

THE DAILY QUIET TIME REFLECTIONS SERIES

DELIVERANCE

Reflections on the Book of Exodus

EXPANDED EDITION

Eugene Han

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The Introduction draws on the introductory notes of Dr. Thomas L. Constable, used with gratitude for his lay-accessible scholarship on the text of Scripture.

Portions of this book are adapted from reflections shared over many years by members of the dailyqt.org Quiet Time community. The author is grateful to each of them.

This book reflects the personal study, reflection, and interpretation of its author and is offered for devotional and educational purposes. It is not a substitute for pastoral counsel or formal theological instruction. Where matters of biblical interpretation remain disputed among careful readers of Scripture, the author has noted this and presented his own considered view rather than claiming final or exclusive authority on the question.

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To the faithful members of my Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in Dallas and the dailyqt.org Quiet Time community—

your questions sharpened these pages, your patience carried us through Exodus year after year, and your hunger for God's Word is the reason any of this was written down at all.

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Preface to the Expanded Edition

A Wider Conversation

The first edition of this book grew out of years of daily reflections posted at dailyqt.org as our community read through the Bible together. Since then, those reflections have kept growing. Many more readers added their own observations and questions, and the reflections themselves were expanded to trace cross-references more fully, to give historical background where it helps, and to note more carefully where faithful interpreters have reached different conclusions.

This expanded edition brings all of that material together. Every chapter has been rewritten to draw on the full range of voices that have gathered around these readings over the years, woven into a single conversation with the text. You will find more on the questions careful readers keep asking—about the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, the plagues and the gods of Egypt, the size of the exodus and the length of Israel’s stay in Egypt, the relationship between the Law of Moses and the Christian, the regulation of slavery in Israel’s law, and how far to press the symbolism of the tabernacle—and more attention to people Exodus itself honors, such as the midwives Shiphrah and Puah, Jethro, and the craftsmen Bezalel and Oholiab. Where Christians who share a high view of Scripture disagree, we have tried to state our own considered view plainly while presenting other views fairly, trusting readers to weigh the evidence for

themselves. Each chapter now closes with five or six discussion questions rather than three or four.

What has not changed is the purpose. This book is still meant to be read slowly, one day at a time, alongside an open Bible. It is still offered not as the final word on Exodus but as one continuing conversation with it. And it is still offered in gratitude to the community of readers whose questions, insights, and faithfulness made it possible.

How to Use This Book

Reading, Reflecting, Together

This book was not written to be read in a single sitting. It was written to be read one day at a time, the way it was first written—a chapter at a time, over the course of several weeks, alongside an open Bible rather than in place of one. The believers in Berea were commended not simply for their eagerness to hear the Word but for their habit of examining the Scriptures every day to see whether what they had been taught was true (Acts 17:11). That daily habit, sustained over years rather than compressed into a season, is the entire aim of this book and of the Quiet Time practice that produced it.

To help establish that rhythm, we have included, as an appendix at the back of this book, the same daily Bible reading plan we have used at dailyqt.org for well over a decade. It walks through the whole of Scripture in a year, a few chapters at a time, and it does not need to be started in January; you are free to begin on whatever date suits you and simply follow the sequence from there. Each of the fourteen chapters in this book lines up with exactly one day on that plan, from Exodus 1–3 on the first day to Exodus 39–40 on the fourteenth, so that this book and your own Bible can move through Exodus together, side by side, one day at a time.

Whether you are reading on your own or working through this book with a group like one of our own Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in Dallas, we would suggest the following simple rhythm for each day, or for each session if you are meeting weekly as a group:

1. Begin and end in prayer. Ask God, before you open either Bible or book, to teach you something true about Himself that day, and thank Him, when you close both, for whatever He

has shown you—even if it is smaller or slower than you expected.

2. Read the assigned Scripture. Using the reading plan in the appendix, read the day's passage directly from your own Bible before turning to our reflections on it. There is no substitute for reading the text itself first, in whatever translation you trust, and letting it raise its own questions before we offer our own.

3. Read the corresponding chapter in this book. Each chapter walks through that day's passage in the order Scripture presents it, drawing out its major movements and, where it seemed useful, the historical background behind them. Treat it as a conversation about the text you just read, not a replacement for it.

4. Answer the discussion questions. Every chapter closes with five or six questions sized to fill a forty-five- to sixty-minute group discussion, though they work just as well as slower journaling prompts for a reader working through the book alone. Some ask you to notice something in the text; most ask you to notice something in yourself.

If you are part of a group, we would encourage you to read both the day's Scripture and the corresponding chapter individually during the week, and then use your time together for the fourth step: praying together and working through the discussion questions as a group. This was, after all, how the material in this book first took shape—not in a study or a library, but in a room full of ordinary readers asking each other what a passage meant and why it mattered, week after week, for years. We hope it will do the same for you.

Introduction

Deliverance

We left Genesis with a family settled, for now, in Egypt—Joseph’s bones embalmed and waiting, a promise of land not yet possessed, and a quiet warning that four hundred silent years lay ahead before God would speak again. Exodus is where that silence breaks. The book opens with a single, ominous sentence: a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. Even the Hebrew title of the book signals this continuity before the story does—Exodus opens, like several other historical books of the Old Testament (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther among them), with the small conjunction “and,” so that its very first words read “and these are the names of.” Exodus does not stand alone. It assumes Genesis, continues Genesis, and cannot fully be understood apart from it. Within a few verses the family that came down seventy strong—the same seventy names Genesis 46 had carefully recorded—has grown into a nation numbering perhaps two million, a staggering, literal fulfillment of God’s old promise to Abraham that his offspring would be as many as the stars. And the gracious hospitality that had once welcomed that family has curdled into slavery, oppression, and finally an order to drown every Hebrew baby boy in the Nile. Genesis ends in a coffin. Exodus begins in a furnace.

The name itself, like Genesis, tells us what to expect. Exodus means “the way out,” a title the Greek translators gave the book centuries later for the obvious reason that its central event is Israel’s departure from Egypt. And though the book technically spans more than four centuries—from the family’s arrival in Egypt to the tabernacle’s completion in the wilderness—the overwhelming bulk of its forty chapters lingers on just two of

those years: the year before Israel left Egypt, and the year after. This is worth noticing on its own. Exodus is not interested in giving us a comprehensive history of Israel's centuries in Egypt. It is interested in one thing above all: the way God delivered His people out of it, and what He did with them once they were out.

It was out of this same furnace that Moses himself emerged—rescued as an infant from one of Pharaoh's own attempts at population control, raised to a position of real authority in Egypt's court, and then forced to flee as a fugitive after killing an Egyptian taskmaster he found beating a Hebrew slave. He fled a long way, to Midian, and there, tending someone else's flock in obscurity, he encountered God in a bush that burned but was not consumed. It was there that a reluctant Moses received his commission to go back and demand of Pharaoh what no one else would have dared demand: let my people go.

Three things stand out across these chapters, and it may help to know what to watch for. The first is the sheer relentlessness of God's sovereignty, especially in the long, uncomfortable drama of Pharaoh's hardened heart. Exodus does not let us soften this into a story of a stubborn man slowly digging his own grave. God announces that He will harden Pharaoh before Pharaoh has done anything to deserve it, and Paul will later reach back into this very story to explain the doctrine of election to the Romans. We will spend real time in these pages wrestling honestly with what that means—not explaining it away, but letting it say what it says, and asking what kind of God it reveals. It may help, going in, to be clear about what sovereignty actually means and does not mean. To say God is sovereign is not to say He operates every detail of the universe the way a puppeteer works strings, allowing creatures no real freedom of their own. It is closer to the way a wise father governs a household—granting real freedom to his children, while remaining, at every

point, unmistakably in charge. Scripture never fully explains how divine sovereignty and human responsibility fit together; it simply insists, side by side and without apology, that both are true. As one great preacher of the last century is remembered to have said of two doctrines that seem, on paper, impossible to reconcile: “I never try to reconcile friends.”

The second is the theme of remembering. Genesis already taught us that God remembers His promises; Exodus opens with that same word doing exactly that work—God hears the groaning of Israel and remembers His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and then immediately turns the command back on the people themselves. Over and over, in the Passover, in the consecration of the firstborn, in the instruction to teach every coming generation what God has done, Israel is commanded to remember. Memory, in Exodus, is not nostalgia. It is the engine of obedience, the only reliable defense against the forgetfulness that will, within a single generation, undo everything God accomplished here—a forgetfulness on full display when Moses delays only forty days on the mountain and Israel, glimpsing his absence, melts down its earrings to worship a golden calf, shattering the very first command of the covenant they had just sworn to keep.

The third is the strange, exacting detail of worship—and this theme, more than any other, is where the book’s two great expressions of faith come into focus. If Genesis teaches that faith expresses itself in obedience, Exodus adds a second, inseparable dimension: faith also expresses itself in worship. Obedience is the man-ward side of faith, arranging every part of life in right relation to God; worship is the God-ward side, putting Him at the true center of that life rather than at its edges. Exodus makes this principle almost architectural. The ark of the covenant, representing God’s own presence, sat at the very center of the tabernacle; the tabernacle itself sat at the very center of Israel’s

camp, with every tribe arranged around it. The physical layout of the camp was itself a kind of sermon: everything in life was meant to orient toward the God who dwelt at its center. It is tempting to skim the second half of Exodus, with its exhaustive measurements for a tent, its exact recipe for incense, its specific gold and blue and scarlet thread for a priestly garment—and many readers do exactly that. But we will try to take seriously what this much attention to detail is meant to teach: that the God who delivered Israel from slavery is the same God who cannot be approached carelessly, and that the tabernacle these former slaves built with trembling precision was, in the language of Hebrews, a shadow of something far greater still to come. Much more can be said about the priesthood God established to serve at that tabernacle, but we will save the fuller discussion for Leviticus, the book that addresses the priesthood most directly.

It is worth appreciating just how central this book has always been to the rest of Scripture. No Old Testament book, apart from Psalms and Isaiah, is quoted or echoed more often in the New Testament than Exodus, and one respected commentator has gone so far as to compare the exodus event's theological weight in the Old Testament to the resurrection of Christ in the New—both serve, in their own Testaments, as the great, load-bearing pillar on which everything else is built. That claim can sound overstated until you notice how often the exodus story recurs, explicitly or by allusion, across the rest of the Bible: in the Passover Jesus Himself reinterprets at the Last Supper, in Paul's language of redemption, in the entire argument of Hebrews.

None of this is meant to be reduced to a tidy system we can fully master, and Scripture itself seems to caution us against exactly that temptation. Attempting to fit the whole of God's self-revelation into a framework that feels comfortably reasonable to us has a way of shrinking God down to whatever size our

reason can hold—an exercise about as promising as trying to pour the Pacific Ocean into a one-gallon jug. Exodus, more than any book so far, asks us instead to let revelation sit in judgment over our sense of what is reasonable, trusting that the God who parted a sea and thundered from a mountain is not obligated to fit inside the categories we would have chosen for Him.

This book follows the same pattern as our earlier study of Genesis: fourteen chapters, one for each daily reading through the text, drawing on more than a decade of daily Quiet Time reflections shared by many readers at dailyqt.org and on Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in Dallas, where much of this material was first taught and discussed aloud. We offer it again not as a final word but as a continuing conversation—the same conversation Genesis began—about a God who keeps His promises across centuries of silence, who delivers His people not because they deserve it but because He has bound Himself to them, and who is, in every page of this book, working out His own glory in their midst.

Chapter One

Exodus 1–3

Exodus opens by deliberately echoing Genesis. Jacob's family had come down to Egypt seventy strong, and now "the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them" (Exodus 1:7). The language recalls God's blessing at creation—"Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28)—and His promise to make Abraham's descendants "as numerous as the stars in the sky" (Genesis 22:17). What God had promised, God was doing.

Then comes a single sentence that changes everything: "Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt" (Exodus 1:8). How suddenly fortunes can change. As long as Egypt's rulers remembered Joseph and the good he had done, Israel was safe. But the first king who did not know or did not care turned against them, and within a generation Israel's fortunes reversed. For many decades afterward they would suffer under Egyptian oppression. And yet, through all of it, Israel kept growing. Whatever the conditions—free or enslaved, favored or forgotten—God's purposes and promises were not thwarted in the least.

That is worth remembering whenever our own circumstances seem to turn against us without warning. God's promises do not depend on the goodwill of kings, the stability of nations, or the unpredictable turns of fortune. They will not be thwarted by the passage of time or by political upheaval. God stands above all of these things, and so do His promises.

Pharaoh's fear is instructive. "Look," he tells his people, "the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more

numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country” (Exodus 1:9–10). It is easy to picture the Israelites as a small, passive group of slaves, but the text suggests otherwise. They had become a large population, a people within a people, numerous enough that a king could imagine them tipping the balance of a war. We should not overstate this; Pharaoh’s words express his fear and his political argument, not a report that Israel already had an army, and the exodus narrative repeatedly locates deliverance in God’s action rather than in an Israelite uprising. But his reasoning shows how fear can turn neighbors into a problem to be controlled before they have done anything at all. What fulfilled God’s promise of life to one community became, in Pharaoh’s eyes, a threat. And every measure he took backfired: “But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread” (Exodus 1:12). Pharaoh was setting himself against God’s own purposes from the very first chapter.

It is in the middle of this oppression that we meet two women whose courage deserves more attention than it usually receives. Pharaoh commands the Hebrew midwives, Shiprah and Puah, to kill every Hebrew boy at birth. “The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live” (Exodus 1:17). Notice a striking detail: the most powerful man in the world is never named in Exodus, but these two midwives are. God’s purposes often advance through the quiet courage of ordinary people who fear Him more than they fear the powers of the day. Their act of civil disobedience carried real risk. They were defying a direct order from the ruler of Egypt, with their own lives plausibly on the line. And Scripture records that God blessed them for it: “So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own” (Exodus 1:20–21). This

is one of the Bible's clearest examples of civil disobedience not merely tolerated but rewarded, when human law demanded something contrary to God's value for human life. The apostles would later put the principle in a single sentence: "We must obey God rather than human beings!" (Acts 5:29).

When Pharaoh summons them to explain themselves, the midwives answer, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive" (Exodus 1:19). That answer may not have been strictly true, and it raises a genuine ethical question that Christians have debated for centuries. Were the midwives sinning by deceiving Pharaoh? There is no indication in the text that they did anything wrong; on the contrary, God dealt well with them. Christians have offered several answers. Some hold that when moral duties genuinely conflict, we are obligated to the higher duty and are not guilty for failing the lower one. Telling the truth is a good, but it is not the only good, and saving life was, in this case, the greater good. Others hold that the midwives were blessed for fearing God and preserving life, while their deception itself was a lapse God graciously overlooked. Still others argue that deceiving someone engaged in murder does not violate the ninth commandment at all, since that commandment forbids bearing false witness against a neighbor—an act of injustice—rather than withholding the truth from those who would use it to kill.

Our own view is the first. We believe the midwives chose the greater good. They could have told Pharaoh the truth, been executed, and been replaced by midwives who would do his bidding; instead, their answer saved lives. The same pattern appears elsewhere in Scripture. Rahab hid Joshua's spies and misled the king of Jericho, and she was not only spared but commended (James 2:25) and included in the lineage of Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Many Christians also remember Corrie ten

Boom's family, who concealed the truth from Nazi officers searching their home for the Jews they were hiding. Some would insist that the midwives should have told the truth and trusted God to protect them. Perhaps God would have intervened, and perhaps not; but to demand such an intervention could itself be presumption. Because some theologians rightly react against a philosophy in which every moral question is merely situational, they sometimes overcorrect by asserting more than Scripture says. We do not find a passage asserting that every command of the Law of Moses, even among the Ten Commandments, is absolute and equally binding in every circumstance on all people. If it were, God would have violated the command against killing when He ordered judgment on the Amalekites, Christians would still be observing the Sabbath, and there would be no distinction in the Law between intentional and unintentional sins. Paul warns us, "Do not go beyond what is written" (1 Corinthians 4:6). God's commands are not subject to anyone's whims, but saying that God's laws are not arbitrary is different from saying that it is always wrong, in every circumstance, to speak falsely to a murderer. There is such a thing as a greater good, and even a greater and lesser sin (John 19:11).

