerful and victorious, but spiritually and eternally, it's the other way round. So take heart! Persevere! Don't give up and swap sides...
- Passing through the Red Sea is a shadow of baptism (1 Corinthians 10:2), which itself is a sign of how we die to our old self and are raised to new life with Jesus. We've already gone through the Red Sea! Let's live lives of faithful obedience in response to this.

### **Exodus 15:22-18:16: The Journey**

**Main point:** Grumbling is a sign that we are testing God and doubting his goodness.

**Main aim:** Instead of getting bogged down in self-centred grumbling, look up to Jesus, who never grumbled, and respond with faith and gratitude.

Today's passage sees the Israelites setting out from the Red Sea, fresh from their spectacular deliverance from the Egyptians. But it's not all plain sailing. Three times, God tests them by confronting them with a desperate situation, and three times, they respond by sinfully grumbling against God. It becomes a two-way trust-test – one that God always passes, and the people always fail! It seems unbelievable – surely they don't think he's brought them out of Egypt with all these miracles only to let them die of hunger and thirst? But don't we do the very same thing? Every day? God has done even more for us than for them – we know about Jesus' death for us – and yet, we doubt him, we test him, we grumble, we think we know best.

I've focussed the study on 15:22-17:7, but if you'd like to and have time, by all means look at the rest of the passage too! There's a lot of repetition, but your group might find that helpful in recognising the pattern each time! There are also a huge number of places in the New Testament which speak about this passage. I've listed a few, but just choose what you think will be most helpful!

- **Intro question: What do you most often grumble about?**
- **Read 15:22-27.**

- **What is the Israelites' spiritual attitude immediately after crossing the Red Sea (14:31)?**
- They have a right fear of God – he's just displayed his righteous judgement on their enemies!
- They believe in him – they trust him! And Moses, his representative.
- It's a spiritual high!
- **How have they changed by 15:24? Why? (What lies behind their grumbling?)**
- They're grumbling against Moses – which is the same as grumbling against God (see 16:8).
- They are in a real pickle – it would be bad enough trudging through the desert for 3 days with no water, but to then find it but discover it's bitter – that would be gut-wrenching...
- But they've forgotten God's promises to them! They're completely self-centred, focussed on the suffering of the moment, and that has thrown everything else they know to be true out of their heads.
- **What is it about God that the people are testing?**
- They aren't doubting God's power, but they are doubting his goodness – that's what they're testing. Maybe he doesn't have their best interests at heart; maybe he's abandoned them! By grumbling to Moses, they're testing God to see if he'll bother to respond and sort them out.
- **What is it about the people that God is testing (15:25)?**
- He's testing whether they will trust him when the chips are down! Specifically, will they trust him to provide water in the desert. He's not punishing them – he's teaching them.
- **What would have been a godly reaction to this predicament?**
- Instead of grumbling to Moses, they could have simply prayed in faith, reminding God of his promise to bring them into the Promised Land.
- It's ok to tell God that we're in a bad situation and ask for help to get out of it – it's when we rebelliously turn away from God and doubt his good intentions that it becomes grumbling!
- **How does God respond to their grumbling (15:25-27)?**
- He's outrageously gracious towards them. Not only does he make the bitter water sweet, but he gives them a warning to help them not to make the same mistake, and then he brings them to a lush oasis!
  
- **Read chapter 16.**
- **How are the Israelites even more sinful in their grumbling here (16:2-3)?**
- As in 14:12, they turn their eyes back to Egypt. To the very place God redeemed them from only a month before! They're throwing all his goodness back in his face. The grass is always greener! They say they'd rather be dead but well-fed slaves in Egypt, than free and alive with the LORD in the wilderness. Just a bit ungrateful...
- **How does God respond to their grumbling (16:4-12)?**
- Again, with remarkable grace. He provides fresh food straight to their doorsteps every day.
- He also reveals his glory to them. This is an encouragement, and an assurance that he is with them and for them, but also a warning that he is not one to be disregarded!
- **How does God test the people further (16:4)?**
- He gives them instructions about the manna – they aren't to gather more than they need or try to keep it overnight – they need to trust that God will provide again the next day! Only on the day before the Sabbath are they to gather double – so that they can enjoy a day of rest.
- **Why does God test the people (16:4)?**

- To see if they'll trust him to keep his word! If they do, their faith-muscles will be strengthened – it will be easier for them to trust him the next time. He's being gracious in this testing! Revealing his faithful character!
- See also 20:20 – he's not testing them to see if they're good enough, but because they're his beloved people and he wants to help them.
- **How do the people get on with these tests? Why?**
- They fail both of them! (Or at least some of them do!) They try to keep the manna overnight, only to find it goes maggoty, and they try to gather it on the Sabbath, only to find it's not there!
- It's infuriating to read – what will it take for them to trust God's word? They just keep on trusting in themselves and doubting their Saviour God!
  
- **Read 17:1-7**
- **How is the people's response to this third test the worst yet?**
- They've had two experiences of God coming through for them in providing water and food – haven't they caught on yet?
- Again they look longingly back to Egypt.
- They're so angry they want to stone Moses – God's representative! What does that say?!
- **How does God respond to their grumbling this time?**
- Again, with such grace. Moses strikes the rock, and water pours out.
- But he won't put up with their grumbling forever. Two years later, in Numbers 11, the people are still grumbling, still doubting. And in Numbers 14 God judges them – none of that generation will see the Promised Land.
- **How does this passage point us to Jesus?**
- Matthew 4:1-11. Jesus went out into the wilderness for 40 days (a symbol of the 40 years the Israelites spent in the desert) and was tested by the devil. Tempted beyond anything we could imagine. And yet he never doubted God. Never tested him. Never grumbled. Even on the cross. He kept trusting. He's therefore the only Perfect One who could be our sacrifice.
- 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 (especially v.4). Jesus is the Rock who was struck – punished – so that the living water of eternal life could flow out to all of us. This event in Exodus points forward to his death. He's the real thing who casts all those shadows.
- Jesus is the true manna from heaven (John 6:48-51) – feed on him (i.e. trust in him) and you'll have eternal life.
- **How might God be testing you? What can you see of his grace in the situation? What is he teaching you about himself?**
- **Why do you grumble about things? What is it about God that you are testing? Why is it never right to grumble, even when something terrible happens? How will you change?**
- See 1 Corinthians 10:9-13 or Hebrews 3:7-19.
- God is faithful. We're in a much better position than the Israelites – we've seen how he has kept his promises over the past 4000 years! We have no need to grumble or put him to the test. Sometimes present suffering is so acute that we're tempted, or tested – it's the same word in the Greek – to give up the rewards of heaven just so the present suffering will end – but God won't let us be tested beyond what we can bear! There'll still be times when we mess up, when we fail the test, but not to the extent that we lose our eternal salvation – our souls are secure, purchased by Jesus' blood. He shows us astounding grace.

- He draws us to himself, sometimes using testing situations, but teaching us to rely on him alone. But we need to remember God's promises, imprint them on our minds, so that when trials come, our first thought is to turn to God for help. He is way more reliable than even the people closest to us; when we're suffering, when terrible things happen to us, he will enable us by his Spirit to keep trusting that he will save us ultimately and is working all things for our good.

### **Exodus 19:1-25 and 20:18-21: Sinai**

**Main point:** God's perfect holiness means sinful people have to stay far away from him.

**Main aim:** Recognise the immensity of what Jesus has done in making us God's holy, perfect children.

In Exodus 3:12, God promised Moses that he'd come back to Horeb (Sinai) with the redeemed Israelites. Finally, after 2 months in the desert, they've made it. And here they will remain for a whole year, while God explains to them the laws by which they are to live as his redeemed people. It's not until Numbers 10:11 that they set out again.

This chapter sets up the relationship between God and his people throughout the rest of the Old Testament. It's a relationship based on grace, but one which is constantly strained by the incompatibility of sinful people with a holy God. It should cause us to rejoice at the privilege of living in the New Testament age!

- **Read Exodus 19:1-8.**
- **Is God saying that the people have to earn their salvation through obedience (v.5)? Has the way of salvation changed from then to now?**
- Obedience is a response to what God has already done for the Israelites. They have already been saved; they are already his people. Now they are to act in accordance with their new identity.
- It's the same in the New Testament – we don't obey in order to be saved, but once we have been saved, obedience is the only response which makes sense. If we consistently ignore God's commands, then it's questionable whether we really are one of his people.
- The difference between us and the Israelites is that we have the fullness of the Holy Spirit living in our hearts, giving us access to the power to live God's way. The Israelites didn't have the Spirit in the same power and fullness. And many of them consistently failed to keep God's law, revealing that they weren't really his people in the first place, and so lost out on the nation, land and blessing promised to Abraham.
- **Read 1 Peter 2:9-10. How are the promises in Exodus 19:5-6 ultimately fulfilled?**
- In us! The church is God's chosen people, a royal kingdom of priests bearing witness to God in the world, and made perfectly holy in Jesus.
- The Israelites who really were God's people, like Simeon and Anna (who lived by faith in God's promises), recognised Jesus when he came – and so continued to be part of God's holy people.
- **Read Exodus 19:9-25.**
- **What do the people see and hear?**
- V.9 – thick cloud, God's voice.
- V.11 – the LORD will come down on the mountain on the third day in the sight of all the people.

- V.13 – there'll be a long trumpet blast when it's time for the people to assemble at the foot of the mountain.
- V.16 – they hear thunder, see lightning, see the thick cloud on the mountain, and hear the trumpet blast, just as God had told them.
- V.18 – the mountain is wrapped in smoke and there's fire burning on it. There's also a huge earthquake!
- V.19 – the trumpet gets really loud, Moses speaks, and God answers in thunder!
- V.20 – God comes down on the mountain (this may be a summary of what all the previous things show) and calls Moses up to him.
- **What rules does God put in place? Why?**
- V.10 – the people are to be consecrated and wash their clothes. The word for 'consecration' is derived from the word for 'holy'. We're not told how this consecration happened, but it may have involved sacrifices, as in Exodus 13 with the consecration of the firstborn.
- V.12 – they're to set limits round the mountain, and anyone who touches it is to be put to death.
- V.13 – anyone who does touch it can't be touched even to be killed – they have to be stoned or shot.
- V.15 – they're not to 'go near a woman'! This may be so that they can devote themselves fully to waiting and worshipping with no distractions – see 1 Cor 7:5. But see also Lev 15:18.
- All of these rules emphasise God's holiness and how we can't just walk blithely into his presence. We need to be clean – the symbolic cleanliness here indicates how we really need to be cleansed on the inside, from our sin. Ultimately, this is achieved through Jesus' death.
- The people can only come so close without dying – they're not really clean. How incredible that we can now draw near to God through Jesus!
- **What actually happens when Moses goes up to meet with God (Exodus 19:21-25)?**
- At first reading, it all seems a bit pointless! God just tells him to remind them of something he's already told them, which Moses points out! Then he tells him to go and get Aaron and bring him back. What's going on?
- But God knows his people. He knows how prone to sin they are, how quickly they forget his good commands. It's really important that the people know they're not supposed to come up, because it will result in their death! God is being gracious yet again, giving them another reminder of his holiness and why they need to stay at the bottom of the mountain.
- **What role does Moses play here?**
- He's the mediator between the two 'sides'. He goes up and down that mountain at least 3 times in this chapter! (And it would probably have taken at least 2.5 hours just to get up!) He reports to the people everything God says, then then reports back to God everything the people say. Of course God knows all about it – but it's symbolic. The people can't interact on a personal level with God.
- Moses is a shadow of Jesus, the God-man, the ultimate mediator between us and God. It's so easy for us to take this mediatorial office for granted! We have instant access to God through his Son! The Israelites had to wait for hours and hours for Moses to go up and down the mountain, and even then the message would have been hard to hear – certainly not personalised! We can pray to God any time, and know that he hears us and answers us because we belong to his Son.
- **Read Exodus 20:18-21.**

- **How do the people respond to this close encounter with God? Why?**
- They're terrified! They want to get as far away as they can! They don't want to be able to hear God's voice.
- They seem to think they might die if God continues to speak directly to them (20:19). Is this because they are aware of their own sin and they can't withstand the sheer purity and power of God's holiness? Is it just too far out of their comfort zone to be confronted by how far short they fall? They'd rather keep God at a safe distance.
- **What reasons does God give for appearing to the people as he has (19:9, 20:20)?**
- He's letting the people in on his conversations with Moses, so that they will subsequently trust Moses as their mediator – they'll know that God really does speak to them through Moses.
- He's also testing them – or rather trying them – putting them through a difficult experience so that they learn to fear him rightly (a healthy fear rather than a debilitating fear). This will help them not to sin.
- **Read Hebrews 12:18-24. How are things different for us compared to the Israelites?**
- We've come to a different mountain! Instead of Sinai, we've come to Zion – the heavenly Jerusalem. We've come to God's heavenly throne, surrounded by celebrating angels and heavenly saints.
- We can stand in the presence of God himself because Jesus is there to mediate for us.
- Even after their consecration, the Israelites weren't really clean – not on the inside. But we are made perfect in God's sight (Hebrews 12:23).
- The Israelites trembled with fear to be even at the foot of the mountain. We have no need to be afraid before God because Jesus has taken all our punishment for us (Hebrews 10:24). We can enter God's presence with confidence (Hebrews 10:19). Of course we should still fear God in terms of being awe-struck at his power, grace, wisdom, infinity etc. – but not because we think he's going to punish us. That would be to doubt the efficacy of Jesus' death.
- **How does this passage make you thankful for Jesus?**

## **Exodus 20: The Ten Commandments**

**Main point:** After God has redeemed his people, he gives them the law so that they can respond by living lives which please him.

**Main aim:** Reflect on your attitude to God's commands – are you legalistic, or motivated by gratitude and love?

This is one of the most famous parts of the Bible, and yet we often struggle with how to understand it. Does it teach salvation by works? If not, what's the point of it? And who does it apply to now? It's important to get these questions sorted before we launch into specific application of each commandment – otherwise the study may quickly degenerate into a list of dos and don'ts, back-patting or face-slapping!

- **How do people generally view laws? Why do they keep them? Or not keep them?**
- There seem to be 2 main views: either laws are kept reluctantly because people think they know better but don't want to get in trouble, or kept legalistically because people like to feel like they're

'good'. Either way, law is not kept for the right reasons – for the glory of God and the good of others.