Whatever one concludes about the ethics of their words, Scripture's emphasis is clear: "the midwives feared God." Their fear of God outweighed their fear of Pharaoh. Hebrews commends Moses' parents in the same spirit: "By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict" (Hebrews 11:23).

That phrase—"the midwives feared God"—can strike those in the medical profession with special force. One Christian physician has described being drawn, in medical school, toward obstetrics out of a desire to serve women through pregnancy and childbirth, perhaps even as a medical missionary. During an

internship abroad, she was shocked to discover how often pregnancies were ended not in rare tragedies but routinely, as a form of birth control or for the sake of choosing a son over a daughter. She pursued the specialty anyway, resolving privately to refuse whatever she found morally objectionable. Then, despite strong qualifications, every residency application was turned down. At the time it felt like inexplicable failure: How could God let this happen, when she was doing it for Him—or was she? In hindsight, it looked more like God closing a door she might not have been strong enough to keep closed herself, sparing her compromises she could not yet foresee. She went on to a different field, caring for patients facing the end of life, where she could offer both medical guidance and spiritual support without ever compromising her convictions. Years later, during each of her pregnancies, she declined routine prenatal screening, explaining to her doctor that no result would change her resolve to receive whatever child God gave, with or without a disability.

Stories like that remind us that God sometimes closes doors for reasons we do not understand, and sometimes never fully understand, and that we still need to trust Him when He does. They also remind us that doing right before the Lord must come before every other consideration, even when the cost is not measured in money but in sacrifices only God fully sees. Following the midwives' example, doing right is rewarded—though not always with earthly rewards, and sometimes with suffering instead. Our real dilemma is that we tend to fear the present moment more than the eternal judgment still to come. Lord, help us to be bold and courageous, to do what is right in Your eyes.

When the order to kill newborns fails, Pharaoh commands that every Hebrew boy be thrown into the Nile. Into that decree Moses is born. His mother, seeing that he was “a fine child,”

hides him for three months, then places him in a papyrus basket among the reeds of the very river that was meant to be his grave (Exodus 2:2–3). Pharaoh’s own daughter finds him, takes pity on him, and—through the quick thinking of his sister—hires his own mother to nurse him. “She named him Moses, saying, ‘I drew him out of the water’” (Exodus 2:10). The irony is thick. The deliverer of Israel is raised in Pharaoh’s own household, at Pharaoh’s expense, “educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22). Pharaoh’s own house becomes the training ground for the man who will bring Egypt to its knees.

Yet Moses’ first attempt at deliverance fails. Grown up, he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, kills the Egyptian, and hides the body in the sand. The next day, when he tries to break up a fight between two Hebrews, one of them retorts, “Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?” (Exodus 2:14). Stephen later explains, “Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not” (Acts 7:25). He had the right burden but the wrong timing and the wrong method. Hebrews honors what was genuine in his choice: “By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin for a short time” (Hebrews 11:24–25). But the man who tried to deliver Israel by his own strength had to flee to Midian and spend forty years tending another man’s sheep. God often prepares His servants in the wilderness before He sends them.

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, “The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them” (Exodus 2:23–25). As we saw with Noah, God’s

“remembering” does not mean that He had forgotten. It means He acted on His covenant commitment. In nearly every place in the Old Testament where we read of God’s love, lovingkindness, or faithfulness, the Hebrew word is often the same: *hesed*. The word fuses affection with obligation; it is love that has bound itself by promise, which is why some translations render it “steadfast love” or “loyal love.” That keeps us from imagining God’s love as mere sentiment directed toward a people who were somehow lovely. Israel was often stubborn and rebellious. What made the difference was God’s choice to bind Himself by covenant, a covenant whose ultimate security rested on His faithfulness rather than theirs. When Israel thought of God’s love, they thought of His faithfulness to His promises. That is exactly what makes His love dependable for a people whose track record was what the rest of Exodus will describe—and for people like us.

Then God appears to Moses in a bush that burns without being consumed. “Do not come any closer.... Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). God tells Moses that He has seen His people’s misery and heard their cry—“I am concerned about their suffering” (Exodus 3:7)—and that He has come down to rescue them. And He is sending Moses. Moses, once so eager to act on his own, now hesitates: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” God’s answer does not dwell on who Moses is: “I will be with you” (Exodus 3:11–12).

Moses then asks the question every messenger would need answered: What is Your name? “God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I am has sent me to you”’” (Exodus 3:14). It is worth noticing what God did not do when Jacob asked the same question at Peniel. Then, God answered only, “Why do you ask my name?” (Genesis 32:29). Here, He not only answers but explains. The difference may lie

in what each moment required. Jacob's request came in a private struggle that called for humbling more than information. Moses' request came attached to an urgent mission requiring real authority; leading an enslaved nation out of Egypt demanded a name Moses could invoke before both Israel and Pharaoh. God's self-revelation seems calibrated to what the moment genuinely called for.

Much has been written about the phrase "I am who I am," the source of the divine name *Yahweh*, usually rendered "the LORD" in our English Bibles. Because the Hebrew verb carries no fixed tense, it could also be understood as "I will be who I will be," and it can rightly suggest God's eternal, self-existent being. Jesus Himself would one day say, "before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58). But such philosophical discussions can overshadow the name's meaning for the enslaved Hebrews who first heard it. God Himself immediately explains His name in covenant terms: "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation" (Exodus 3:15).

By this point Israel had suffered long enough in Egypt to make anyone question whether the promises made to their forefathers still meant anything. We do not even know how widely the prophecy God had given Abraham about this very bondage (Genesis 15:13–14) had been remembered. The name God gave was His answer to exactly that doubt. The God who spoke to Abraham, confirmed His word to Isaac, and renewed it to Jacob was the same God now standing before Moses. He would not only deliver them from Egypt but fulfill every promise to make them a great nation and give them the land of Canaan. His name told them that just as He had been faithful in the past, He would be faithful now and into the future. He had not forgotten them.

We stand in much the same position. We have waited not decades but millennia for the full realization of all God's promises in Christ. Nations and cultures have risen and fallen in the meantime. But our God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, remains exactly the same. As He was faithful in the past, He remains faithful in this present age, and He will be faithful still on the day Christ returns and finishes what He began.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Israel's fortunes changed overnight when a new king came to power, yet God's purposes were not thwarted. What changing circumstance in your life has tempted you to doubt God's promises, and what would it look like to trust Him regardless?
2. Shiprah and Puah feared God more than Pharaoh, and Scripture remembers their names while leaving Pharaoh's unmentioned. Where are you currently tempted to fear people more than God?
3. Christians differ on how to understand the midwives' answer to Pharaoh. Have you faced a moment when two genuine goods seemed to be in tension? How did you decide what mattered most?
4. Can you identify a closed door in your life that, looking back, you now see differently than you did at the time?
5. Moses' first attempt to deliver Israel failed because he acted in his own strength and timing. Where are you tempted to run ahead of God, and what might He be teaching you in a "wilderness" season?

6. God explained His name as a pledge of faithfulness across generations. Where in your life do you most need to remember that the God who was faithful in the past remains faithful today?

Chapter Two

Exodus 4–6

“Please send someone else.” Isn’t that what many of us are silently saying to God? Moses had a miraculous encounter with the living God. God spoke to him audibly from a burning bush, revealed His name, and promised to be with him. Yet Moses answered with one objection after another. The objections form a series. First, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” (Exodus 3:11). Then, “What is his name?” (Exodus 3:13). Then, “What if they do not believe me or listen to me?” (Exodus 4:1). Then, “Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent.... I am slow of speech and tongue” (Exodus 4:10). And finally, the last pretense of a reason drops away: “Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else” (Exodus 4:13).

God answered each objection. To “Who am I?” He answered with His presence: “I will be with you.” To the question of His name, He revealed it. To the fear of unbelief, He gave signs: a staff that became a snake and a hand that became leprous and was restored. To the complaint about speech, He answered with a question that claims authority over human weakness itself: “Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say” (Exodus 4:11–12). God did not deny Moses’ weakness; He claimed authority over it. Only the last objection, which was not a question but a refusal, provoked God’s anger: “Then the LORD’s anger burned against Moses” (Exodus 4:14). And even then God did not dismiss him. He provided Aaron as a spokesman. Moses went, still not fully convinced, accommodated rather than argued into agreement. Scripture is not tidy about this. The man who becomes the model of

prophetic authority begins by exhausting every excuse available to him, and he is sent regardless.

Many of us are just like Moses. When God makes it clear that He intends to use us, we respond with disbelief that He could possibly mean us, and then we offer our excuses one after another. Some of us claim that if only God would speak to us as clearly as He spoke to Moses, we would obey without hesitation. Moses' story suggests otherwise. The problem is rarely a lack of clarity; it is our reluctance.

If anyone suffered from low confidence, it was Moses. Three times Scripture records his protest about his speech (Exodus 4:10; 6:12, 30), twice using the unusual expression that he had "faltering lips"—literally, "uncircumcised lips," suggesting lips that are closed or unfit, the same image the prophets later apply to uncircumcised ears and hearts (Jeremiah 6:10; 9:26). At first, Aaron spoke for him and performed the signs before Pharaoh. But over time something shifted. By the later confrontations, Moses himself takes the lead. Stephen would later describe him as "powerful in speech and action" (Acts 7:22), and Deuteronomy consists largely of his eloquent speeches. Either Moses underrated himself, or God's promise to be with his mouth was fulfilled—likely both.

What is striking is God's patience. He could have used someone else, even Aaron alone, but He kept working with and through Moses until the task was complete. We disqualify ourselves from the Lord's work in many ways, and God accomplishes His purposes in and through us anyway. So we need not worry about whether God will achieve His good, holy, and perfect will through us. He will. We should be more concerned with our own part: whether we are pliable, trusting, and obedient, or stubborn, doubting, and rebellious. Father, give us hearts of flesh and not of stone (Ezekiel 36:26). Make us pliable rather than brittle in Your hands. Forgive our foolish

disobedience and stubborn rebellion, and let us follow Your leading with all our hearts, though it cost us everything—which, compared with You, is really nothing at all.

Paul had a similar testimony about his speech. His critics in Corinth said, “His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing” (2 Corinthians 10:10). And yet, after Jesus Himself, these two unimpressive speakers may have been among the most influential people in history. Paul explains the principle: “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.... so that no one may boast before him” (1 Corinthians 1:27, 29). God does not choose us merely in spite of our weakness but, in a sense, through it, so that His power, wisdom, and grace are magnified. It is not about us; it is all about making much of Him. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). So let us not complain about our weaknesses and shortcomings. Let us declare our daily dependence on the Lord and build our confidence on the foundation of His providence and grace.

Before Moses even returns to Egypt, God tells him plainly what to expect: “When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go” (Exodus 4:21). This is one of the hardest themes in Exodus, and it runs through the whole account of the plagues. It has become common to argue that Pharaoh hardened his own heart first and that God’s hardening only followed and confirmed a choice Pharaoh had already made. The text does say that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exodus 8:15, 32), and many careful Christians read the passage that way, emphasizing that God gave Pharaoh over to the stubbornness he himself chose. But we do not think that reading resolves the difficulty on its

own. God announces His intention to harden Pharaoh before Pharaoh has done anything to provoke it. Paul draws his own conclusion from this very narrative: “For Scripture says to Pharaoh: ‘I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden” (Romans 9:17–18). In our understanding, Pharaoh, like Judas Iscariot centuries later, was raised up for a particular moment in history, and God directed even his sinful stubbornness to display His glory in delivering His people. Pharaoh remained fully responsible for his cruelty; God remained sovereign over its outcome.

This should not be softened or explained away, and it should provoke exactly the question Paul anticipates: Is this unjust? Paul’s answer is not a philosophical defense but a rebuke: “But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God?” (Romans 9:20). As we noted in *Beginnings*, sincere Christians in other traditions read Romans 9 differently, and those differences deserve respect. But on any reading, we are not entitled to measure God’s freedom by the freedom we imagine for ourselves. The fitting response is not protest but worship: gratitude for mercy shown, and sober humility in recognizing that none of us, left to ourselves, would have deserved anything better.

There is also comfort in this truth. When we face an angry client, a hostile relative, or simply a stubborn, closed heart, we can remember that every one of them remains within God’s reach and under His sovereignty. In obedience to His Word, the Spirit will give us the words and actions we need, and the results remain in His hands—not necessarily glorious results, or the ones we wanted, but we remain in our Father’s care. God is a better Parent, a better King, and a better Teacher than any

alternative. If He has spoken, it is as good as done, and there is a peace and joy in that knowledge that makes enduring hardship possible.

On the way back to Egypt comes one of the most puzzling episodes in the Bible. “At a lodging place on the way, the LORD met Moses and was about to kill him” (Exodus 4:24). Moses’ wife Zipporah quickly circumcises their son, and the Lord lets him alone. The passage is brief and mysterious, and interpreters have offered various explanations. The most common is that Moses, about to lead God’s covenant people, had neglected the covenant sign in his own household. The leader who would call Israel to obedience had to obey first. Whatever the details, the scene warns us that God takes His covenant seriously, and that those called to lead His people are not exempt from His commands.

Moses and Aaron gather Israel’s elders, perform the signs, and the people believe and worship (Exodus 4:29–31). Then they go to Pharaoh with God’s demand: “Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness” (Exodus 5:1). Pharaoh’s reply is contemptuous: “Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go” (Exodus 5:2). His reasoning seems sound enough from his own point of view. He does not know the Lord or His power, so he feels no compulsion to obey Him. But Pharaoh’s question—“Who is the LORD?”—turns out to be the question the entire Exodus narrative answers. God repeatedly states the purpose of the plagues: “By this you will know that I am the LORD” (Exodus 7:17; compare 8:22; 9:14, 29). The book’s answer to Pharaoh’s contempt is not an argument but a revelation: God makes Himself known. And once Pharaoh experiences the Lord’s power firsthand, he will have no excuse.

As witnesses who have experienced God’s transforming grace, we are commanded to tell others about Jesus. But we

should not be surprised when people do not believe what we say. Why should they? They do not yet know the Lord. In this sense, we are like Moses and Aaron: called to proclaim, not necessarily to persuade. In fact, when we lean too heavily on worldly means of persuasion, we can undermine the supernatural nature of our message. Moses' first sign before Pharaoh, a staff becoming a snake, was imitated by Pharaoh's magicians (Exodus 7:10–13). Why would Pharaoh obey a God whose "miracles" his own magicians could replicate? In the same way, if someone comes to faith merely because church people were nice, or because they liked the music, or because their children enjoyed the programs, what happens when they discover that they can get the same benefits elsewhere? Many groups are kind; many organizations offer excellent programs for children. Paul made this distinction when he wrote, "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 2:4–5). Genuine transformation is supernatural.

This does not mean that persuasion and good ministry have no place. Paul himself "reasoned" with his hearers, "explaining and proving" from the Scriptures (Acts 17:2–3), and he could say, "we try to persuade others" (2 Corinthians 5:11). Kindness and excellent ministry to children are good in themselves. Most Christians would say that clear, thoughtful communication is worth pursuing, while the power that changes hearts belongs to God alone. The danger lies in confusing the two—in building people's faith on the flimsy ground of our presentation rather than on the power of God. Even if our promotional efforts brought thousands to profess faith, those professions might count for little if they rested on anything less than God's power.