- **Where does God give the 10 commandments? Who hears it?**
- It seems that Moses has come down to the bottom of the mountain again before the 10 commandments (19:25) and goes back up again after them (20:21). This, combined with the people's words in 20:19, suggests that God himself gives the commandments at the foot of the mountain, and all the people hear them.
- **Why did God give the law?**
- Out of grace, so the people knew how to live as his people. He's saved them already (20:2), and in response they should have desired to live as he wants.
- The law is a reflection of God's holy character – as he is holy, his people are to be holy, and so show the world what he is like through their conduct.
- To show us the need for Jesus – the law makes sin really obvious. Jesus fulfils the law:
  - Romans 3:20 – the law reveals sin, because we can't keep it. It shows us our need for a Saviour.
  - Romans 10:4, Matthew 5:17 – the law points to Jesus – he's where it's all heading!
- **What is the importance of the law for Christians?**
- Jesus kept the law perfectly for us so he could be our perfect substitutionary sacrifice - it's as if we've kept the law perfectly.
- And he gives us his Spirit so the law is in our hearts and we have the desire and the power to do what God wants. We don't keep the law out of duty, but out of joy:
  - Romans 8:3-4 – the Holy Spirit gives us new desires, so we both want and are able to keep the law.
  - Matthew 5:6 – if you're in God's Kingdom, then you'll hunger and thirst for righteousness – you'll have a desire to do the right thing.
- So if we could live in perfect obedience to the Holy Spirit within us, the law would be irrelevant to us. But as we can't do that this side of the new creation, the written reminders of how God wants us to live are immensely helpful in assisting us to go his way. They stop us from sinfully twisting our consciences so that we can do whatever we like.
- **For each commandment: What does it mean? What does it tell us about God? How is it fulfilled in Jesus? How does it apply to us? (It's probably a good idea to just focus on a few of the commandments – choose those which will be most relevant to your group!)**
- First commandment: God is worthy of our undivided worship because of who he is, what he's like, and what he's done.
- Jesus always put God first. We are to put God first – not to do so is the essence of sin.
- Second commandment: God is a jealous God, therefore the Israelites are not to make and worship representations of anything (even Yahweh himself, because no representation could depict him fully). If they do, there will be far-reaching consequences. But if they stay faithful, the blessing will reach much further! The promises here are probably not specific, otherwise they would contradict Deut 24:16. Rather, they are of a corporate nature – indeed, we see them played out when the Jews are eventually exiled from the land because of their repeated idolatry.
- Jesus, being God, knew God perfectly and worshipped him truthfully. We are to take God at his word (quite literally!) and not think of him just as we like.

- Third commandment: Don't use Yahweh's name if you don't mean it. And don't use it in an untrue way either. He is to be held in the highest honour at all times!
- Jesus always spoke in earnest and in truth about his Father. We are to only speak about God thoughtfully, truthfully, and in honouring ways.
- Fourth commandment: Everyone within the Israelite community was to rest on the Sabbath because they were following the pattern of their creator, who rested after the 6 days of creation.
- This is a tricky one to apply to ourselves because there are loads of different opinions. But we do know that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). In him we have rest (Hebrews 4:9-10). We don't need to be a distinct nation any more, observing special days, though we should respect those who do (Rom 14:5-9).
- Fifth commandment: Just as we are to honour God, we are to honour those he has put in authority over us. The promise here is again general, rather than specific – if the people consistently obey God's commands, they will remain in the land he has given them.
- Jesus honoured his earthly parents (Luke 2:51), and did it so perfectly that his mother came to acknowledge him as the sinless Son of God. How we interpret this command for ourselves is a matter of wisdom. Unfortunately, we sometimes have to choose between honouring our parents and honouring God...
- Sixth commandment: All humans are made in God's image, and so we have no right to take a life – it's up to God when we die.
- Jesus emphasises the sinfulness of the heart-attitude behind murder in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:21-22). Anger is murdering someone in our hearts, and if we had experienced different life-circumstances – an abusive upbringing, psychological problems, traumatic events – those thoughts might actually lead us to murder. There but for the grace of God go I...
- Seventh commandment: God's relationship to his people is often pictured as a marriage, and their betrayal of him as spiritual adultery. Human marriage is to be a shadow of this relationship. We are to be faithful as God is faithful.
- As with murder, Jesus broadens our view of adultery to include the heart attitude of lust (Matt 5:28).
- Eighth commandment: God provides us with everything we 'need'. Stealing reveals idolatrous greed and a lack of trust in God's provision. It is also the opposite of loving our neighbour as ourself.
- Ninth commandment: God is truth and cannot lie (Numbers 23:19, Titus 1:2), and his people are to imitate this.
- Jesus is 'the way, the *truth* and the life' (John 14:6).
- Tenth commandment: Coveting is the opposite of contentment – not being satisfied with what God has given us, and comparing ourselves to those around us. See Hebrews 13:5!
- **Should we expect unbelievers to keep the 10 commandments?**
- Murder and stealing are against the law of the land, but the rest of the commandments apply to God's people only. If we expect unbelievers to keep them outside of the saving work of Jesus, aren't we inadvertently implying that salvation by works is possible?
- Yes they may be 'better' people in a 'better' society if they don't commit adultery or covet or lie, but they're not doing it for the right reason, i.e. in response to what God has done for them. They're doing it to tick religious boxes and feel proud and secure about themselves – when in fact they're doomed without Jesus.

- **What is your attitude to the 10 commandments? What truths do you need to remember?**
- Do you see them as a response of thankfulness to what God has done for you in Jesus?
- Do you rejoice in living a life which reflects God's holy character?
- Do you see them as bringing true freedom, life as God intends?
- Do you see them as a chore, something to tick off but which really spoils your fun?
- Do you see them as a safety-net, ensuring God's approval of you?

## **Exodus 20:22-24:18: The Law**

**Main point:** God's redeemed people are to be distinctive and so reflect his character and glory

**Main aim:** How distinctive are we? How well do we reflect God's character and glory in our thoughts, words, and actions?

This section of Exodus (20:22-23-19) is known as the 'Book of the Covenant' (24:7). It's a set of laws for how the Israelites, as God's redeemed people living in the Promised Land, were to treat each other in daily life. The difficulty for us is in knowing how on earth to apply them to ourselves. We don't live in the Bronze Age; we don't have oxen or slaves; women aren't the property of men; our country has no death penalty. We live post-cross, under the New Covenant (Luke 22:20) – Jesus has fulfilled the law for us, and the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to live a life pleasing to God (Romans 8:3-4). It would be a mis-use of Scripture to try applying these laws directly to ourselves. So where does that leave us with these chapters? Does 2 Timothy 3:16-17 really apply here? Well, as with the Ten Commandments, these laws teach us about God's character, and show us that God's people should be distinctive and holy – in other words, these chapters are *very* applicable to us as we struggle to live for God in our secular world. We just need to keep remembering what comes first: as with the Israelites, God saves us, and *then* we respond to that by obeying him. It's never the other way round.

It's another very long passage, so you might want to just focus on a few sections! I've picked those which highlight God's concern for the most vulnerable in society, but depending on your group, you might want to go for a different selection!

- **Read 21:1-11.**
- **Why might someone become a slave in ancient Israel?**
- This slavery was very different to the slavery we're used to. If someone was very poor, or in debt, he could sell himself as a slave. This meant he had secure employment, a home, and food.
- People couldn't be forced into slavery – see 21:16.
- We recoil at the idea of a father selling his daughter, but if they were a very poor family, then this could be her best chance. It's better than starvation, or prostitution.
- But slaves were still on the bottom rung of society. These laws don't condone slavery, but accept it as a fact, and provide protection from exploitation.
- **How do these laws benefit slaves?**
- After 6 years of service, the slave is to be freed! And take with him whoever he came with.
- But if he wants to, he can stay for life. And if a servant can love his master (v.5), it's clear that slaves are to be well-treated!

- A female slave was to be treated with respect. She couldn't be sold on to just anyone if she didn't please her master – instead, she had to be set free by an Israelite – probably her family – so that she would continue to be safe and provided for.
- If she was given to her master's son, she was to have the full rights of a wife. If not, then she would be free to leave.
- **What does this tell us about God?**
- God cares about the vulnerable and marginalised, and makes provision for them. Every person is worthy of dignity and respect, and made in the image of God, whatever their position in life.
- **What does this tell us about how Israel was to be different to the surrounding nations?**
- Think what Israel suffered under Egypt. There was definitely no liberation after 6 years!
- Slaves were to be treated as respected members of society, just as much a part of God's people as those who were 'free'. There was to be no oppression.
- **How do we treat those who are socially or economically less privileged than us?**
  
- **Read 22:16-23**
- **Who benefits from the laws in 22:16-17? How?**
- The way society worked was that a virgin bride came at a price, paid to her father by the bridegroom. If she'd been seduced, she was essentially 'damaged property', and no-one would want to marry her, or pay the bride-price for her. This law ensures that the man who seduced her does this. This saves her from shame, and saves her father from financial loss.
- **What does this tell us about God?**
- Reading this makes our hair stand on end – it's so counter to the values of modern society. But again, God is not condoning this treatment of women. What he is doing is damage-limitation. These laws dissuade men from pre-marital sex – they're going to have to pay for it! – and protect women who have got themselves into hot water.
- **What does this tell us about how Israel was to be different to the surrounding nations?**
- Here's a little summary of the Canaanite lifestyle:
  - 'Canaanite worship was socially destructive. Its religious acts were pornographic and sick, seriously damaging to children, creating early impressions of deities with no interest in moral behaviour. It tried to dignify, by the use of religious labels, depraved acts of bestiality and corruption. It had a low estimate of human life. It suggested that anything was permissible, promiscuity, murder or anything else, in order to guarantee a good crop at harvest. It ignored the highest values both in the family and in the wider community – love, loyalty, purity, peace and security – and encouraged the view that all these things were inferior to material prosperity, physical satisfaction and human pleasure. A society where those things matter most is self-destructive.' Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy*, 146.)
- In comparison to this, the Israelites were to sexually pure – sex was to be kept between husband and wife in marriage. No sex with children, or animals, no orgies. Not only does this reflect God's pattern for marriage and his holiness, but it provides a stable bedrock for society. Can you imagine what Canaanite society was like? Though in many ways, it sounds frighteningly familiar...
- **Is the church a good witness of biblical sexual ethics in our twisted world? How can we make it clear that God's way is the best way, and the way of real freedom, without coming across as judgemental?**

- **Who benefits from the laws in 22:21-27? How?**
- Again, the focus is on the most vulnerable in society – the foreigner, the widow, the orphan, the poor.
- **What does this tell us about God?**
- These are people who seem to be forgotten or ignored by society. But God sees them, and hears them, and cares. As he heard the Israelites' cry in Egypt and acted in judgement on their oppressors, so he will judge any who oppress the weak in their society.
- **What does this tell us about how Israel was to be different to the surrounding nations?**
- Generally speaking, it was a world where the strong used the weak in whatever way they pleased. In contrast, Israel was to be a shining example of the strong respecting the weak, providing for them, and caring about them.
- **The heart of God is the same now as it was then – he still cares for the weak and marginalised. How do our hearts compare?**
- **Summary application: How distinctive are we? In what ways do our actions fail to reflect God's character?**
- **Read 24:3-8. (Moses has been up on the mountain receiving the laws from God since 20:21, but now comes back down and tells the people what he's heard.)**
- **How did the people get on with keeping their promises of v.3 and v.7?**
- They completely failed to keep their side of the covenant. They broke God's laws, and instead of being a distinctive witness to the nations around them, they bought into their idolatry, witchcraft, and moral degeneracy.
- **How do these verses, especially v.8, point us to Jesus?**
- See Luke 22:20 and Hebrews 10:22 – Jesus's blood ratifies the new covenant. We can't keep God's law perfectly any more than the Israelites could – but being sprinkled with Jesus' blood purifies us once and for all, so that we are holy in God's sight. And the Holy Spirit dwells in us, changing us to be more and more like Jesus.

## **Exodus 25-31: The plan of the Tabernacle**

**Main point:** The tabernacle shows us a glimpse of what it means for God to dwell with his people, but was only a temporary shadow leading to Jesus and the new creation.

**Main aim:** Give thanks that Jesus has permanently opened the way for God and man to dwell together.

If last week's passage was difficult, then this week's is gruelling! But don't be discouraged! As we look closely at the tabernacle, we'll see shadows all over the place – shadows of Eden, shadows of the new creation, and shadows of Jesus. I've focussed on the tabernacle and its contents, as opposed to the priests – we'll come back to them in the final study (Exodus 35-40), where much of this material is repeated.

There's a lot to get our heads round, and I may have made things over-complicated. We don't want to just be giving a monologue to our groups because they're struggling to come up with the answers themselves, so don't feel you have to cover everything – focus on even one or two things! Hebrews

chapter 9 is a key text for understanding this passage, so concentrate on that if you get really stuck. The illustrations might help too (thank you ESV Study Bible!).

- **Read Exodus 25:1-9.**
- **Where did all of these precious items come from? Why are they appropriate materials for building the tabernacle?**
- Probably they came from the Egyptians – remember Exodus 12:35-36.
- Acacia wood was hard, durable and lightweight – perfect for things that had to be carried around the desert! There were acacia trees in the area, so it's possible the Israelites got the wood themselves, or it may have been given to them by the Egyptians.
- Dye for coloured fabric was very expensive – it was made from sea shells, with thousands needed for just one robe.
- This is to be *God's earthly dwelling place* – only the very best will do! It's remarkable!
- **Why was it so important that the people followed God's instructions exactly (25:9)?**
- He's opening up a way for him to dwell amongst them (v.8) – but it'll only be safe for them if they do exactly as he says! They can't just make him any old dwelling-place!
- See Hebrews 9:23-24. This is a shadowy copy of a heavenly reality! They're following a pattern based on God's eternality-existing heavenly dwelling place.
  