Pharaoh responds to Moses' request by making the Israelites' labor harsher. They must gather their own straw while producing the same number of bricks, and the Israelite foremen are beaten when they fall short (Exodus 5:6–14). The foremen confront Moses and Aaron, and Moses turns to God with raw honesty: "Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and you have not rescued your people at all" (Exodus 5:22–23). Moses and Aaron may have expected Pharaoh to let the people go right away. Instead, things got worse. Frustration clouded Moses' view of God's plan, even though God had told him in advance that Pharaoh would resist. Many of us know the feeling. God, who is more than able, has given us many promises, and yet we still falter and grow grouchy toward our loving Father when things do not unfold as we expected.

What is remarkable is how God responds. He does not rebuke Moses for his complaint. He answers with fresh reassurance: "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh" (Exodus 6:1). And then comes one of the fullest statements of God's covenant faithfulness in the Old Testament, a series of "I will" promises: "I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.... And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession" (Exodus 6:6–8). That pattern—honest complaint met with renewed promise rather than correction—appears again and again in Scripture. Peace and joy amid hardship do not require us to suppress our frustration first; they come from bringing it directly to God and receiving His answer.

When Moses relays these promises, the people “did not listen to him because of their discouragement and harsh labor” (Exodus 6:9). Yet God’s promises did not depend on their ability to receive them in that moment.

In the middle of this reassurance comes a verse that raises a real interpretive puzzle: “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself fully known to them” (Exodus 6:3). Some skeptical scholars point to this as a contradiction, since the name “the LORD” appears throughout Genesis—in the narrative, on the lips of the patriarchs, and in God’s own speech. God told Abraham directly, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans” (Genesis 15:7). If this were a contradiction, the writer would have had to overlook scores of uses of the name, which seems unlikely for a work as carefully constructed as Genesis and Exodus. People determined to find contradictions in the Bible will usually find something to point to, as when some claim that Proverbs 26:4–5 contradicts itself, as though the wisest man could not keep his own deliberate contrasts straight across two consecutive verses. We should add, in fairness, that this verse touches a long-running scholarly conversation; some scholars who hold a high view of Scripture have noted that different parts of the Pentateuch seem to use the divine names in different ways and have proposed various explanations.

The explanation we find most persuasive comes from the immediate context. The Hebrew verb “to know” often refers not to learning a name for the first time but to recognizing its significance by experience. God goes on to say how Israel will come to know Him: by His delivering them from Egypt, making them His people, and giving them the land (Exodus 6:6–8). Before the exodus, Israel was a family of about seventy, living as nomads and then as slaves in a foreign land. They had received

God's promises; now God would begin to fulfill them. The patriarchs knew the name "the LORD" the way we might know someone by reputation, trusting his word. This generation would come to know Him by direct experience of His great works—the way we know someone whose promises we have watched come true.

The same is true in our experience of Jesus. There may have been a time when we merely knew about Him, perhaps attending church for years on that basis. Until we experienced the Spirit's regenerating work in genuine conversion, we did not truly know Him. And even now, the way we know Him will not compare to how we will know Him in the resurrection, when we see Him face to face.

The chapter closes with a genealogy of Moses and Aaron (Exodus 6:14–27), anchoring these two reluctant, ordinary men in the history of the tribe of Levi. And then Moses repeats his old complaint one more time: "Since I speak with faltering lips, why would Pharaoh listen to me?" (Exodus 6:30). God will answer, as He always does, by keeping His word.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Moses offered God five objections before he finally went. Which of his excuses sounds most like your own when you sense God calling you to something?
2. God answered Moses' weakness not by denying it but by claiming authority over it: "Who gave human beings their mouths?" What weakness of yours might God want to use rather than remove?
3. Moses' first obedience made things worse, and he complained honestly to God. How do you respond when

obedience does not produce the results you expected? What does God's answer in Exodus 6 teach you?

4. Pharaoh asked, "Who is the LORD?" Do you rely more on persuasion or on the power of God when you share your faith? How can you hold both together wisely?
5. The patriarchs knew God's promises; the exodus generation would know Him by experience of their fulfillment. In what ways have you come to know God more deeply by seeing His promises kept?

Chapter Three

Exodus 7–9

What a foreboding stretch of Scripture this is. Before a single plague falls, God tells Moses exactly how the contest will unfold: “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet.... But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you” (Exodus 7:1, 3–4). And then He tells him why: “And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it” (Exodus 7:5). Everything that follows in these three chapters should be read in the light of that sentence. The plagues are judgments, but they are also revelations. Again and again the refrain returns: “By this you will know that I am the LORD” (Exodus 7:17); “so that you may know there is no one like the LORD our God” (Exodus 8:10); “so that you will know that I, the LORD, am in this land” (Exodus 8:22); “so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth” (Exodus 9:14). Pharaoh had asked, “Who is the LORD?” (Exodus 5:2). God was answering him.

The contest opens in Pharaoh’s court. Aaron throws down his staff and it becomes a snake. Pharaoh’s magicians do the same by their secret arts, “but Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs” (Exodus 7:12). When Moses turns the Nile to blood, the magicians imitate that too, and when he calls up frogs, they manage frogs of their own. It is worth pausing on this. The magicians’ imitation is real enough to give Pharaoh an excuse, and every time they succeed, “Pharaoh’s heart became hard; he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said” (Exodus 7:22). Notice, though, what the magicians never do. They can produce more blood and more frogs; they cannot take

a single frog away. Only Moses' prayer does that. Counterfeit power can add to a problem, but it cannot heal one.

And the imitation has a ceiling. By the third plague, when the dust of Egypt becomes gnats, the magicians try and fail, and they tell Pharaoh plainly, "This is the finger of God" (Exodus 8:19). Their own trade had reached its limit, and they knew it. Centuries later Jesus would use the same phrase about His own works: "But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20). The magicians recognized what Pharaoh refused to see.

The presence of these magicians in the story is a sobering reminder that signs and wonders by themselves prove nothing. Jesus warned that false messiahs and false prophets would "perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:24), and He described people who would stand before Him on the last day saying, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?" only to hear, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matthew 7:22-23). The dividing line in that passage is not whether a person has done something spectacular. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Egypt's magicians could perform signs too. What set Moses apart was that he was doing the will of God. Samuel would later tell Saul that "to obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Samuel 15:22); we might add that to obey is better than to chase after signs.

Why these particular plagues? It is worth noticing how deliberately they strike at the foundations of Egyptian life. The Nile was Egypt's source of drinking water, its irrigation, its fish, and its very existence as a nation in the desert; turning it to blood struck at everything. The frogs invaded the Egyptian

household—“your palace and your bedroom and onto your bed” (Exodus 8:3). The gnats and flies attacked sanitation and health. The disease on the livestock cut at the heart of an agricultural economy. The boils struck the bodies of the people themselves, including the magicians, who “could not stand before Moses because of the boils” (Exodus 9:11). And the hail, the worst storm Egypt had ever seen, flattened the flax and barley just as they were ripening (Exodus 9:31).

But the plagues also carried a religious meaning. Before the final plague God would announce, “I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD” (Exodus 12:12). Egyptians revered the Nile as a source of divine blessing; the frog was associated with a goddess of fertility and birth; sacred bulls and cow-headed deities were bound up with the livestock; the sky, the sun, and the harvest all had their gods; and Pharaoh himself was regarded as divine, the son of the gods by birthright. Read against that background, the plagues look less like random disasters and more like a systematic dismantling, point by point, of everything Egypt had credited with power over life. We should hold particular identifications loosely, since scholars differ on which deity each plague was meant to confront, and Exodus itself names none of them. But the broad point is clear from the text: the plagues exposed the gods of Egypt as powerless before the God of Israel.

That reframes what the contest is really about. It is not simply a stronger force overpowering a stubborn king. Pharaoh was contending for his own divinity. Each time he bargains—“Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land” (Exodus 8:25); “I will let you go... but you must not go very far” (Exodus 8:28)—he is defending not merely his workforce but the premise that he has any standing to negotiate with the Lord at all. And the more he negotiated, the worse it became.

There is a lesson here for us as well. Many of the troubles that come into our lives are not punishments in the way Egypt's plagues were, and we should be slow to claim we know why any particular hardship has come. But God does, at times, use the ordinary disruptions of life to turn our eyes back to Him when we have been ignoring Him. The question is whether we will respond like the magicians, who finally admitted, "This is the finger of God," or like Pharaoh, who waited for relief and then went back to business as usual.

Beginning with the fourth plague, God introduces something new: "But on that day I will deal differently with the land of Goshen, where my people live; no swarms of flies will be there, so that you will know that I, the LORD, am in this land. I will make a distinction between my people and your people" (Exodus 8:22-23). The livestock of Israel are spared while Egypt's die (Exodus 9:4-6), and the hail that devastates the rest of the country falls nowhere in Goshen (Exodus 9:26).

This distinction mattered. It showed that the plagues were not natural accidents that happened to coincide with Moses' warnings. A natural disaster does not stop at a property line. It also showed Israel that God's hand was over them before they had left Egypt, before the Red Sea, before Sinai. They had not yet done anything to earn His protection. They were simply His people, and He was keeping His word to them. That is a pattern that runs all through Scripture: God distinguishes His people not because they are better than others, but because He has chosen to set His love on them.

At the heart of these chapters stands one of the weightiest verses in the Old Testament. Before the hail, God sends Pharaoh this message: "For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. But I have raised you up for this very

purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth” (Exodus 9:15–16).

This answers a question many readers ask as they work through the plagues: Why did God not simply end the matter at once? He could have. The prolonged confrontation was not evidence of any weakness on God’s part. It was purposeful restraint. Pharaoh was permitted to remain so that the Lord’s power could be displayed and His name proclaimed. The ruler who kept refusing Moses never became the final authority over how long the story lasted or how it would end.

Paul quotes this very verse when he writes about God’s sovereign mercy: “For Scripture says to Pharaoh: ‘I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden” (Romans 9:17–18). And he goes further: “What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?” (Romans 9:22–24). Isn’t this exactly what God did in Egypt? He delayed His final judgment on Pharaoh so that the greatness of His deliverance would be seen by Israel, His power would be known by the Egyptians, and His name would be heard among the nations.

As we noted in the previous chapter, Exodus speaks of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in more than one way. Sometimes Pharaoh hardens his own heart: “when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart” (Exodus 8:15; see also 8:32). Sometimes the text simply says his heart “became hard” (Exodus 7:13, 22; 8:19). And beginning with the sixth plague, the

text says directly, “But the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said to Moses” (Exodus 9:12). Many careful Christians read this sequence as God working through Pharaoh’s own repeated choices, giving him over to the hardness he had already chosen, much as Paul describes God “giving over” those who suppress the truth (Romans 1:24, 26, 28). That reading takes seriously the real responsibility Pharaoh bears, and there is truth in it; Pharaoh is never presented as an unwilling puppet.

Our own view, however, is that the text will not let us stop there. God announced the hardening before Pharaoh had refused anything (Exodus 4:21; 7:3), and He tells Pharaoh that He raised him up for this very purpose. Pharaoh’s choices were real, and they were his own; yet they unfolded within a purpose God had declared in advance. Proverbs states the principle simply: “In the LORD’s hand the king’s heart is a stream of water that he channels toward all who please him” (Proverbs 21:1). Scripture offers a sobering parallel in Judas, whom Jesus called the one “doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled” (John 17:12), and in those who crucified Christ, who did “what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen” (Acts 4:28). In each case human beings acted freely and culpably, and in each case God’s purpose stood.

Is that unfair? Paul anticipates the objection—“Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?”—and answers not with a philosophical argument but with a reminder of who we are: “But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God?” (Romans 9:19–20). We cannot apply to God the standards of fairness we rightly apply to one another, because He is the Creator and we are His creatures. As the one Lawgiver and Judge (James 4:12), He holds rights over life and judgment that no human being possesses. And we should remember what we are asking when we demand fairness. “For God has bound everyone

over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all” (Romans 11:32). If all of us deserve judgment, then the scandal is not that God judges some; the wonder is that He saves any. Jesus told of a landowner who paid the last workers the same as the first, and who answered the grumblers, “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (Matthew 20:15). And if we are still inclined to say God was unjust to harden Pharaoh for His glory, we might ask ourselves whether it was unjust for God to lay the judgment of a whole world of sinners on the one truly innocent man who ever lived. The cross itself tells us that God’s ways are not measured by our sense of what is fair; they are measured by His holiness and His astonishing grace.

We recognize that many faithful Christians read Romans 9 differently, understanding Paul to be speaking of God’s choice of nations and roles in redemptive history rather than of individual salvation, or emphasizing God’s foreknowledge of human choices. Those differences deserve respect. But whatever position one reaches on the harder question underneath, the posture Paul calls for is the same. The proper response is not to join the chorus declaring God unfair, but to serve Him with fear and trembling, acknowledging that we stand among the saved not because of anything good in us—not our works, and not even our faith considered as our own achievement—but entirely because of His grace. As for why God has mercy on one and not another, that remains beyond us, and all we can do is join Paul in worship: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!... For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen” (Romans 11:33, 36).

It is striking how thoroughly God’s purpose was fulfilled. Forty years later, Rahab would tell Israel’s spies in Jericho, “We

have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt” (Joshua 2:10). Generations after that, the Philistines would tremble at the memory of “the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness” (1 Samuel 4:8). God’s name was indeed proclaimed in all the earth. And the prophet Habakkuk would look forward to the day when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14).

That purpose reaches us too. One of the chief reasons Jesus came was to make the Father known: “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John 1:18). The revelation of God is not confined to overwhelming acts of judgment. Its fullest expression is the life, words, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And He has passed that same commission to us: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). We are to make His name known in our generation—not by presuming to explain the hidden purpose of every delayed judgment or every hardship, but by telling truthfully what God has revealed in Scripture and what Christ has done, and by living in a way consistent with the Savior we proclaim.

Before the hail, God gives the Egyptians a warning and a way of escape: “Give an order now to bring your livestock and everything you have in the field to a place of shelter” (Exodus 9:19). And then comes a small verse with large significance: “Those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the LORD hurried to bring their slaves and their livestock inside. But those who ignored the word of the LORD left their slaves and livestock in the field” (Exodus 9:20–21).

This is the first time any Egyptians are described as fearing the word of the Lord. The plagues were not only judgments but warnings that called for a response, and some in Pharaoh’s own

court began to take them seriously. When Israel finally left Egypt, “many other people went up with them” (Exodus 12:38), suggesting that some Egyptians and others cast their lot with Israel’s God. Even in judgment, God was making Himself known and drawing people to Himself.

What is amazing is not that some of Pharaoh’s officials feared the word of the Lord, but that any remained who did not. After the Nile, the frogs, the gnats, the flies, the livestock, and the boils—each one announced in advance and each one arriving exactly as announced—who would risk ignoring this warning? Perhaps some had comforted themselves with naturalistic explanations for everything that had happened. But there is a world of difference between someone who explains events after the fact and someone who announces them beforehand with complete accuracy. Moses spoke, and it happened, whether to start a calamity or to stop one. He was accurate about its nature and even its timing: “At this time tomorrow” (Exodus 9:18). He was a true prophet of God.

In fact, it was through Moses that God later gave Israel the tests for recognizing a true prophet. The first is accuracy: “If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed” (Deuteronomy 18:22). The second test is perhaps even more searching. Deuteronomy 13 anticipates that a false prophet’s sign might actually come true, and yet if that prophet says, “Let us follow other gods,” Israel must not listen, because “the LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 13:2–3). Accuracy alone is not the final test. Faithfulness to what God has already revealed about Himself is. The penalty Moses prescribed for false prophets in Israel was severe (Deuteronomy 13:5; 18:20), which would certainly have

discouraged anyone from presumptuously claiming a word from the Lord.

Christians today hold different views about whether the gift of prophecy continues in the church. Some believe it does, understanding New Testament prophecy as a gift to be exercised humbly and weighed carefully by the congregation: “Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:20–21). Others believe that the foundational, revelatory gifts ceased with the apostolic age and the completion of Scripture (Ephesians 2:20). Our own view is closer to the second, and we are especially wary of claims to predictive prophecy whose track record would not survive Moses’ first test, or whose message quietly shifts attention away from the God revealed in Scripture. But on this much all sides ought to agree: the tests Scripture gives are to be applied, not relaxed, and signs are never self-authenticating.