- **Split into pairs and look at either the ark (25:10-22), the table (25:23-30), the lampstand (25:31-40, 27:20-21), or the altar of incense (30:1-10). What were they like? You could even have a go at drawing them from the description! What was the purpose of each?**
- The **ark**, which was covered in gold, was the focus of God's presence – he would speak with Moses from above the cherubim on the mercy seat. It couldn't be touched, but had poles so it could be carried (v.15). (Remember what happened when Uzzah touched the ark in 2 Samuel 6:6-7?) Cherubim are angelic beings, often depicted as winged lions or bulls with human heads. They are the traditional guards of holy places.
- The **table**, also covered in gold, displayed the bread of the presence (i.e. bread that was in God's presence). This bread was eaten by the priests and replaced every Sabbath (Leviticus 24:5-9).
- The golden **lampstand**, in the shape of a tree, gave light to the tabernacle. The priests needed to be able to see what they were doing! They tended to it morning and evening, so that it was always burning. It was all made from one solid piece of gold, weighing 34kg!
- The **altar of incense**, also covered in gold, was for making an incense offering every morning and evening. It wasn't to be used for any other kind of offering, but was to be cleansed by the sprinkling of blood on the Day of Atonement. The smoke from the incense covered the mercy seat on the Day of Atonement, so that the high priest wouldn't die from seeing God's presence (Leviticus 16:12-13).
  
- **Skim-read Exodus 26. What is being built here? Where are the 4 items placed within it (see Exodus 30:6 for one of them)?**
- It's the tabernacle – the tent where God would dwell amongst his people. (See illustration.) It had to be portable, and went ahead of the Israelites as they journeyed round the desert.
- The **ark** is behind a veil at one end of the tent (the western end). The **altar of incense** is in the main part of the tent, just outside the veil (see Exodus 30:6). The **table** and **lampstand** are also in

the main part of the tent, opposite each other, the table on the north side and the lampstand on the west side. This means that the opening to the tent faces east.

- **Explanation: Two other items, the bronze altar (27:1-8) and the bronze basin (30:11-16), are placed outside the tabernacle, in the outer court (27:9-19, see illustration). Only priests could enter the tabernacle, so the altar had to be outside in order for ordinary Israelites to be able to come and offer sacrifices. These things were made of bronze (instead of gold) because they weren't quite as close to God's presence.**
- **So we can see that the tabernacle complex had a three-part structure (see illustration): the outer court, where ordinary Israelites could go, the holy place, where only priests could go, and the most holy place, where only the high priest could go once a year, on the Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 16).**
- **What is the significance of the cherubim (see Exodus 26:1, 31-33)? Where have they been mentioned previously in the Bible?**
- They 'guard' the tabernacle as a whole, and the most holy place in particular, being woven into the curtains.
- See Genesis 3:24 – the cherubim guard the way into the Garden of Eden – they're a 'danger' sign: 'Keep out! God's dwelling here, and sinful people can't come in unless he gives them express permission!'
- They also emphasise God's holiness. They're heavenly beings, which worship God in his presence. As it's forbidden to make an image of God, his holy presence is represented by images of the things closest to him.
- **How else does the tabernacle point to Eden?**
- The entrance to Eden is at the eastern end – the same as the tabernacle (see Exodus 27:13-15)!
- The golden lampstand is in the form of a tree – the tree of life?
- It's stunningly beautiful, filled with bright colours, gold, and intricate designs.
- It's very precisely ordered and structured – order in the midst of chaos, like creation.
- God 'speaks' 7 times ('And the Lord said to Moses' – Exodus 25:1, 30:11, 17, 22, 34, 31:1, 12), and some scholars see this as reflecting the 7 days of creation. The things made one each day don't relate directly to the 7 days of creation, except for the final one, where God instructs Moses about the Sabbath.
- **To summarise: the tabernacle is a piece of holy ground in a fallen world. A piece of heaven on earth. The place where the holy God dwells. It's spectacular both in beauty and in purpose.**
- **What does the tabernacle teach us about God?**
- He is perfectly, terrifyingly holy, and his presence is therefore dangerous to sinful people. But instead of staying far away from the Israelites or coming and destroying them, he graciously made a way for his people to experience his presence, by mediating it with curtains, veils, clouds of incense, and priests.
- **Read Hebrews 9:23-28. How does what Jesus has done compare with what happened in the days of the tabernacle?**
- The tabernacle was just a copy – Jesus entered the real place, heaven, and approached God's heavenly throne.

- Jesus' sacrifice only had to be made once, whereas the priests had to make continual sacrifices. This is because Jesus' offering is all-sufficient: he offers his own blood – the sacrifice of a perfect, infinite life – whereas the priests only offered the blood of animals.
- **How else are these chapters fulfilled in the New Testament? How should we respond?**
- The **tabernacle** – John 1:14 is literally 'the Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us' – Jesus was God become human, dwelling shoulder to shoulder with us. The One who was enthroned above the cherubim, whom only the high priest could approach once a year, could be seen and touched and spoken to directly, by everyone.
- And now we, the church, are God's dwelling place on earth – he tabernacles within us by his Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16). This means that sin is the total antithesis of who we really are – imagine stealing or lying or murdering in the most holy place of the tabernacle! That's in essence what we're doing when we sin!
- See Revelation 21:3, 22. The tabernacle points us to the beautiful heavenly Jerusalem, with its golden streets and jewelled gates, where we will live directly in God's presence. No more barriers between us and God! This is the future that awaits us! Take heart!
- The 'mercy seat' of the **ark** is translated *hilasterion* in Greek (Hebrews 9:5), which is also the word for propitiation (Romans 3:25). Try getting your head round that! Basically, the mercy seat was where the high priest sprinkled blood on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:14-16). This blood propitiated the sins of the people, i.e. the goat or lamb which had been sacrificed took God's wrath in their place. Jesus is our mercy seat, our propitiation – his death in our place satisfies God's wrath at our sin. That's why in the new creation, we will worship him as the lamb who was slain (Rev 5:6-10).

### **Exodus 32:1-33:11: Idolatry**

**Main point:** God takes idolatry very seriously. He is to be worshipped the way he tells us to worship him!

**Main aim:** Search your heart for any false gods or ways you may be worshiping the true God falsely.

The story of the golden calf seems incomprehensible at first. What *were* they thinking? It comes right out of the blue, after 7 chapters of instructions for building the glorious tabernacle. But the more we look into it, the more it begins to make sense, and the more we see the same sinful tendencies in ourselves. This passage teaches us how much God hates our idolatry, but we need to remember to apply it through Jesus – God won't punish us with plagues or swords, like he did the Israelites, because Jesus has already taken the punishment for our idolatry. How much we have to thank him for!

- **Recap what has just been happening to the Israelites. What is your reaction after reading 32:1-6?**
- God rescued them from slavery in Egypt 3-4 months ago – they witnessed his terrible plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. Since then, they've followed God's pillars of fire and cloud through the desert, and he has provided water and food for them in spite of their grumbling. Now he's led them to Mount Sinai, where they've heard his voice giving them the 10 commandments from the midst of the fiery mountain. They've agreed to keep them, and do everything he says (19:8, 24:3,7).

- So their actions in chapter 32 seem utterly ridiculous! How could they forget so quickly? How could they so outrageously disobey?
- **Which of the 10 commandments are the people breaking? How?**
- **The first:** here they are putting other 'gods' before/beside Yahweh. Even if they think the calf is a representation of Yahweh (see below), the fact is that it isn't – it's just a golden calf – and they make an altar for it and offer it burnt offerings and peace offerings, as they had to Yahweh in 24:5.
- The fact that 'gods' *plural* is mentioned is puzzling. Have the Israelites become polytheistic, like the surrounding nations? Or is it just a grammatical oddity – the same word (Elohim) is used for gods and God, even though it's plural in form, so it could just be translated 'God'...
- **The second:** they have made an image of a created thing and are bowing down to it, serving it! They probably didn't actually think the calf itself was a god and had brought them out of Egypt – that would just be too insane – but they thought the calf would channel Yahweh's presence, much like a pagan version of the ark (see 32:5, where Aaron calls for a 'feast to the LORD'). It was a common pagan belief at the time that images of calves or bulls were 'pedestals' of the gods, the focus of their presence on earth. But how could a calf represent Yahweh, the indescribable, holy, omnipotent creator? It's a terrible affront to him.
- They may also be breaking the **third** and **seventh** commands – if they're claiming that this calf is a representation of Yahweh, then they're definitely using his name in vain, and the 'play' of v.6 has sexual connotations – they may have been following pagan customs of the time, where idol worship involved orgies.
- **How does the people's proclamation in 32:4 compare to God's proclamation in 20:1? Why is this so terrible?**
- They've taken what God said to them all on the mountain, the first words of his commandments, and said 'No! We see it differently. We didn't like the way you were dealing with us Yahweh, so we've taken matters into our own hands. We control you now.'
- **Why do the people do what they do? Why does Aaron?**
- Moses was on the mountain for 40 days (Ex 24:18). Maybe they didn't think he'd take so long, and think he's not coming back? They've forgotten God's promises that Moses would lead them to the promised land! Of course he's going to come back down the mountain!
- Moses is their mediator – their only way to hear from God. Are they just panicking, making a mad attempt to fill the spiritual void?
- The sense of 'the people gathered themselves together to Aaron' in v.1 can also be translated '*against* Aaron' – perhaps they put pressure on him, blaming him for their predicament, and he panicked?
- Ultimately, they're displaying a serious lack of faith in God and his promises. They think the golden calf can supply their needs, rather than their almighty Redeemer! This is because the calf is right there in front of them, and Yahweh is temporarily inaccessible. How quickly they forget, how quickly they turn away from the One who has saved them!
- We've seen how the tabernacle instructions echo creation in some ways – and here, right afterwards, is the fall!
- **How can we be like the Israelites here?**
- Even though he has done SO much for us (creating us, giving us food and families and homes etc., sending Jesus to die so we can have eternal life...), we too worship other 'gods', created things, before Yahweh, or alongside him. We trust *them* to give us what we think we need, instead of

trusting God – our loving, all-powerful creator! How ridiculous! We kid ourselves into thinking it's ok, or even right and good – that we're *really* serving him, but we're often deceiving ourselves. And, like the golden calf, our idols can't deliver on their promises, but will instead lead to destruction.

- Here are a few examples of idols we might be worshiping: approval, security, comfort, success, money, house, car, job, marriage, children, being 'good' ... These are good things, gifts from God, but they shouldn't be ultimate things.
- And here are some questions to help us work out what our idols might be: What's your greatest longing? Your greatest fear? What do you daydream about? What gets your emotions out of control?
- **How does God react (32:7-10)? How does Moses handle the crisis (32:11-14)?**
- He says he's going to destroy them and make Moses into a great nation instead. It's a complete disaster. He calls them 'your people' (v.7) – disassociating them from himself. He's no longer referring to them as *his* people, his firstborn son. (Don't we do that too when we're angry? Husband becomes 'your father', child becomes 'your daughter'?)
- Moses argues with him! But it's a very different kind of arguing from chapters 3 and 4...! There, Moses was selfishly trying to avoid something he thought was too difficult. Here, he's become a true mediator, representing the people before God, for their good and God's glory.
- He uses God's own words of v.7 back to him in v.11, reminding him how he's rescued the Israelites already, and it'll diminish his reputation if he now destroys them.
- He then reminds him of his promises to the patriarchs.
- **Does this mean that Moses changes God's mind?**
- It certainly looks that way! This is a tricky passage! Because if Moses really did change God's mind, then God is not sovereign, or all-knowing, or independent, or trustworthy...
- God is in complete control of everything, including himself, and has decided everything from before creation. He knew he wasn't going to destroy the Israelites here. But he is reacting to the situation in time, in a sequence of events, because that's the way he's made us to function, and so to interact with us he accommodates himself to our way of functioning. He's teaching Moses and teaching the people that there are consequences to sin, because he is holy, but that he is also gracious. If he's just said straight away 'It's ok, I forgive you', then the seriousness of their sin wouldn't have been apparent.
- Perhaps God is also using this as an opportunity to grow Moses as a leader, and emphasise his role as mediator.
- **What can we learn about prayer from Moses' intercession?**
- It's good to 'remind' God of his character and his promises.
- When we pray, we function as though God hasn't made up his mind – we're trying to persuade him – 'Please may I get that job. Please heal this person.' And yet we know that of course he has planned everything from the beginning. But he accommodates himself to our way of thinking. And he really does answer our prayers – they really do change things. It's a bit of a paradox: prayer is effective, but God is also sovereign.
- **How does Moses react when he sees what's happened (32:15-20)? Why?**
- He's furious! His anger 'burns hot', mirroring God's reaction in v.19. Maybe before, when he was interceding for them, he didn't quite realise the extent of their sin? God did!

- He smashes the stone tablets! The ones engraved by the finger of God with the words of his covenant! This a clear symbol of what the Israelites have really done – they’ve broken God’s covenant with them. It’s catastrophic.
- He utterly destroys the calf – burns it, grinds it, and makes the people drink it! Why he does the latter isn’t clear – maybe it was to symbolise the calf’s complete destruction, or maybe it was a prove to the people in a very obvious way that it wasn’t a god, or maybe it was just to show them that sin has bitter consequences, or maybe it was to ensure that the gold could never be used again – certainly not for building tabernacle!
- **How does Aaron try to make excuses (32:21-24)?**
- Haha! As if the calf just jumped out of the fire!
- **What are the consequences of the people’s rebellion (32:25-35)?**
- Those who openly continue in rebellion are killed by the Levites. Interestingly, this is where the Levites are singled out from the other tribes for continued religious service – God chooses them because of their faithfulness here.
- Moses tries to make atonement for them so they’re not all wiped out. He tries to be their substitute – that’s what he seems to be saying in v.32 – if God’s won’t just forgive them, will he forgive them if Moses takes the punishment? (To be blotted out of the book of life probably means being killed physically here.) But God replies that it’s the guilty who will pay for their own sin.
- There’s then a plague, which presumably deals with these remaining serious offenders.
- **What does this tell us about God?**
- He is indeed a jealous God! Failure to worship him in the way he has ordained, failure to put him first, is the essence of sin, and deserves his fierce wrath.
- But he is also merciful. All of the Israelites deserved to die, yet only the very worst offenders are taken.
- **What is the further consequence in 33:1-6? Why is this so ‘disastrous’?**
- God threatens to remove his presence from among them. He’ll still keep his promises, but he won’t dwell with them. This is reversing the whole point of Exodus so far! God making a people for himself to dwell among!
- **What is different about the tent of meeting as compared to the planned tabernacle (33:7-11)?**
- Apart from the fact that it’s nowhere near as beautiful, it’s far away from the camp, not in the middle of it!
- We’re left hanging – will God relent and go with his people once more? Will the tabernacle be built? Will they ever get to the promised land?
- **How does this episode point us to Jesus?**
- See 32:32! Here we see that already there is an understanding that the death of animals can’t atone for sin – only human death can pay for human sin. Except Moses isn’t a perfect or infinite human, so his death won’t work – he’s unable to bear the guilt of all the Israelites. It’s a massive shadow of what Jesus, both in terms of why he’s needed and what he does. Being perfect and infinite, Jesus was able to take all our guilt upon himself in a way Moses couldn’t – and so he was blotted out from the book of life instead of us.
- Even though we are idolaters, God is able to forgive us through Jesus and then *dwell within us!* Although we are just as stiff-necked as the Israelites, we have more than a tabernacle – we have the Spirit!