What our generation most needs is discernment. The lines of truth and error can become blurred when Christians know their Bibles less well than they should, and then judgments are made on the basis of feelings, excitement, or a leader’s popularity rather than a clear grasp of what God has said. The antidote is not suspicion of everything but familiarity with the real thing. Stay in God’s Word daily, and pray for discernment, so that you will not be carried along by every wind that blows through the church in our day.

The chapter ends with one of the saddest moments in the plague narrative. As the hail pounds Egypt, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron and says what sounds like a confession: “This time I have sinned.... The LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Pray to the LORD, for we have had enough thunder and hail” (Exodus 9:27–28). Moses agrees to pray, but he is not deceived: “But I know that you and your officials still do not fear the LORD God” (Exodus 9:30). And sure

enough, “When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned again: He and his officials hardened their hearts” (Exodus 9:34).

Pharaoh’s words were correct. His theology, for a moment, was even sound: the Lord is in the right. But his repentance lasted exactly as long as the storm. What he regretted was the hail, not his sin. Paul describes the difference well: “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (2 Corinthians 7:10). Worldly sorrow is sorry for consequences; godly sorrow is sorry for the offense against God, and it turns. It is worth asking ourselves how often our own prayers in times of trouble sound like Pharaoh’s—sincere enough while the thunder rolls, forgotten as soon as the sky clears.

Pharaoh had been raised up to show God’s power. We have been called for something better: to know the God who shows it, and to make Him known.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Pharaoh’s magicians could imitate some of the signs but could not remove a single frog, and eventually they could imitate nothing at all. How do you distinguish between genuine spiritual power and impressive imitation? What role does Scripture play in that discernment?
2. The plagues struck at the things Egypt trusted for its life and security. What are the “Niles” of our own culture, or of your own life, that are easy to trust in place of God?
3. God told Pharaoh, “I have raised you up for this very purpose.” How do you respond emotionally and spiritually to the truth of God’s sovereignty over even the hardest

hearts? Where does Paul's closing doxology in Romans 11 leave you?

4. Some of Pharaoh's officials feared the word of the Lord and acted on it, while others ignored it. What warning or instruction from God's Word are you currently tempted to ignore?
5. Pharaoh said, "This time I have sinned," and then hardened his heart as soon as the hail stopped. How can you tell the difference between regret over consequences and genuine repentance in your own life?
6. God's purpose was that His name "might be proclaimed in all the earth," and Jesus sends us as the Father sent Him. What is one concrete way you can make God known this week, in word and in the way you live?

Chapter Four

Exodus 10–12

“How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, so that they may worship me” (Exodus 10:3). If we read a sentence like that in isolation, we may be tempted to shake our heads at Pharaoh. After everything he had seen—the Nile turned to blood, the frogs, the gnats, the flies, the dead livestock, the boils, the hail—surely any reasonable person would have humbled himself by now. But the context gives us pause. Before Moses was ever sent, God had told him, “I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go” (Exodus 4:21). And the very chapter that opens with God’s appeal begins with this explanation: “Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these signs of mine among them that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the LORD” (Exodus 10:1–2). God even told Moses in advance which plague would finally break Pharaoh’s resistance (Exodus 11:1).

So we are left with a genuine question. Was God’s appeal real? When He said, “How long will you refuse?” and set out conditions—“If you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country tomorrow” (Exodus 10:4)—were these real offers?

It may help to go all the way back to the garden. When God called out to Adam, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9), was that a real question? When He asked, “Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” (Genesis 3:11), did He not already know? Scripture is plain that God knows everything (1 John 3:20) and knows every human heart (1 Kings 8:39).

David confessed, “Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely” (Psalm 139:4). God’s questions are not requests for information. They are genuine as they are spoken and as they are heard; they confront, invite, and expose. But their purposes run deeper than we can see, and their outcomes are never outside God’s knowledge or direction.

The same, we believe, is true of the gospel invitation. The offer of salvation is sincere to everyone who hears it, and God’s call to repent is genuine. But God does not make these appeals in ignorance of how they will be answered, and their outcome is not beyond His control. Our own conviction is that everyone God intends to save will be saved, and that salvation rests finally on God’s will rather than on human free will. Paul tells believers that God “chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will” (Ephesians 1:4–5). And Scripture testifies that, left to ourselves, we would never choose Him: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God” (Romans 3:10–11). So God had to overcome our resistance by His sovereign grace. It is the same sovereign will that hardened Pharaoh’s heart to display His power and that foresaw the path of Judas. This does not mean that God mechanically predetermines every detail of our lives in a way that makes our choices unreal. But it does mean that salvation, in every part, is His work: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9).

Many Christians in other traditions agree that God knows all things and that salvation is entirely by grace, but they understand appeals like “How long will you refuse?” as expressing a real desire for a response that God does not

override. They point to verses such as “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live” (Ezekiel 33:11), and to Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem: “how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing” (Matthew 23:37). Those texts are part of Scripture too, and anyone who holds our view must hold them with equal seriousness. God’s sovereignty never makes His grief over sin unreal, and it never makes our responsibility less than complete. Scripture teaches both, side by side, and we do well not to let either truth swallow the other.

How then should we live? Like Paul, those of us who have tasted the Lord’s mercy should long for all people to be saved. God “wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4), and Paul, who called himself the worst of sinners, became “all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22). It may be that those who know most deeply how much they have been forgiven have the widest desire for others to be forgiven too. Yet not every believer is called to the same kind of witness. Some, like Paul, spend their lives crossing boundaries to preach where Christ is not known. Others are urged to “make it your ambition to lead a quiet life” (1 Thessalonians 4:11), loving fellow believers and bearing witness in the place where God has put them. Scripture presents both without ranking one above the other. Whether we seek out new people every day to hear the gospel or faithfully share it with those God brings into our lives, let us follow our own calling without judging one another.

Pharaoh’s negotiations in these chapters reveal another danger, one that is easy to recognize in him and much harder to recognize in ourselves. He kept trying to meet God’s demand halfway. First, the people could sacrifice, but only in the land (Exodus 8:25). Then they could go, but “not very far” (Exodus

8:28). Then only the men could go (Exodus 10:11). Then the women and children could go too, but the flocks and herds had to stay behind (Exodus 10:24). Each concession, taken on its own, sounds almost reasonable. It is only when we see the whole sequence together that we recognize it for what it is: a steady refusal to obey completely. Every offer preserved a hostage.

Moses' answer is a model of what complete obedience sounds like: "Our livestock too must go with us; not a hoof is to be left behind. We have to use some of them in worshipping the LORD our God, and until we get there we will not know what we are to use to worship the LORD" (Exodus 10:26). That last clause repays attention. Israel was being asked to leave with incomplete instructions. They did not yet know what God would require, which meant that anything they held back might turn out to be the very thing He asked for. Faith does not negotiate with God over what it may keep. It leaves the whole of life at His disposal, even before it knows what He will ask.

We see the same failure centuries later in Israel's first king. God commanded Saul to destroy the Amalekites completely, but Saul spared their king and kept the best of the livestock, claiming he meant to sacrifice them to the Lord. Samuel's reply has echoed ever since: "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22). Because of Saul's partial obedience, the kingdom was taken from him.

How many of us obey only partially? How many of us serve God with part of our heart, part of our energy, part of our money, part of our time? How many of us pick and choose which parts of Scripture we will follow and which we will quietly set aside? No single compromise may look like rebellion. It is usually only the accumulated pattern, examined honestly over time, that reveals whether we have been obeying God or managing Him. God's charge to Joshua applies to us: "Keep this Book of the Law

always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it” (Joshua 1:8).

Many who read this book have committed to reading God’s Word every day, and that is a wonderful thing. There is nothing better in this life. Like Mary sitting at the Lord’s feet, you have chosen “what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:42). But reading is meant to lead to doing. Hold what you read in the highest regard, and as the Spirit teaches you, put it into practice, not settling for less than wholehearted obedience. And take encouragement from this: it is rare to meet anyone who humbly and faithfully reads God’s Word day after day without also growing in the desire to obey it. That is not to their credit. It is the grace of God working quietly and powerfully through His Word by His Spirit.

The eighth and ninth plagues complete the devastation of Egypt. The locusts devour everything the hail left standing, until “nothing green remained on tree or plant in all the land of Egypt” (Exodus 10:15). By now even Pharaoh’s officials are pleading with him: “How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the people go.... Do you not yet realize that Egypt is ruined?” (Exodus 10:7). Everyone in Egypt seems to understand except Pharaoh. Then comes the darkness, “darkness that can be felt,” covering Egypt for three days—“Yet all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived” (Exodus 10:21, 23). For a nation whose chief god was identified with the sun, and whose king was regarded as the sun’s own son, three days of unbroken darkness was a devastating statement.

God Himself tells us how to understand the whole sequence: “I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD” (Exodus 12:12). As we noted in the last chapter, many readers find it helpful to match each plague with a particular Egyptian deity—the Nile god, the frog-headed goddess of childbirth, the scarab associated with the rising sun, the sacred cattle, the sun

god himself. Some of those associations are well attested; others are more speculative, and Exodus never names any of them. We should hold the individual pairings loosely. But the central claim needs no reconstruction, because the text states it outright: none of the powers Egypt trusted for its life could stand before the Lord.

The contest calls to mind another one centuries later, when Elijah faced the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Baal, the storm god, often depicted holding a thunderbolt, could not produce a spark, while the Lord sent fire that consumed Elijah's sacrifice, the wood, the stones, and the water in the trench (1 Kings 18:38). The point of that contest, like the point of the plagues, was allegiance: "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). Scripture does not record many such dramatic interventions, and we should not expect God to stage a contest every time our faith is questioned. But these events are recorded so that we might know there is only one God. Our own "gods" may be more respectable than the Nile—wealth, political power, technology, the systems we trust to secure our future—but Exodus announces that none of them occupies God's place. For those of us whom He has chosen and called, the fitting response is worship, and settled confidence: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

Just before the final plague, the narrator adds a quiet but remarkable note: "The LORD made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and Moses himself was highly regarded in Egypt by Pharaoh's officials and by the people" (Exodus 11:3). God had told Moses at the burning bush that Israel would not leave empty-handed, but would ask their neighbors for silver, gold, and clothing, and so "plunder the Egyptians" (Exodus 3:21–22). Now it was happening (Exodus

12:35–36). The man who had fled Egypt forty years earlier as a fugitive now stood respected even by those who opposed him.

Is that a surprise? Who would not esteem someone associated with such overwhelming power? And yet not long before, this same Moses had been pleading, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” (Exodus 3:11). God was patient with him as he grew into his calling. Moses, too, needed to witness God’s power; he too had a crisis of faith and needed grace to carry him through. It is a mercy that Scripture records the faults of God’s servants as well as their virtues. Before we aspire to their virtues, we usually identify with their faults. Every time we fret over our work, our families, our ministry, or our own slow progress, we are standing where Moses stood by the bush. And every time we experience God’s grace in those same places, we are receiving the grace Moses received. Moses would still fail at times—his anger at Meribah would cost him entry into the Promised Land (Numbers 20:10–12)—but Hebrews remembers him for his faith: “By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible” (Hebrews 11:27). Confidence in God grows the way his did: through repeated experience of grace.

And so we come to the night that would define Israel’s identity for every generation after it. God instructs each household to take a year-old male lamb without defect, slaughter it at twilight, and put some of its blood on the sides and tops of the doorframes. They are to eat the meat roasted, with bitter herbs and bread made without yeast, dressed for travel, “with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand” (Exodus 12:11). “The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt” (Exodus 12:13).

Notice what protected Israel that night. It was not their ancestry alone, and it was not their moral superiority to the Egyptians. It was the blood of a substitute, applied in obedience to God's word. A household that believed God and put the blood on its doorframe was safe; a household that did not, whatever its lineage, had no promise of protection. "By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel" (Hebrews 11:28). The Passover lamb pointed forward to another Lamb. John the Baptist would say of Jesus, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Paul would write, "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7). Peter would remind us that we were redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:19). And it was at a Passover meal that Jesus took bread and the cup and told His disciples that they now spoke of His body and His blood. Every lamb slain in Egypt that night was a signpost to the cross.

The judgment itself was terrible. "There was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead" (Exodus 12:30). The final plague reached every household, from Pharaoh's palace, where the heir to the throne had been raised from childhood for the crown, to the house of the prisoner in the dungeon. We should not read these words lightly. Pharaoh had begun his reign of terror by ordering the death of Israel's sons; now the sons of Egypt died. The Lord had warned him from the beginning: "Israel is my firstborn son.... Let my son go, so he may worship me. But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son" (Exodus 4:22-23). God's judgment is never arbitrary, and it is never delayed forever.

Woven through the Passover instructions is a command that is easy to overlook but essential to everything that follows: "And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to

you?” then tell them, “It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians” (Exodus 12:26–27). Again and again Scripture anticipates a child’s question and supplies the answer (Exodus 13:8, 14; Deuteronomy 6:20–25; Joshua 4:6–7). The Passover meal was designed as a teaching tool, so that every generation would rehearse the story of redemption and say, in effect, “The Lord brought *us* out.” The Passover Seder observed by Jewish families to this day still preserves that structure, with the youngest child at the table asking the traditional questions.

Teaching the next generation was critical to Israel’s faithfulness, and the consequences of failing to do it even once would be disastrous. The book of Judges shows us exactly what happened: “After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals” (Judges 2:10–11). The failure of one generation to pass on the knowledge of the Lord set off a downward spiral that the judges could interrupt but never reverse. By the end of the book, “everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 21:25), and the moral condition of Israel resembled that of Sodom (Judges 19:22).

The charge given to Israel is given to us as well: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). Our own conviction is that the primary responsibility for the spiritual instruction of children belongs to the family. Just as the judges could not stem Israel’s decline from generation to generation, so pastors, Sunday School teachers, and Christian schools cannot replace parents. We cannot drop our children off at church for a few hours a week and imagine that this is sufficient. God’s design is that faith be impressed on children “when you sit at home and

when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:7). That means teaching them the Bible regularly and showing them that it is the chief authority in our lives, the guide for our decisions, and the basis of our hope. It means inviting and answering their questions about faith. It means giving them a language and a pattern for prayer. And it means modeling faith in the way we make decisions, treat people, and spend our time.

At the same time, Scripture gives the church a real role alongside the home. Paul instructs older women to teach younger women (Titus 2:3–5), addresses children directly in his letters (Ephesians 6:1), and calls the whole congregation to “teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” (Colossians 3:16). Timothy’s faith was nurtured first by his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5), and then shaped further by Paul. Home and church are partners, not competitors. But the partnership works best when parents do not hand off what God has entrusted to them first.

The chapter closes with Israel on the move: “The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth. There were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. Many other people went up with them, and also large droves of livestock” (Exodus 12:37–38). Six hundred thousand men! With women, children, and the elderly, the total may well have exceeded two million people. It is hard to imagine what that must have looked like. Genesis 46 records about seventy people entering Egypt with Jacob, and now a nation walked out. Even apart from the plagues, the sight of such a multitude leaving would have made any Egyptian think, “What a mighty God they have!” And the growth happened under slavery, under policies designed to reduce their numbers, even under infanticide. The very size of the departing nation was its own testimony to God’s

faithfulness to His promise that Abraham’s descendants would be as numerous as the stars.