- Our idolatry is so terrible, that only the death of God's Son could save us from the punishment we deserve. Doesn't this encourage us to be more diligent in rooting out our idols daily?

### **Exodus 33:12-34:35: The glory of God**

**Main point:** When God forgives, it's a fresh start.

**Main aim:** Recognise the outrageousness of God's grace in forgiving us our sin through Jesus.

This passage is a wonderful picture of God's grace. The Israelites have messed up catastrophically, yet God listens to Moses' intercession on their behalf and forgives them. Moses is assured of this by a glimpse of God's glory, and then the remaking of the broken covenant symbolised by new tablets of stone. It's a fresh start. How many of us need to apply this to our own lives! Many of us with guilt and can't believe that God really has forgiven us – we expect him to bring our past sins back up again at any moment. Or, at the other end of the spectrum, we fail to grasp the magnitude of our sin, and then fail to appreciate the scandal of God's forgiveness. Hopefully, this passage will be helpful in addressing both issues.

- **What's the problem left unresolved from the last study (see 33:1-6)?**
- In response to the people's idolatry, God has said he won't dwell amongst them, lest he destroy them. This is disastrous – it's undoing the whole of Exodus chapters 1-31, where God was building everything towards dwelling with his people.
- **Read 33:12-23.**
- **What's going on in 33:12-17? What does Moses ask of God? What arguments does he use?**
- Moses is again interceding for the people, asking God to come with them! This conversation is probably happening at the tent of meeting, outside the camp.
- In v.12, Moses wants to know who is going to go with him into the promised land – in other words, will God go with them or not?
- Moses then argues his case by reminding God that he has chosen Moses to be favoured – he is the mediator after all! Doesn't this mean God should listen to his request? But maybe Moses isn't so sure of this anymore, in the wake of the golden calf catastrophe. This makes sense of Moses' request in v.13 – he wants to know God in a deeper way and so be assured of this favour. (God fulfils this request later on when Moses sees his glory.)
- Moses also reminds God again that the Israelites are his people (v.13)! He should therefore go with them!
- Vv.14-15 are confusing on first reading. There are two options:
  - In God's reply, the 'you' (v.14) is singular – so perhaps God is only promising to go with Moses. This isn't good enough for Moses, so he argues with God again! They're his people, and without him, they're nothing – no different to any other nation, and not able to reflect his glory. Or:
  - God is answering Moses request with a full 'yes' – after all, Moses' question in v.12 was 'Who will you send with *me*', so we might expect the answer to be a singular *you*. By going with Moses, God will indeed be going with his people as a whole. Moses' strange response in v.15 can then be explained as a retrospective argument – a sort of last word by Moses,

emphasising how important it is that God go with them. This makes sense if Moses really has had a crisis of confidence – it's almost like he doesn't hear what God says the first time!

- I'm really not sure which one I'll go with! But either way, by v.17, it's clear that God has answered Moses with a definitive 'yes, I will go with my people.'
- **How do you think Moses felt on hearing God's words in v.17?**
- Relieved! And incredibly grateful for God's grace! And reassured – God uses Moses' own words of v.13 back to him – he really has found favour in God's sight and is known by name. The golden calf episode hasn't ruined everything, even though it really should have.
- **But Moses then asks for further confirmation of this promise – he wants to see God's glory (33:18)! How does God respond (33:19-23)?**
- God grants Moses's request! Moses can't see the full glory of God – his 'face' – because, being a sinner, he would die in the presence of such holiness. But God will graciously enable him to see his 'back' as his 'goodness' passes by. (Of course God doesn't have an actual face or back or hand, because he isn't limited to a body, but Moses will still see something – a glimpse of the glorious light radiating from God's presence?)
- He will also proclaim his name again – the LORD, Yahweh, I AM, and reaffirm his gracious character. He has chosen to be compassionate and merciful to the Israelites irrespective of their terrible sin – simply because he has chosen them to be his people.
- **Does this episode remind you of anything else in Exodus? Why might a similar thing be happening here?**
- The burning bush! There, God appeared to Moses, albeit in a less spectacular way, and proclaimed his name! It's as if we're starting all over again, making a fresh beginning. This is made even clearer by what happens next!
  
- **Read 34:1-10.**
- **God has already made a covenant with the people (24:8). Why does he say he's making another one in 34:10?**
- It's the same covenant renewed after they broke it by worshiping the golden calf! There are lots of similarities with the first time Moses went up the mountain – the people and their animals have to stay at a safe distance, God comes down in a cloud on the mountain, and Moses was up there for 40 days (see.34:28).
- The tablets are an illustration of what's going on – God wrote on them, making the covenant, but Moses broke them because the people broke the covenant. Now God is re-writing them (whether it's by God's finger or God through Moses isn't important – both are mentioned, see 34:1 and 34:28), remaking the broken covenant.
- **How has God demonstrated the characteristics of 34:6-7 in chapters 32-34?**
- Has been remarkably gracious and compassionate to the Israelites, forgiving their terrible sin, wiping it away as though it never happened (the building of the tabernacle starts in chapter 35, continuing on from chapter 31 as if nothing had happened in between).
- He's been abundantly faithful to his promises.
- But those who were unrepentant, he did punish. He is a God of justice as well as mercy (hence the need for the cross!).
- **How should we respond to God in light of these characteristics?**

- Recognise the seriousness of our sin. The only way we could be forgiven was for God's Son to die for us! That's pretty serious!
- Don't take God's grace and forgiveness for granted, just because that's his character – that would be a gross misapplication. Instead, we are to be motivated by thankfulness towards greater faith and obedience. And remember that he is just – if we deny him, he will deny us.
- Remember that when God forgives us, he also 'forgets' our sin – he carries on as though it never happened. He doesn't harbour a grudge or keep a record of our failings – he gives us a fresh start every time.
- Do we forgive like this?
- It also motivates us towards evangelism – everyone needs to know this unavoidable God, and know his forgiveness.
- **Why did God forgive the Israelites? Why does he forgive us? Why are we in a better position?**
- He forgave the Israelites because he keeps his promises to his chosen people, because of his gracious character, and because *Moses* interceded time and again for them.
- He forgives us because he keeps his promises to his chosen people, because of his gracious character, and because *Jesus* has paid the price for our sins! He is interceding for us at God's right hand (Romans 8:34)!
- Jesus is far superior to Moses! His intercession is guaranteed to work, because it is based on a past event which dealt with our sin once and for all! And he doesn't just reflect God's glory, as Moses did – he is God himself, fully glorious.
- **Skim-read 34:11-26. Why do you think God reiterates commands he's already given in 34:11-17?**
- Look at what's just happened! He's graciously reminding them of the importance of *keeping* these commandments.
- He's also continuing to show the Israelites that the broken covenant has been restored – we're back where we left off – it's as if the golden calf episode never happened.
- **Read 34:27-35.**
- **How are things different this time Moses comes down the mountain, compared with chapter 32?**
- There's no singing this time, no idolatry, no anger from Moses – instead, the people are afraid, because Moses' face is shining!
- It seems that something of God's glory remains on Moses after he's been in God's presence. Just as when they heard God's voice at the foot of the mountain, the people are afraid of this revelation of God's glory, and so Moses has to wear a veil to shield them.
- Is it a bit like the veil of the tabernacle?
- God is reaffirming Moses as his intermediary.
- **Read 2 Corinthians 3:7-18. How are we in a much better position than the Israelites?**
- They had a covenant which ultimately led to condemnation and death – they couldn't keep the law, and failed to trust God so they could be forgiven. We have a covenant which leads to righteousness and life, through the Spirit!
- We have had the veil removed! We see Jesus! And we are being transformed to be more and more like him.