Careful readers have long noticed that these numbers raise questions. The text says, “Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years” (Exodus 12:40), yet the genealogy of Moses lists only a few generations from Levi (Exodus 6:16–20), and growth from seventy to several million in that span requires an extraordinary rate of increase. Faithful interpreters who share a high view of Scripture have offered several answers. Some note that the Greek Septuagint and the Samaritan Pentateuch read Exodus 12:40 as including the patriarchs’ years in Canaan, which would put the time in Egypt closer to 215 years, and they point out that Paul counts 430 years from the promise to Abraham to the giving of the law (Galatians 3:17). Others hold to 430 years in Egypt itself, citing God’s word to Abraham that his descendants would be mistreated “four hundred years” (Genesis 15:13; Acts 7:6), and understand Paul to be counting from the last confirmation of the promise to Jacob as he went down to Egypt (Genesis 46:3–4). Many note that biblical genealogies often skip generations; 1 Chronicles 7:20–27, for instance, lists about ten generations from Ephraim to Joshua, a contemporary of Moses. Some scholars also suggest that the Hebrew word usually translated “thousand” can refer to a clan or military unit, which would yield a much smaller total, while others defend the large numbers as the text’s own emphasis on Israel’s extraordinary multiplication (Exodus 1:7, 12). And the “many other people” who went up with Israel—a mixed multitude of Egyptians and others who cast their lot with Israel’s God—would add to the count as well.

Our own inclination is to take the text’s numbers and its 430 years at face value, allowing that the genealogy of Moses is likely abbreviated and that the mixed multitude swelled the total. But we hold that view with humility, recognizing that questions

such as how so vast a company was organized and fed in the desert remain genuinely difficult, and that faithful readers land in different places. What no reading disputes is the point the text is making: “At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the LORD’s divisions left Egypt” (Exodus 12:41). God keeps His appointments. The promise He made to Abraham centuries earlier was fulfilled on the very day He had set. Is anything outside our God’s control? Absolutely nothing. What, then, do we have to fear?

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. God asked Pharaoh, “How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me?” How do you hold together God’s sovereign purposes and the genuine invitations and warnings He gives? How does that affect the way you share the gospel?
2. Pharaoh offered one partial concession after another, and Saul offered sacrifice in place of obedience. Where are you tempted to obey God only partially, and what “livestock” might you be trying to leave behind in Egypt?
3. Moses said, “Until we get there we will not know what we are to use to worship the LORD.” What does it look like to place your whole life at God’s disposal before you know what He will ask?
4. Moses grew from “Who am I?” to being highly regarded even in Pharaoh’s court. Where have you seen your own confidence in God grow through repeated experiences of His grace?
5. Israel was protected not by ancestry but by the blood of the lamb applied in faith. How does the Passover deepen your

understanding of what Christ, “our Passover lamb,” has done for you?

6. Israel was commanded to answer their children’s questions about the Passover. Who in the next generation are you responsible for teaching, and what is one practical step you can take to pass on the knowledge of the Lord?

Chapter Five

Exodus 13–15

If there is one word that runs through both Testaments and is especially important for believers walking with God, it may be this one: *remember*. In Genesis, altars, pillars, and heaps of stones served as memorials of what God had done. Beginning in Exodus, storytelling, ritual, and written law take on that same role, reminding Israel of what God had done for them and what He required of them. Many of us know the famous instruction in Deuteronomy: “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children.... Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:6–9). But forty years earlier, on the very first days of the journey, Moses had already spoken in nearly identical terms about the Festival of Unleavened Bread: “This observance will be for you like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead that this law of the LORD is to be on your lips. For the LORD brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand” (Exodus 13:9; see also 13:16). At the beginning of the journey and at its end, Moses wanted Israel to remember.

It is striking to notice how often Scripture tells us that God Himself remembers. “God remembered Noah” (Genesis 8:1). “He remembered Abraham” (Genesis 19:29). “God remembered Rachel” (Genesis 30:22). “God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob” (Exodus 2:24; see also 6:5). Now God asks His people to do what He Himself has done: to remember, and to teach the next generation about His mighty hand. “Commemorate this day, the day you came out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery,

because the LORD brought you out of it with a mighty hand" (Exodus 13:3).

The elaborate system of memorials, rituals, and repeated instruction we meet in these chapters was never decorative. It existed because forgetting is the default condition of the human heart, and it takes deliberate, structured effort to resist it. The negative side of this theme appears all too clearly later in Israel's history, when Judges describes a generation "who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel" (Judges 2:10). The great need of our own day is exactly the same: for God's people to be reminded of His works and His words, His greatness and His righteousness, who He is and what He requires of us. Every day brings distractions that pull us away from seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33). But through daily meditation on His Word we find wisdom (Psalm 19:7), purity (Psalm 119:9, 11), faith (Romans 10:17), sanctification (John 17:17), and everything needed for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

As Israel sets out toward the Promised Land, it is worth paying attention to the regulations God gives them along the way, many of which were meant to be practiced after they had settled in Canaan. In chapters 12 and 13 there are at least two that God establishes so that future generations would remember their deliverance: the Passover with its accompanying Festival of Unleavened Bread, and the consecration of the firstborn.

Before the Passover, God did something easy to read past: "This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year" (Exodus 12:2). God did not simply add a festival to an existing calendar. He reset the calendar itself. From that night on, Israel's reckoning of time began with its deliverance. Every date in the national year would be measured from the night God brought them out of Egypt. That is a far more thorough

reorientation than setting aside a single holiday; it embeds the memory of redemption in the structure of ordinary timekeeping. The Passover became Israel's first festival, celebrated in the first month of every year, followed by seven days of eating bread without yeast, with a sacred assembly on the first and seventh days (Exodus 12:14–20). The New Testament picks up the same instinct. Paul calls Christ “our Passover lamb” (1 Corinthians 5:7), and the early church came to gather on the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection. In both cases, deliverance is not only remembered on special occasions; it is built into how time itself is counted.

The requirement of unleavened bread illustrates how God teaches. For a whole week, one of the most ordinary acts of daily life—eating bread—became impossible to do without recalling why. The yeast had to be removed from every house (Exodus 12:15, 19; 13:7). This is a different kind of teaching from explaining a doctrine. It embeds the memory in the body, the kitchen, and the household routine.

Why did God begin giving His people festivals and laws at this point? Israel had lived for generations in a land saturated with idolatry. Day after day they had heard about Egypt's gods and how powerful they were. It seems likely that many had largely forgotten who their own God was. Now that the Lord had overwhelmed those idols, there was something to celebrate, but there was also something to relearn. By bringing them out of Egypt, out of the surroundings they knew, God was teaching them that He alone was the God they could turn to. And the reorientation needed to go deeper still. Israel had to unlearn Egypt's gods, but they also had to unlearn Egypt's assumptions about themselves. A people accustomed to being property had to learn to live as a people bound to God in covenant. That would take considerably longer than the plagues did.

The consecration of the firstborn made the same point in another way: “Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal” (Exodus 13:2). Israel’s firstborn had been spared on Passover night; now they belonged to the Lord. Firstborn sons were to be redeemed, and again the text anticipates a child’s question: “In days to come, when your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘With a mighty hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery’” (Exodus 13:14). A covenant always involves obligations on both sides. God had bound Himself to Israel; now Israel’s life, down to its sons and its livestock, was to acknowledge that they belonged to Him.

It is worth noticing, too, what kind of history Moses recorded for Israel. When he wrote these books for the generation about to enter the Promised Land, he did not record only the good things. He recorded the patriarchs’ lies, schemes, and failures, and—as we will see in the very next chapter of the story—Israel’s grumbling as well. Most ancient nations idealized their founders. Scripture refuses to airbrush its heroes. Why record even the bad? Because the purpose of this history was always to give glory to God, not to human beings. A story this consistently unflattering toward its central human figures could hardly be functioning as propaganda for them. It points past them to the God who worked through them in spite of their failures.

When Israel finally left Egypt, God did not take them the shortest way. “God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, ‘If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt’” (Exodus 13:17). God knew the frailty of His people. He knew exactly how much they could bear, and He chose a longer road for their sake. The shortest path is not always the best one, and God’s detours are often acts of mercy. We might also notice that

“Moses took the bones of Joseph with him” (Exodus 13:19), fulfilling the oath Joseph had required as he died in faith, confident that “God will surely come to your aid” (Genesis 50:25). God had kept Joseph’s hope through four centuries.

And God did not send them out alone: “By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people” (Exodus 13:21–22). The pillar was not merely a signal. It was the Lord Himself, going before His people.

Then God did something that must have seemed baffling. He told Moses to turn back and camp by the sea, so that Pharaoh would think the Israelites were “wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert” (Exodus 14:3). In other words, God deliberately led Israel into what looked like a trap: the sea on one side and Pharaoh’s army on the other. And He told Moses why: “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD” (Exodus 14:4).

It is hard to fathom Pharaoh pursuing Israel at all. The Egyptians had just endured ten devastating plagues. Their economy was in ruins. Pharaoh’s own firstborn son was dead. As they gave chase, they could see the pillar of cloud and fire leading Israel. And then they watched the sea divide. Who in his right mind would drive his chariots into the middle of the sea after such a display? We might conclude that Pharaoh and his men were simply foolish, but the text gives a more sobering explanation: “I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen” (Exodus 14:17).

That does not make Pharaoh's army innocent. Their desire to recapture a people they had enslaved came first; they rode out to drag Israel back into bondage. God's purpose in judgment does not turn oppression into an innocent act. But neither should we comfort ourselves with the thought that the Egyptians were a uniquely hopeless people who got what they deserved while we, of course, would have done better. The truth is harsher and more humbling than that. We are all, by nature, a hopeless people. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.... For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 3:23; 6:23). God's mercy to any of us cannot rest on the assumption that we or our group are naturally better than anyone else.

This is sovereignty at work in the Old Testament. God chose Israel from among the nations, and as the story unfolds we will see that even within Israel it is a remnant who truly trust Him. Throughout Scripture, the faithful are frequently a minority. At the golden calf, before the giants of Canaan, and in the days of Elijah, the crowd was often on the wrong side of God. Size does not make something right. So we should not despise the small church that struggles financially and has few programs. The churches Christ commends without rebuke in Revelation, Smyrna and Philadelphia, were not rich and influential; they were poor and pressured, holding on in the face of persecution (Revelation 2:9; 3:8). Some large churches grow because they faithfully preach God's Word, and some grow because they cater to what people want to hear.

But we must be careful here, because Scripture applies this caution in both directions. Being a minority does not itself establish faithfulness. A small group can be mistaken, harsh, or self-deceived, just as a large congregation can be faithful or compromised. What Christ commended in Smyrna and Philadelphia was endurance and loyalty to Him, not smallness as a virtue in itself. Opposition may arise because a community

speaks the truth, but it may also arise because it behaves harshly or refuses correction. A “remnant” identity can become another form of pride if it makes us unteachable. Paul’s charge to Timothy holds both sides together: “Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:2–3). The warning about itching ears is serious. But so is the manner of the charge: with great patience and careful instruction. Paul also warned the Corinthians not to “go beyond what is written,” so that they would not “be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other” (1 Corinthians 4:6). Faithfulness is not measured by how sharply we distance ourselves from others, but by whether our teaching and our lives remain accountable to Christ. “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith” (2 Corinthians 13:5) is a command we should apply to ourselves first.

When Israel saw Pharaoh’s army approaching, they panicked, and their panic turned to accusation: “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?... It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!” (Exodus 14:11–12). Moses answered with one of the great statements of faith in the Old Testament: “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still” (Exodus 14:13–14).

This was the beginning of a long pattern. Israel’s journey is full of grumbling. They grumbled at the sea. They grumbled over bitter water, over lack of food, over the lack of meat. They grumbled when Moses took too long on the mountain. They

grumbled at the report of giants and fortified cities in the land. Even after witnessing God's power again and again, they kept complaining. And that generation died in the wilderness. Hebrews asks, "Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?... So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief" (Hebrews 3:16, 19).

Christians differ on how to understand the "rest" that generation failed to enter. Many read Hebrews as warning that persistent unbelief shuts people out of God's eternal rest, and there is weight to that reading, since Hebrews applies the example as a warning to professing believers: "Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience" (Hebrews 4:11). Others understand the wilderness generation's failure primarily as the loss of the land, noting that Moses, Aaron, and Miriam also died outside Canaan yet are honored as faithful (Hebrews 3:5; 11:23–29). Our own view is that Hebrews uses the wilderness to warn of something eternal, not only the loss of Canaan, while we leave the eternal destiny of any particular Israelite in God's hands. Both readings share the text's urgent point: unbelief is deadly, and God's grace is our only hope. And Hebrews holds out the promise in the same breath as the warning: "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9).

We should not imagine that we would have done better than they did. Most of us would probably have been in that grumbling crowd, and we too would have perished in the wilderness of unbelief were it not for the grace of God. So let us not make light of that grace. We have received a gift that words cannot adequately describe. When we understand what the Lord has done for us, we will, as Moses told Israel, "be still." We will be able to hear the psalmist's words, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). We will not complain because of difficult

circumstances or fret over hardships. We will not nurse anger against others or let anxiety and discouragement linger. The Lord has saved us, made us heirs with His Son, and guaranteed us a place in His eternal kingdom—and He has told us that this is His doing, not ours, and that He will sustain it to the end: “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). What, then, do we have to complain about?

Yet stillness is not the same as passivity. The very next words God speaks are these: “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on” (Exodus 14:15). Being still and moving forward were not in conflict. Israel did not part the sea, but they did have to walk into it. The stillness Moses called for was the stilling of panic and complaint, a refusal to scramble for human solutions when God had promised to act. Faith stops panicking, and then it starts walking. As another king would hear centuries later when facing an overwhelming army, “the battle is not yours, but God’s” (2 Chronicles 20:15)—and yet his army still marched out that morning.

Then came one of the most dramatic moments in all of Scripture. “The angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel’s army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long” (Exodus 14:19–20). The Lord who had led them now became their rear guard. Isaiah would later draw the same picture for exiles returning from Babylon: “the LORD will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard” (Isaiah 52:12).

Some readers have found it helpful to think about how this might have looked from the Egyptian side. Armies of that era sometimes used a column of smoke by day and fire by night as a

beacon for troops on the march. A great column of fire suddenly moving to Israel's rear might have given the Egyptian commanders pause, as though Israel were turning to fight; and the text tells us Israel had left Egypt "ready for battle" (Exodus 13:18). Advancing toward a bright light in the darkness would have been blinding. And "all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind" (Exodus 14:21), a wind that may have masked the sound of an entire nation on the move. Then "during the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. He jammed the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving" (Exodus 14:24–25).

Readers differ on how far to press such reconstructions. Some find them illuminating; others worry that they risk flattening an account the text presents as unmistakably supernatural. Both can be held by people who take the event as real history. What is clear is that Scripture is comfortable with God working through wind and water. The narrative names the east wind, and the Song of the Sea calls that same wind the breath of God: "By the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up" (Exodus 15:8). The poem does not treat the natural means and the divine cause as competitors. And a purely military reading would miss what the narrative most wants us to see: the thing standing between the two armies was God's own presence. Rather than simply speaking a word of judgment, God orchestrated providence upon providence, wonder upon wonder, until "The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea" (Exodus 14:28).

"And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant" (Exodus 14:31). And then they sang. The Song of the Sea is one of the oldest songs

in Scripture, and it gives us the first great hymn of redemption: “The LORD is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him” (Exodus 15:2). Its central question answers Pharaoh’s contemptuous question from chapter 5: “Who among the gods is like you, LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (Exodus 15:11). The song looks back on what God has done and then looks forward to what He will do: “In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling” (Exodus 15:13). And it ends with the confession that underlies the whole book: “The LORD reigns for ever and ever” (Exodus 15:18). Miriam took up a timbrel and led the women in dancing and singing the refrain (Exodus 15:20–21). The New Testament tells us that the redeemed will one day sing “the song of God’s servant Moses and of the Lamb” (Revelation 15:3). The Red Sea was a preview of a greater deliverance still to come.

Paul, too, looks back on this moment and draws a warning from it: “our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.... Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did” (1 Corinthians 10:1–2, 5–6). The very people who sang God’s praises on the far shore would, within days, be grumbling again. Three days into the desert, they found only bitter water at Marah, “So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What are we to drink?’” (Exodus 15:24). God showed Moses a piece of wood that made the water sweet, and then made them a promise: “I am the LORD, who heals you” (Exodus 15:26). And immediately afterward He led them to Elim, “where there were twelve

springs and seventy palm trees” (Exodus 15:27). The God who tested them also refreshed them.

How quickly we move from the song to the complaint. The same week can hold both. But God does not abandon His grumbling people; He heals the bitter water, provides the oasis, and keeps leading. Our hope rests not on the steadiness of our praise, but on the faithfulness of the God who “reigns for ever and ever.”

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. God reset Israel’s calendar so that every year began with the memory of deliverance. What practices help you remember what God has done for you, and how might you build that memory more deeply into the rhythm of your ordinary days?
2. God led Israel on a longer road because He knew they were not ready for war. Can you recall a “detour” in your life that you now recognize as God’s mercy?
3. Scripture warns against both despising the small, faithful minority and making a proud identity out of being one. How do you guard your heart against both errors?
4. Moses said, “You need only to be still,” and then God said, “Tell the Israelites to move on.” Where do you need to stop panicking, and where do you need to start walking in obedience?
5. The pillar of God’s presence moved from in front of Israel to behind them, becoming their rear guard. What would it mean for you to trust God with the things that are pursuing you from behind?

6. Israel moved from the Song of the Sea to grumbling at Marah in three days. What helps you keep gratitude alive after God has answered your prayers?

Chapter Six

Exodus 16–18

It is hard to read Exodus without concluding that the Israelites had very short memories. Only weeks before, they had been slaves in Egypt. They had been beaten, their children thrown into the Nile, their labor exploited, nothing in their lives their own. Now, a month into the wilderness, the whole community grumbles against Moses and Aaron: “If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death” (Exodus 16:3). “As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly” (Proverbs 26:11). How quickly they went from singing, “The LORD is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation” (Exodus 15:2), to wishing they were back in bondage for fear of missing breakfast.

But before we shake our heads, we should notice what their complaint does to memory. Egypt is remembered for its pots of meat, not for its brick quotas and drowned infants. That is not simple stupidity; it is what fear does to memory under pressure. These people had genuinely been hungry that week. The hunger was present and pressing, while the deliverance was already weeks behind them. Reading the episode as a story about uniquely foolish people is the one reading that guarantees we learn nothing from it, because the mechanism—a present difficulty crowding out the memory of past rescue—is entirely ordinary. We do it all the time.

God’s response is patient. He does not strike them down; He feeds them. “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my

instructions" (Exodus 16:4). Quail cover the camp in the evening, and in the morning the ground is covered with thin flakes that the Israelites call manna, "white like coriander seed" that "tasted like wafers made with honey" (Exodus 16:31). Moses reminds the people that their grumbling was never really against him: "You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD" (Exodus 16:8).

In what sense was God testing them? He provided food along with specific instructions. They were to gather only what they needed for each day, and they were not to keep any until morning, except on the sixth day, when they were to gather twice as much in preparation for the Sabbath. The mechanics of the manna are worth noticing, because they made dependence structurally unavoidable. "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed" (Exodus 16:18). Those who tried to hoard it found it "full of maggots" by morning (Exodus 16:20). There was no way to build up a surplus, and there was no penalty for being unable to. The arrangement removed both the possibility of self-sufficiency and the anxiety that would otherwise come with its absence. Paul would later quote this very verse to encourage the Corinthians to share generously with believers in need (2 Corinthians 8:15). Jesus taught us to pray in the same spirit: "Give us today our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11).

Deuteronomy tells us what the test was really about: "He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deuteronomy 8:3). What we discover here is remarkable. It was God's will for Israel to be hungry, to be thirsty, and even to grow weary of the strange manna. Why? He wanted them to understand that their

lives were sustained not by food alone but by His word. He was not simply a dispenser of benefits. He was God, with absolute claim over their lives and worthy of unconditional trust. He also wanted to humble them, to help them recognize their complete dependence on Him, so that when they entered the Promised Land and prospered, they would remain humble and give Him the glory.

That is exactly where Deuteronomy goes next. The danger it guards against is not starvation in the desert but forgetfulness in Canaan: “Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down... then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 8:12, 14). The lesson of dependence was taught under conditions where dependence was obvious, so that it could be remembered under conditions where it would not be. Both scarcity and abundance test the heart, and abundance may be the harder test.

Some of the Israelites went out on the seventh day anyway and found nothing, and the Lord asked Moses, “How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions?” (Exodus 16:28). The issue was not simply whether the people enjoyed God’s provision. They were being taught to receive it according to His word. Some tried to keep what should not be kept; others went out to gather when they had been told to rest. The gift itself became the place where trust and obedience were tested.

It should be clear that God did not intend Israel to follow Him merely for His benefits. He certainly could have made the journey easy. He could have destroyed every enemy before they had to lift a finger. He could have fed them lavishly and paved a smooth road through the desert. The One who parted the Red Sea could surely have done all of that. But He did not, and that frustrated the Israelites and fed their complaints. God wanted

them to follow Him not for what He gave but because He alone is God. Moses would tell the next generation, “You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other” (Deuteronomy 4:35).

Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 when the devil tempted Him to turn stones into bread after forty days of fasting (Matthew 4:4). Jesus was genuinely hungry, and bread is a good thing, yet He refused to act at the tempter’s direction. The issue was not that hunger is more spiritual than eating; it was faithful obedience to the Father. And He taught His disciples the same freedom: “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:31–33). Later He would identify Himself as the true manna: “it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.... I am the bread of life” (John 6:32, 35).

So we should ask ourselves: Do we worship and follow the Lord for His benefits? What if He called us to live in hardship rather than the comfort we now enjoy? Would we still follow Him? What if He took away someone we love deeply? Would we still worship Him? Do we follow Him because of what He gives, or because we know that He alone is God?

At the same time, we should not make the contrast between worshipping God and receiving His gifts absolute. Scripture repeatedly invites gratitude for His gifts. The manna itself was mercy, and the Sabbath provision gave rest rather than merely imposing hardship. We come to know God’s goodness partly through what He does for us. The error is not in receiving His gifts with thanks; it is in treating Him as valuable only so long as He supplies whatever we presently prefer. And when we ask

ourselves the hard questions above, we should do so gently. A grieving person's tears, confusion, or inability to speak confidently do not prove that he loved God only for His benefits. Job's first response to overwhelming loss was worship—"The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21)—but the book that bears his name also gives long space to anguished lament, and so do the Psalms. Trust often persists in the very act of bringing our pain to God.

A more practical question, then, is whether our obedience becomes negotiable whenever it becomes costly. Can we receive good gifts with gratitude without making them the condition of our allegiance? Can we practice rest, generosity, and honesty when fear urges us to secure everything for ourselves? The Lord who gives bread also teaches His people how to live as recipients of His gifts rather than masters of them.

One more detail about the manna deserves attention: "The Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a land that was settled" (Exodus 16:35). Forty years of the same food every day! Anyone who has ever worked in an ice cream shop and been allowed to eat as much as they liked knows how quickly even a favorite treat can become unbearable. Numbers records exactly how the Israelites felt about it: "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" (Numbers 11:5–6). That is not a generic grumble about hardship; it is a catalog of flavors, which is precisely what people miss when they have eaten one thing for a long time. The manna was not tasteless—Numbers says it "tasted like something made with olive oil" (Numbers 11:8)—but it was singular, and over the decades it became wearing. Scripture's candor on this point is part of what makes the account ring true: the people it describes grew tired of miraculous provision in exactly the way people do. And there is

something miraculous in the fact that it sustained them for forty years at all, like their clothing that “did not wear out” and their feet that “did not swell” through the whole journey (Deuteronomy 8:4).

In chapter 17 the pattern repeats. At Rephidim there is no water, and the people quarrel with Moses, ready to stone him. Moses asks, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?” (Exodus 17:2). God tells him to strike the rock at Horeb, “and water will come out of it for the people to drink” (Exodus 17:6). Moses names the place Massah and Meribah—“testing” and “quarreling”—“because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’” (Exodus 17:7). They asked that question while the pillar of cloud stood over their camp. Paul tells us who was really supplying that water: “they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:4).

Immediately afterward, Amalek attacks. Deuteronomy tells us the Amalekites struck at the weary stragglers at the rear of the column (Deuteronomy 25:17–18), the most defenseless of God’s people. Joshua leads Israel into battle while Moses stands on a hill with the staff of God in his hands. “As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning” (Exodus 17:11). When Moses’ arms grow tired, Aaron and Hur sit him on a stone and hold up his hands, “one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset” (Exodus 17:12). Moses builds an altar and calls it “The LORD is my Banner” (Exodus 17:15). Israel’s victory did not come from its own strength, and it did not come from Moses’ strength either. It came from the Lord, and it came through a leader who could not stand alone. There is a picture here of what intercession and mutual support in the church look like: the ones on the hill

holding up tired hands are as essential to the victory as the ones in the valley.

It is interesting to notice that in these chapters Israel meets two groups of distant relatives. The Amalekites were descendants of Esau (Genesis 36:12), and the Midianites were descendants of Abraham through Keturah (Genesis 25:1–2). Both had likely heard of God’s mighty deliverance of Israel, yet they responded in opposite ways. The Amalekites attacked. Jethro, the priest of Midian, rejoiced. “Jethro was delighted to hear about all the good things the LORD had done for Israel in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians. He said, ‘Praise be to the LORD.... Now I know that the LORD is greater than all other gods’” (Exodus 18:9–11). Jethro does not necessarily represent all Midianites, but the contrast is striking.

How do we respond when others tell us what God has done in their lives? With envy, quietly hoping to see them stumble? Or with genuine delight? Paul lists this as a deliberate discipline: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15). He places celebrating someone else’s blessing right beside comforting someone else’s grief, as though both require intentional effort—and they do. Genuine delight in another person’s good news is not merely a temperament some people happen to have. It is a grace to be cultivated, one that runs directly against the grain of comparison and envy. May our churches be communities of brothers and sisters who truly delight in each other’s good news, sharing our joys in the Lord so that we can praise Him together.

Jethro’s visit is one of the warmest scenes in Exodus. Moses goes out to meet his father-in-law, bows down and kisses him, and tells him everything the Lord has done (Exodus 18:7–8). Jethro offers sacrifices to God, and he eats a meal with Aaron and the elders of Israel “in the presence of God” (Exodus 18:12). The next day he watches Moses judge the people “from morning till

evening” and gives him some blunt advice: “What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone” (Exodus 18:17–18). He counsels Moses to teach the people God’s decrees and instructions and to appoint “capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain” (Exodus 18:21) as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, bringing only the difficult cases to Moses himself.

There is a small phrase in Jethro’s counsel that must not be missed. He begins, “Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you” (Exodus 18:19). And he ends, “If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied” (Exodus 18:23). Jethro understood something many who came out of Egypt never would: God’s will must be at the center of every counsel, plan, and decision. He did not expect Moses simply to adopt human advice; he told him to confirm it with God. He offered his wisdom with open hands. Interestingly, when Moses later recounts this reorganization in Deuteronomy, he does not mention Jethro at all (Deuteronomy 1:9–18). Good counsel, rightly received, becomes simply the way God led.

How do we listen to counsel? How do we make plans and decisions? Do we make it our chief interest that God’s will be done, testing every plan by prayerfully seeking His guidance? “Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and he will establish your plans” (Proverbs 16:3). “Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the LORD’s purpose that prevails” (Proverbs 19:21). James tells us to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that” (James 4:15). Isn’t much of our anxiety rooted in our failure to surrender our plans to God? We are anxious because we take responsibility for outcomes instead of entrusting them to Him. And isn’t much of our discouragement

rooted in seeing things only within the horizon of our own plans and desired results, instead of offering them to God so that He can accomplish His purposes, with us serving simply as one link in a chain, one thread in the tapestry of His great work? None of us does this perfectly. But when we prayerfully give every purpose of our hearts to God and sincerely desire His will above our own, regardless of gain or loss, we find that “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding” guards our hearts and minds (Philippians 4:7).

Jethro’s counsel also gives us a lasting principle of leadership: delegation. It is somewhat puzzling that although Moses followed Jethro’s advice, he found himself overwhelmed again in Numbers 11: “I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me” (Numbers 11:14). But the two situations differ. Exodus 18 addresses the workload of deciding disputes; Numbers 11 addresses the heavier burden of bearing the people’s complaints and needs. And the remedy in Numbers is not merely organizational but spiritual: God “took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders” (Numbers 11:25). Structures help, but shared burdens require shared empowerment from God. Jewish tradition later looked to that council of seventy as the precedent for the Sanhedrin, the council that governed in Jesus’ day.

Scripture offers rich precedent for sharing leadership. When the apostles were overstretched, they asked the church to “choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” to oversee the daily distribution, so that they could give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:3–4). Jesus Himself sent out the Twelve (Matthew 10:1) and later seventy-two others (Luke 10:1). Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23), and Paul told Titus to do the same (Titus 1:5). Notice, too, that Jethro’s qualifications put character before competence:

capable, God-fearing, trustworthy, and specifically free from the love of money. The New Testament's lists for elders and deacons follow the same pattern, emphasizing character, self-control, hospitality, and being "not a lover of money" (1 Timothy 3:3). Paul's charge to Timothy captures the whole principle in a single sentence that spans four generations of leaders: "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2).

If you are in any kind of leadership, take these examples to heart. Do not make yourself the only leader of your group or ministry. Be intentional about sharing responsibility and authority with others. You can carry the vision and be involved wherever you choose, but carrying all the leadership on your own shoulders is neither prudent nor wise. Discipleship is in part delegation, for every disciple must learn to do what we do and eventually stand on their own. Delegation requires humility, because it admits that we cannot do everything, and it requires trust in God, because we are entrusting those leaders to His care. We have seen this principle bear fruit again and again: in Sunday School classes that flourished once several servant-leaders stepped forward, in a men's Bible study that grew from a handful to a full room when others embraced leadership, and even in ordinary businesses and training programs where leaders were raised up who in turn trained others. Build leaders. Share the load. The work is God's, and He has never intended any one of us to carry it alone.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. The Israelites remembered Egypt's pots of meat and forgot its brick quotas. When present difficulties crowd out your

memory of God's past faithfulness, what helps you remember rightly?

2. God designed the manna so that no one could store up a surplus. Where in your life are you trying to secure tomorrow in a way that keeps you from depending on God today?
3. Deuteronomy says God let Israel hunger to teach them that we do not live on bread alone. Do you follow God for His benefits, or because He alone is God? How would you know the difference?
4. Aaron and Hur held up Moses' tired hands until sunset. Whose hands might God be asking you to hold up in prayer and support right now?
5. The Amalekites attacked while Jethro rejoiced at what God had done for Israel. How do you honestly respond when God blesses someone else? What would it look like to "rejoice with those who rejoice"?
6. Jethro offered his counsel with the words "if God so commands," and he urged Moses to share the load. What plan do you need to surrender to God, and what responsibility might you need to share with others?

Chapter Seven

Exodus 19–21

Three months after leaving Egypt, Israel arrives at Mount Sinai, and God speaks to Moses from the mountain: “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:4–6).

Notice how God reveals Himself here. He is not only the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; He is the God to whom “the whole earth” belongs. And through this covenant He commissions Israel to serve as a kind of priesthood between Himself and the world. A priest stands between God and people, representing each to the other. Israel was to be God’s treasured possession, His kingdom of priests, His living example of a holy nation before everyone else. Their calling was never simply to enjoy God’s favor, but to display His character to the nations.