## Exodus 35-40: The construction of the Tabernacle

**Main point:** Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament priesthood.

**Main aim:** Praise God for Jesus, our high priest, our representative, our sacrifice.

Much of this section of Exodus is very similar to our study of 3 weeks ago, chapters 25-31. There, Moses received the instructions for building the tabernacle and its contents and for instituting the priesthood. Now, after the remarkable failure of the golden calf, the people finally carry out these instructions. As we focused on the tabernacle last time, we'll concentrate on the priests here, and how they point us to Jesus, our great, eternal high priest, and once-for-all perfect sacrifice.

- **Read 35:4-9, 20-29. What is the people's attitude as they give?**
- They do it freely, not out of compulsion.
- They've just gone through the trauma of the golden calf, and this is a wonderful picture of the renewal of the covenant and restoration of the people's devotion to the LORD.
- **Read 39:1-31.**
- **What were the different elements of the high priest's clothing? (See illustration.) What do they symbolise? What's missing?**
- **Ephod** (39:2-6), an apron-like garment, made of gold, blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen – like the tabernacle (see 26:1)! The high priest is an integral part of the whole tabernacle system, identified with it in an obvious way.
- Two **onyx stones** (39:6-7) set in gold with the names of the 12 tribes on them, placed in the shoulder pieces of the ephod. Aaron is representing the people. See **Revelation 21:9-14**, where the New Jerusalem is described as having the names of the 12 tribes on its gates, and the names of the 12 apostles on its foundations.
- **Breastpiece** (39:8-21), again made of gold, blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, like the tabernacle.
- The breastpiece is adorned with 12 different precious stones, each bearing the name of one of the tribes of Israel. This is even clearer symbolism than the onyx stones – Aaron carries the 12 tribes over his heart (see 28:29). The sacrifices he brings are on their behalf.
- 9 of these precious stones appear in **Ezekiel 28:13** in connection with the Garden of Eden, and all 12 (with some different names) reappear in **Revelation 21:19-20**, where they adorn the foundations of the new Jerusalem (which also bear the names of the 12 apostles). It's possible to over-analyse this, but it we can at least say that there is a remarkable unity to God's word, and that even the most beautiful things on earth only begin to capture the beauty of God's glory and holiness.
- A blue **robe** with bells and pomegranates round the bottom edge (39:22-26). The bells seem to be a safety measure, signalling the approach of the priest to the Holy of Holies (28:35). The pomegranates may be another reference to the Garden of Eden.
- **Coats and caps and sashes** for Aaron and his sons, and a turban for Aaron (39:27-29).
- A **crown** (39:30-31) made of gold with 'Holy to the Lord' inscribed on it – the priest's role as mediator couldn't be much clearer! Yet the fact that he needs a sign announcing that he's holy really highlights his inadequacy...
- **No shoes** are mentioned – it seems the priests, like Moses at the burning bush, went barefoot in God's holy presence.

- **Glance through Exodus 29, where God gives instructions about the priests' ordination. What is the overwhelming theme?**
- Sacrifices have to be made to make the priests holy! They're sinful human beings, and their own sin needs to be dealt with before they're able to fulfil their role in dealing with the people's sin.
- **Read Hebrews 7:23-28, 9:11-14. In what ways is Jesus' priesthood superior to that of Aaron's line?**
- The Levitical priests died and so couldn't do their job anymore. Jesus' priesthood is permanent (7:23-25)!
- The Levitical priests had to offer sacrifices for their own sins first. Jesus is perfect, sinless, so doesn't have to make any sacrifices for himself (7:26-27).
- The Levitical priests had to offer repeated sacrifices, because their sacrifices didn't have enduring power. Jesus' sacrifice is once for all (7:27).
- Jesus is both high priest and sacrifice (9:11-12)!
- Jesus entered the heavenly holy place – the real thing of which the tabernacle was only a shadow (9:11-12).
- Jesus' blood is completely effective in purifying our consciences because he is both a truly perfect man and the eternal God (9:12-14). He doesn't need to wear a sign saying 'Holy to the Lord' – he is the Lord!
  
- **Read 40:16-33. What's the repeated phrase? Why is this so important?**
- 'As the Lord had commanded Moses'. They had to do it according to God's instructions – because he's the holy God, coming to dwell amongst his people! He's got to set the terms, otherwise it won't work...
- And remember Hebrews 9:23-24 – it's a copy of the heavenly reality!
- **Read 40:34-38. These verses are in a way the climax of the whole book. Why?**
- It's all been about God redeeming a people for himself – they would be his people, and he would be their God, and they would know him (see 6:7). Now he's dwelling in the midst of them, and they can all see the cloud and the fire.
- It's a tremendous moment! Nothing remotely like this has happened since the fall – God is remaking the broken world.
- **How have things changed for the Israelites compared to their situation at the start of Exodus?**
- They're free, no longer under Egyptian rule.
- They're on a journey to the promised land.
- They know God so much better. They've witnessed his power to judge in the plagues, his power to save through the sea, his power to provide in the desert, and his power to rule in the giving of the law, and his power to forgive after the golden calf.
- God is dwelling in their midst, and they can all see it!
- They have priests to be the mediators between them and God.
- **How has studying Exodus challenged and encouraged you?**
- **How is the situation of Jews today different to what we read here?**
- They have no tabernacle/temple. The last temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70AD, and it's never been rebuilt. The original site of the temple is now occupied by the Al-Aqsa mosque and a Muslim shrine called the 'Dome of Rock'. This complex political/religious situation still prevents another temple ever being rebuilt. But maybe this situation shouldn't surprise us – now that Jesus

has come, there's no need for the temple – it's obsolete – God knows what he's doing! The curtain in front of the Holy of Holies tore in two when Jesus died, opening the way for free access to God!

- The Jews also have no priests or Levites – without the temple, these offices disappeared. The sacrificial system could no longer function. This means that it's impossible for today's Jews to follow the Old Testament laws about sacrifices...
- The ark of the covenant disappeared when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 587 AD. Maybe they took it, maybe it was hidden, we don't know. But it's not important now! Because, as we've seen, Jesus was God dwelling amongst us, and we have God dwelling within us by his Spirit!
- So basically, the Jews are in a real pickle – and it should point them to Jesus! He's the one who makes sense of everything that's happened! God hasn't abandoned or forgotten his people – it's they who have abandoned him by refusing to accept his promised Messiah. Remember 2 Cor 3:14 from last week!