The New Testament applies this same language to the church. Jesus “has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father” (Revelation 1:5–6). Peter writes to believers, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). As Israel was under the old covenant, Christians are under the new. We are called to be salt and light, countering the world’s moral apathy and spiritual ignorance so that our lives and our words reveal both God’s righteousness and His mercy. Let no believer say, “I don’t know what to do with my life.” Whatever

else remains unclear, this much is not: God has called us to be His witnesses to the world through faith in Christ and obedience to His Word. That is the new covenant equivalent of “obey me fully and keep my covenant.”

The people answer at once: “We will do everything the LORD has said” (Exodus 19:8). Then God tells Moses to prepare them for His coming. They are to consecrate themselves and wash their clothes, and Moses is to set limits around the mountain: “Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death” (Exodus 19:12).

Stop and consider what is happening here. If we set aside for a moment the lens of faith through which we read all of Scripture, this might seem extreme or even arbitrary. The penalty is not for murder or abuse. A person would be put to death for touching a mountain. But recall what God commanded Adam in the garden. He was not to eat from one particular tree, and if he did, he would surely die—and, in a sense, all who came after him would die with him. That too does not seem, by our reckoning, to rise to the level of the sins we think deserve death. Or consider Uzzah, who reached out to steady the ark when the oxen stumbled and was struck down (2 Samuel 6:6–7). To us, these may not look like capital offenses. Yet God treated them as such.

What these episodes teach us is that the weight of a command lies not only in its content but in the One who issues it. The mountain was not dangerous because of its rocks. It was dangerous because the Lord “descended on it in fire” (Exodus 19:18). God’s holiness is not something to be approached casually, and a command from the Holy One carries the full weight of His holiness. Paul says, “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good” (Romans 7:12)—holy because it comes from the God who alone is holy by nature.

We see the same principle later at Kadesh Barnea. God commanded Israel to go up and take the land; they refused in fear. God then sentenced them to forty years in the desert. When they changed their minds and tried to take the land anyway, they were soundly defeated (Numbers 14:39–45). But hadn't God commanded them to take the land in the first place? Yes—but He had since given a new command. When they went up anyway, they were not obeying the first command; they were disobeying the second. It is not the command in the abstract that matters most, but the living God who speaks it.

This also helps explain why some commands in Scripture change over time. The God who declared some foods unclean later declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19; Acts 10:15). The Bible never says that every one of God's laws is unchanging; it says that God Himself does not change (Malachi 3:6). He remains holy, sovereign, and good, unchanging in all His perfections. Many theologians rightly add an important distinction here. God's moral commands—against murder, adultery, theft, and false witness—are not arbitrary decrees but expressions of His unchanging character, which is why they remain binding across the covenants. Other commands, such as the food laws, the sacrificial system, and the boundary around Sinai, were tied to particular times and purposes and could be fulfilled or set aside. On either way of putting it, the practical point is the same: we must not project our own sense of morality onto God. It is God we must honor and obey, and we must take Him at His Word.

That is why it matters so much that every believer know God's Word well. If we do not understand what God has said, how can we be confident we are pleasing Him? There is a temptation, even among teachers, to speak of "the heart of God" in a way that portrays Him only as a benevolent being who would never judge, rather than taking Him at His Word. That kind of picking and choosing is dangerous. None of us will be

able to stand before God at the end of our lives and ask for another attempt because we misunderstood. Each of us should be “fully convinced in their own mind” (Romans 14:5)—and conviction comes from searching the Scriptures deeply for ourselves.

And yet the terrifying boundary around Sinai is not the end of the story. Hebrews contrasts that scene with the gospel: “You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm.... But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God.... to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant” (Hebrews 12:18, 22, 24). The mountain no one could touch finds its answer in a Mediator through whom sinners may draw near. When the people heard the thunder and saw the smoke, they begged Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die” (Exodus 20:19). Moses’ answer holds both truths together: “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning” (Exodus 20:20). We are not to be terrified of God in a way that drives us from Him, but we must never lose the reverent fear that keeps us from sin.

Then God speaks the Ten Commandments—literally, “the ten words” (Exodus 20:2–17). They are followed by hundreds of other commands dealing with specific situations Israel would face in the land; Jewish tradition counts 613 commandments in the Law of Moses. Some readers have compared the Ten Commandments to a nation’s founding charter, with the chapters that follow serving as case law, working out the principles in particular circumstances. The comparison is apt. Exodus 21–23 applies the commandments to questions of servants, injuries, property, and restitution. Can you imagine having to learn all of it—everything you could and could not do, and what you owed if your ox gored your neighbor’s?

Israel was not the first nation in the region to have written laws. The famous Code of Hammurabi predates Moses by centuries and covers some of the same ground. What sets Israel's law apart is less its novelty than its source and its framing. Until then, the laws that governed people were given by men, from a human perspective on right and wrong. The law given at Sinai came from God, with a full view of the far-reaching consequences of sin against oneself, against one's neighbor, and before God Himself. And it came embedded in a covenant with a God who had already delivered His people.

That is the most important thing to notice about the Ten Commandments: they begin not with a command but with a statement of grace. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). Redemption comes before obligation. Israel was not told to obey in order to be rescued; they were told to obey because they had been rescued. The New Testament preserves the same order. Paul's letters typically move from what God has done in Christ to how believers should therefore live: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1).

The third commandment deserves a closer look: "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name" (Exodus 20:7). Most of us think of this command as forbidding profanity or the careless use of God's name in speech. It certainly includes that. But some Old Testament scholars have argued that the Hebrew is better understood as "You shall not *bear* the name of the LORD your God in vain." The verb is the ordinary word for lifting or carrying, and the same language is used of the high priest bearing the names of Israel's tribes on his shoulders (Exodus 28:12). Read that way, the command governs how a person who belongs to God represents Him in the world. It forbids invoking

God's name for any cause He has not sanctioned, and claiming His name while living in a way that dishonors it. That makes it a commandment about the whole of life rather than about vocabulary alone—and correspondingly harder to keep.

Forty years later, as Israel prepares to enter the land, Moses repeats the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5:6–21) and then sets out the attitude God expects: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts” (Deuteronomy 6:4–6). Israel was to make God the first, central, and total focus of their affection, and His Word their primary study and conversation throughout every day.

When Israel heard that, they should have fallen on their faces and cried out, “Who can obey the LORD like this?” And when the crowds heard Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, with its call to a righteousness that surpassed even that of the Pharisees, they should have asked the same question. In both cases the honest answer is: no one but God Himself. That was Jesus’ mission: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). Paul makes the argument explicit: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:10, 13). Our salvation rests on Jesus’ perfect obedience on our behalf. At the cross there was a great exchange: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

That does not mean we may discount the attitude God asked of His people. Jesus summarized the whole Law as loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and loving our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37–40). The commandments were

never merely external rules; they were expressions of love. God still desires a total love for Him and an all-consuming devotion to His Word. If daily Scripture reading has become part of your routine, consider giving regular time to praise and prayer as well. Many have found it helpful to give the first part of the morning to God's Word and to set aside early mornings or evenings for prayer. Start with minutes and let the Spirit lengthen the time. As God brings more responsibilities into our lives, He often moves us to spend more time with Him, not less—and we discover that more is accomplished when we work in dependence on Him.

How, then, do Christians relate to the Law of Moses today? This question has divided sincere believers for centuries, and it deserves careful thought.

It helps to begin with the relationship between the covenant God made with Abraham and the covenant He made at Sinai. The Abrahamic covenant was a covenant of promise: land, descendants, and blessing, with the assurance that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3). Its blessing depended not on Abraham's performance but on God's faithfulness, and Abraham received it by faith: “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). The covenant at Sinai was different. It was conditional: “*if* you obey me fully and keep my covenant, *then...*” (Exodus 19:5). So does the Mosaic covenant cancel the Abrahamic? If Israel failed to keep the Law, would they lose everything promised to Abraham? And why would God give a covenant He knew they could not keep?

Paul answers these questions directly. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his “seed”—“Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ” (Galatians 3:16). Paul's reading builds on the fact that the Hebrew word for “offspring”

can refer either to many descendants or to one, and he draws out its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. “The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.... Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come” (Galatians 3:17, 19). God’s covenant with Abraham stands. From the beginning, every blessing was meant to flow to the nations through Christ. The Law was given so that we would become conscious of our sin: “no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin” (Romans 3:20). And once we recognize our unrighteousness, we come to appreciate who Christ is and what He has done: “For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:3–4). God’s plan for our redemption was already in place two thousand years before Christ was born. Isn’t that amazing?

Our own view is that Christians are not under the Law of Moses as a covenant at all, but under what Paul calls “Christ’s law” (1 Corinthians 9:21). Paul writes that “by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code” (Romans 7:6). He describes becoming “like one under the law” to win those under the law, “though I myself am not under the law” (1 Corinthians 9:20). Hebrews says, “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete” (Hebrews 8:13). Moses himself told Israel that the Sinai covenant was not made “with our ancestors” but “with us, with

all of us who are alive here today” (Deuteronomy 5:3). When some in the early church insisted that Gentile believers must keep the Law of Moses, Peter asked, “why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?” (Acts 15:10). And Paul wrote, “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” (Colossians 2:16–17). The whole letter to the Galatians was written against the idea that believers must return to the Law: “Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!” (Galatians 4:9–10).

The Law of Moses remained in force until Christ’s death, which is why Jesus Himself lived under it and kept it perfectly. It was through His death that the old covenant was fulfilled and the new covenant established. He set aside “in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations” (Ephesians 2:15), and He canceled “the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:14). On our view, much of the moral content of the Ten Commandments reappears in the New Testament—nine of the ten are restated in one form or another, the Sabbath being the notable exception—but it binds us now because it is part of the law of Christ, not because we remain under Sinai.

Many faithful Christians, particularly in the Reformed tradition, see it differently. They distinguish among the moral, civil, and ceremonial parts of the Law, holding that the ceremonial laws were fulfilled in Christ and the civil laws expired with Israel as a nation, while the moral law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, remains binding on all people as a

rule of life. They point to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:17–19 and to the way the New Testament repeatedly appeals to the commandments. Others hold that believers should observe a day of rest in keeping with the fourth commandment. These are serious positions held by careful readers, and in practice the two views often arrive at very similar conclusions about how Christians should live. Where they matter most is in guarding against two errors: the legalism that places Christians back under the yoke of Sinai, and the lawlessness that imagines grace leaves us free to ignore God's moral will.

One practical consequence of our view deserves mention. The Law of Moses came with specific blessings for obedience—health, prosperity, fruitful land, victory over enemies—and specific curses for disobedience—sickness, poverty, defeat, and exile (Deuteronomy 28). Some teachers today promise believers the blessings of the Mosaic covenant, as though God has pledged material prosperity and physical health to every Christian who has enough faith. It is worth noticing that the same teachers rarely preach the curses that came attached to those blessings. We believe neither the blessings nor the curses of Sinai apply directly to Christians. The New Testament promises us something far better—every spiritual blessing in Christ—while telling us plainly that in this world we will have trouble.

The case law of chapter 21 raises questions that trouble many readers today, especially its regulations concerning slaves. Does the Bible condone slavery? This question deserves an honest answer rather than an evasive one.

First, the servitude regulated in Exodus 21 was very different from the race-based chattel slavery of the modern era, which Christians today rightly condemn as a grave evil. In Israel, a Hebrew servant was typically someone working off a debt, and his service was limited: "If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free,

without paying anything” (Exodus 21:2). Deuteronomy adds that he was not to be sent away empty-handed (Deuteronomy 15:12–15). Kidnapping someone to sell was a capital crime: “Anyone who kidnaps someone is to be put to death, whether the victim has been sold or is still in the kidnapper’s possession” (Exodus 21:16). That single verse condemns the transatlantic slave trade at its root, and Paul lists “slave traders” among the lawless (1 Timothy 1:10). And unlike the practice of every surrounding nation—and unlike the fugitive slave laws of American history—Israel was commanded, “If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand them over to their master” (Deuteronomy 23:15).

Second, against the background of the ancient world, the Law of Moses was remarkably protective of slaves. In most ancient societies a slave was the absolute property of the master, who could punish or even kill him with little or no interference from the law. In Israel, a master who struck a slave so that he lost an eye or even a tooth had to set the slave free (Exodus 21:26–27). A master who beat a slave to death was to be punished (Exodus 21:20). The following verse, which exempts the master from punishment if the slave survives a day or two, “since the slave is their property” (Exodus 21:21), is troubling to modern readers. Older commentators understood it to mean that in such cases the law presumed the master had not intended death and treated the loss of the servant as penalty enough. Even so, we should not pretend that every provision in these chapters is humane by every standard. Some, such as the distinctions drawn between Hebrew and foreign servants, remain genuinely difficult.

Third, and most important, regulating an existing institution is not the same as endorsing it. Jesus explained the Mosaic divorce provision this way: “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this

way from the beginning” (Matthew 19:8). Many laws in the Mosaic code restrained the evils of a fallen world rather than expressing God’s ideal for it. The trajectory of Scripture runs toward Philemon, where Paul asks a master to receive his runaway slave “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother” (Philemon 16), and toward the declaration that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free” (Galatians 3:28). The abolitionist movement was driven in large part by Christians arguing from Scripture—from the truth that every person bears God’s image (Genesis 1:27), from Israel’s own deliverance out of slavery as the foundational act of the Old Testament, and from texts like Philemon. It is also true, and should be said honestly, that slaveholders quoted these same chapters in defense of their practice. That history is a reason for care in how we handle these texts, not a reason to avoid them.

One more provision in chapter 21 rewards close attention. “Anyone who strikes a person with a fatal blow is to be put to death. However, if it is not done intentionally, but God lets it happen, they are to flee to a place I will designate” (Exodus 21:12–13). The law distinguishes between premeditated murder and unintentional killing, a distinction later developed into the difference between defiant and unintentional sin (Numbers 15:22–31) and into the cities of refuge. What is striking is the phrase “God lets it happen.” The text does not call such a death an “accident.” In God’s sovereignty there are no true accidents; not even a sparrow falls “outside your Father’s care” (Matthew 10:29). This does not mean God directly causes every event; often He permits what He does not initiate. But both kinds of death fall within His sovereign oversight, while only the first carries human legal guilt under His Law.

Notice, too, what this passage does not say. It does not call such a death a judgment of God for sin. When natural disasters strike, it is tempting to declare them God’s specific verdict on

the sins of the people affected. We can rightly call such events “acts of God” in the sense that no human planning caused them, and Scripture reminds us that God is sovereign over calamity as well as prosperity (Isaiah 45:7). But we have no biblical warrant to announce that a particular disaster is a particular judgment on particular sins. Jesus refused to make that move even when He was invited to. Asked about Galileans killed by Pilate and eighteen people crushed by a falling tower, He answered, “do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Luke 13:4–5). The right response to disaster is not to diagnose others’ sins but to examine our own.

The distinction between intentional and unintentional sin will also matter greatly when we come to the sacrificial system in Leviticus. The Law provided no sacrifice to atone for premeditated murder; it prescribed death instead. That is why it is so remarkable that David, after arranging the death of Uriah, was not put to death. When he confessed, “I have sinned against the LORD,” Nathan replied, “The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die” (2 Samuel 12:13). God forgave David by His own sovereign mercy, beyond anything the Law itself provided, in response to a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:16–17). The Law could expose sin and restrain it, but it could never finally remove it. Only God’s grace could do that—the grace that would one day be revealed fully in the Mediator of a better covenant.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. God called Israel to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” and Peter applies the same calling to the church. What would it look like for you to serve as a “priest” who represents God to the people around you?

2. The boundary around Sinai shows that the weight of a command lies in the One who gives it. Are there commands in Scripture you find yourself weighing by your own sense of what seems reasonable? How does knowing the character of the Lawgiver change your response?
3. The Ten Commandments begin with “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt.” Why does it matter that redemption comes before obligation? How does that shape the way you obey?
4. The third commandment may mean not “bearing” God’s name in vain. In what ways do you carry the Lord’s name into your work, your home, and your community?
5. Christians differ over how the Law of Moses applies today. How would you explain the relationship between the old covenant and the new to a friend? What errors does each view help guard against?
6. Jesus refused to treat the victims of a disaster as worse sinners than anyone else. How do you tend to interpret suffering, whether your own or others’? What does Jesus’ call to repentance ask of you?

Chapter Eight

Exodus 22–24

Why are the laws in these chapters so specific? Readers sometimes wonder whether Israel really needed such detailed guidance—about goring oxen, borrowed animals, fires that spread into a neighbor’s field, and the proper handling of a lost donkey. Scripture itself gives at least part of the answer. As Moses explains in Deuteronomy, these commands, decrees, and laws were given so that Israel and their children after them would fear the Lord by keeping them, enjoy long life, and prosper in the land God was giving them (Deuteronomy 6:1–3). These laws were fitted to the particular moral life Israel was to live in Canaan. A good case can be made that many of their specific provisions were designed to set Israel apart from the idolatry, immorality, and cruelty of the Canaanites. Israel was to be God’s treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a “holy”—that is, set-apart—nation (Exodus 19:5–6), and their distinctness had to show up in the ordinary details of life.

Jewish tradition counts 613 commands in the Law of Moses. The Ten Commandments stand apart from the rest in several ways. They alone were spoken by God directly to the whole assembled nation before the people, terrified by the thunder and smoke, asked Moses to serve as their go-between for everything that followed (Exodus 20:18–19; Deuteronomy 5:22–27). They alone were written by the finger of God on tablets of stone. With the exception of the command to honor parents, they carry no attached blessings or penalties, and their grammar uses an especially strong, absolute form of prohibition. Those features suggest that the Ten Commandments provided the overarching principles, while the other provisions applied those principles to specific moral,

ceremonial, and civil situations in the land. It is in those specific provisions that we find the blessings and curses tied to Israel's obedience (Deuteronomy 28).

As we saw in the previous chapter, Christians have understood the ongoing role of the Ten Commandments differently. Some treat them as the permanent moral law distinct from the temporary civil and ceremonial laws. Our own view is that the Sinai covenant as a whole, the Ten Commandments included, was the covenant Hebrews describes as made obsolete by the new covenant (Hebrews 8:13), even as the moral principles expressed in the Ten Commandments are carried forward and deepened in the law of Christ. Either way, the distinct character of the Ten helps us see how the rest of the Law works.

Do 613 laws sound excessive? The religious teachers of Jesus' day had already added many more of their own. And by modern standards, the Law of Moses is strikingly brief; a single nation's tax code today can run to many thousands of pages. Paul observes that "the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels" (1 Timothy 1:9). Perhaps the Law was exactly as detailed as a people entering a new land, surrounded by wickedness and prone to it themselves, actually needed.

As you read these chapters, you may be tempted to apply them selectively to your own life. Don't. These laws were given to Israel for life in the Promised Land. If your child curses you, you are not to put your child to death (Exodus 21:17), however you may feel in the moment! Reading Israel's civil and criminal code as a set of direct personal instructions produces confusion quickly. The same chapters govern goring oxen, restitution for burned crops, and the treatment of servants, and no one applies them selectively without some implicit rule about which ones carry over. It is far better to make that rule explicit than to leave

it to intuition, which tends to select whatever already agrees with us.

Even so, we can learn a great deal from these laws about the moral and equitable character of God, without getting lost in their specifics. Listen to how God cares for the vulnerable: “Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt. Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry” (Exodus 22:21–23). If you lend money to one of God’s poor people, “do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest” (Exodus 22:25). If you take your neighbor’s cloak as a pledge, return it by sunset, “because that cloak is the only covering your neighbor has.... When they cry out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate” (Exodus 22:26–27). Justice must not bend: “Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong” (Exodus 23:2), and do not show favoritism in a lawsuit, whether to the rich or the poor (Exodus 23:3, 6). Even an enemy’s straying animal is to be returned (Exodus 23:4–5). The poor are to eat from the land in the seventh year (Exodus 23:11), and even the servant and the foreigner are to be refreshed by the Sabbath rest (Exodus 23:12). And again: “Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt” (Exodus 23:9). Israel’s memory of its own slavery was to shape its compassion. That is a lesson every Christian can take to heart: the grace we have received should make us gentle toward those in need.

It is also worth noticing that this list of laws and penalties is not set aside when the sacrificial system is established in Leviticus. The sacrifices would deal chiefly with unintentional sins, and there was no offering that simply covered defiant, high-handed sin (Leviticus 4:2; Numbers 15:30–31). We should be careful not to overstate this. Leviticus also prescribes a guilt offering for deliberate wrongs such as fraud and false oaths,

paired with restitution and confession (Leviticus 6:1–7). But those were wrongs that restitution could repair. For capital crimes such as murder and adultery, no offering existed, and confession did not change the sentence (Numbers 35:31). But the principle stands: the sacrifices of the old covenant could not finally remove the guilt of sin. That would come only through the blood of Jesus Christ, who inaugurated a new covenant to replace the old.

In the middle of these laws comes a warning that runs through the rest of the Old Testament: “Be careful to do everything I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips” (Exodus 23:13). God made it clear that Israel was to remove every trace of idolatry from the land they were entering. Why? Couldn’t they keep the idols as historical curiosities, so long as they did not worship them? Apparently not. Israel’s history supplies example after example of how lingering remnants of idolatry corrupted God’s people. Beyond the obvious disasters of Baal and Asherah worship, even Gideon’s golden ephod “became a snare to Gideon and his family” (Judges 8:27), and the bronze serpent Moses made at God’s command later became an object of worship that Hezekiah had to destroy (2 Kings 18:4).

The command not to speak the names of other gods had a practical purpose in a world where oaths were sworn in a god’s name and invoking a deity was itself an act of worship. Joshua gave the same instruction (Joshua 23:7), and David echoed it: “I will not... take up their names on my lips” (Psalm 16:4). Yet Scripture itself names Baal, Molech, Dagon, and Ashtoreth many times, usually to expose their emptiness. Isaiah describes in mocking detail a man who cuts down a tree, burns half of it to bake his bread, and carves the other half into a god to which he bows down (Isaiah 44:15–17). So the command is not against

ever mentioning such gods, but against treating them with honor, familiarity, or fascination.

Paul expressed a related principle when he wrote to the Romans: “I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil” (Romans 16:19). Notice that he does not tell them to become experts in both. Innocence suggests freedom from experience of evil. It is better never to experience an evil than to experience it and learn the hard way that it is evil. Our own conviction is that believers should not cultivate an unhealthy interest in anything ungodly or occult, even for the sake of knowledge, since curiosity can open a door to harm. Our children do not need to know the details of pagan worship. We may need to shelter them from entertainment that glamorizes sorcery and the occult. We think it unwise to fill our homes with images of other religions’ idols, or to immerse young children in displays that celebrate the worship practices of other faiths.

We recognize that Christians apply this principle in different ways, and that Scripture leaves room for differing consciences on such matters (Romans 14). Paul himself quoted pagan poets to the philosophers of Athens (Acts 17:28) and clearly knew the culture of his hearers, while also warning believers against being taken captive “through hollow and deceptive philosophy” (Colossians 2:8). Many Christian parents shelter younger children closely and then teach discernment as they grow, following the pattern of Hebrews, which describes the mature as those “who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:14). Our particular convictions are offered as counsel to fellow believers, not as commands. But the positive aim is one we can all share. Paul urges us to be wise about what is good: “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or

praiseworthy—think about such things” (Philippians 4:8). Rather than books that glamorize the dark arts, we can fill our homes with good stories that point toward truth; rather than images of idols, we can surround our families with Scripture and with the great stories of the Bible. It is enough to know that evil exists. We do not need to become connoisseurs of it.

Chapter 23 closes with a promise. God will send His angel ahead of Israel “to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared,” and Israel is to listen to him, “since my Name is in him” (Exodus 23:20–21). Many Christians have seen in this angel, who bears God’s own name and authority, another appearance of the angel of the Lord we met in Genesis—perhaps the Son Himself before His incarnation. God also promises remarkable blessings: “Worship the LORD your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you, and none will miscarry or be barren in your land. I will give you a full life span” (Exodus 23:25–26). Enemies would flee before them.

What should we make of such promises? Some teachers today tell Christians to claim promises like these for themselves: if you obey God and have enough faith, He will keep you from sickness, miscarriage, and early death, and He will prosper you financially. But these promises belonged to the covenant God made with Israel as a nation in the land, and they were directly tied to Israel’s obedience to the Law of Moses. As we noted in the previous chapter, we believe Christians are no longer under that covenant. “For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.... By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete” (Hebrews 8:7, 13). We have been “released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit” (Romans 7:6). So we must be careful how we apply Old Testament passages, especially the blessings and curses given specifically to Israel.

The New Testament gives us a very different picture of faithful life. Paul “left Trophimus sick in Miletus” (2 Timothy 4:20). He counseled Timothy about his “frequent illnesses” (1 Timothy 5:23). He pleaded three times for his own thorn in the flesh to be removed and was told instead, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Careless handling of Old Testament promises leads to careless application, and careless application leaves people making excuses for why God has not delivered on promises He never made to them—or worse, blaming themselves. For anyone who has suffered miscarriage, infertility, or illness while walking faithfully with God, it matters deeply to say this clearly: these are not signs of God’s displeasure.

The same care is needed with a passage often quoted about giving: “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this... and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it” (Malachi 3:10). Sometimes this verse is used to suggest that God withholds answers to prayer, or financial blessing, from those who do not tithe. Interpreters differ on the setting. Some emphasize that much of Malachi addresses the priests; others note that Malachi 3:9 speaks to “the whole nation.” Christians also differ on the tithe itself. Some regard a tenth as a continuing baseline for Christian giving; others, as we do, understand the tithe as part of the Mosaic system, fulfilled in the New Testament’s call to generous, cheerful, and proportionate giving: “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). On this, all sides agree: giving should never be presented as a transaction that obligates God. Someone might tithe faithfully for forty years and still

struggle to make ends meet. That would not mean God had broken His word; it would mean the verse had been asked to promise something it never promised to him.

Chapter 24 records the ratification of the covenant at Sinai. “When Moses went and told the people all the LORD’s words and laws, they responded with one voice, ‘Everything the LORD has said we will do.’ Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said” (Exodus 24:3–4). He built an altar, offered sacrifices, and read the Book of the Covenant aloud. Again the people pledged, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.” Then “Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words’” (Exodus 24:7–8).

It is worth pausing on that small phrase, “Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said.” How many Israelites, enslaved for generations, could read or write? Yet God had chosen one Hebrew baby out of all the rest and placed him in Pharaoh’s own household, where “Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22). God had been preparing the man who would write down His Word for every generation to come, decades before that man knew anything of his calling. It recalls Mordecai’s words to Esther: “And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14). Neither Moses nor Esther volunteered for their position, and in both cases the purpose became visible only in hindsight. The same is true for us. Our upbringing, our education, our work, and the place we live are not random accidents. God has placed each of us where He wants us. The question is whether we will ask what He has placed us there for, and whether we are willing to obey.

Notice also how the covenant was sealed: with blood. Just as the old covenant was ratified by the blood of sacrifice, the new

covenant would be ratified by the blood of Jesus Christ. At the Last Supper Jesus deliberately echoed the words of Moses: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28). Luke records, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20). Hebrews draws out the connection explicitly (Hebrews 9:18–22) and tells us that we have come “to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Hebrews 12:24). Every time we share the Lord’s Supper, we are standing, in a sense, at the foot of a new Sinai, where the blood that seals our covenant is not an animal’s but the Son of God’s.

Then comes one of the most astonishing scenes in the Old Testament. Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders go up the mountain, “and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank” (Exodus 24:10–11). How amazing! They saw God and shared a covenant meal in His presence. The text tells us little about what they saw, only what was under His feet, as though their eyes could rise no higher. It may have been a vision of God’s throne like the ones Isaiah and John would later see. Some have suggested it was a manifestation of the Son, “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), since “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son... has made him known” (John 1:18). That meal on the mountain foreshadows the Lord’s Supper and, beyond it, the day when those invited to “the wedding supper of the Lamb” will eat and drink in God’s presence forever (Revelation 19:9).

But notice who was there: Nadab and Abihu. Not long afterward, these two sons of Aaron would offer “unauthorized fire” before the Lord and be struck down (Leviticus 10:1–2). Even they had seen God. Seeing God did not guarantee holiness

or continued obedience, any more than the miracles of the exodus guaranteed the faith of the people who witnessed them. Within weeks, the same elders who ate and drank before God would be standing by while Israel danced around a golden calf, with Aaron himself presiding (Exodus 32). Later still, Moses would fail to honor God at the waters of Meribah. Experiencing God, in the sense of a dramatic encounter, was no guarantee of persevering faith.

That is worth remembering in our own day. Some believers speak as though what they most need is a powerful experience of God's presence, and that such experiences will themselves produce favor with God and a life of obedience. Scripture speaks instead of humility, discipline, the study of God's Word, and persevering faith. Jesus warned that some who did mighty works in His name would one day hear, "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:23). Christians differ in how they describe and value experiences of God's presence in worship, and we should not despise the real joy and comfort God gives His people as they gather. Our own conviction is that the Christian life is not built on transcendent experiences, and that practices aimed at producing such experiences can resemble mystical techniques more than the teaching of Scripture. The path to holiness Scripture lays out is faith and obedience shaped by God's Word, which is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17). On this all can agree: genuine encounters with God lead to humility, obedience, and perseverance, and God's Word is the test of every experience.

The chapter ends with Moses climbing higher still, into the cloud. "To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the

mountain forty days and forty nights” (Exodus 24:17–18). What God would show him there—the pattern of a dwelling place where a holy God could live among His people—will occupy most of the rest of this book.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Israel’s laws commanded special care for the foreigner, the widow, and the fatherless, grounded in Israel’s own memory of slavery. How has God’s grace to you shaped the way you treat those who are vulnerable?
2. Why is it important to make explicit how we apply Old Testament laws and promises to our lives today? Have you ever claimed a promise that was never made to you, or felt condemned by one that did not apply?
3. Paul urged believers to be “wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.” How do you decide what to allow into your home and mind? How do you balance protection and growing discernment, especially with children?
4. God placed Moses in Pharaoh’s household so that he would one day write down God’s Word. Looking at your own upbringing, education, and work, what might God have prepared you for “such a time as this”?
5. The old covenant was sealed with the blood of sacrifice, and Jesus said, “This is my blood of the covenant.” How does this deepen your appreciation of the Lord’s Supper?
6. Nadab and Abihu saw God and ate in His presence, yet later rebelled. Why do spiritual experiences alone fail to produce lasting faithfulness? What habits help your faith persevere?

Chapter Nine

Exodus 25–27

With these chapters we enter a part of Exodus that many readers are tempted to skim. After the drama of the plagues, the Red Sea, and the thunder of Sinai, we come to page after page of measurements: cubits, curtains, clasps, frames, and bases. The description of the tabernacle can seem far removed from anything familiar to us today. But it is no less important for that. God Himself explains its purpose in a single sentence: “Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8). The God who had come down on the mountain in fire now intended to live in the middle of His people’s camp. Everything that follows is the answer to a question that runs through the whole Bible: How can a holy God dwell among sinful people?

Hebrews tells us that the tabernacle was “a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: ‘See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain’” (Hebrews 8:5; see Exodus 25:40). It was an earthly reflection, before Christ came, of what Christ would accomplish in heaven on our behalf.

That raises an important question about how to read these chapters. Because Hebrews explicitly interprets some features of the tabernacle—the curtain, the high priest, the sacrifices, the Most Holy Place—it is tempting to find hidden spiritual meaning in every detail: the number of boards, the kind of wood, the color of each thread. A long tradition of exposition has done exactly that, sometimes fruitfully and sometimes fancifully. The wisest approach, we believe, is to let the New Testament set the boundaries. Where Scripture itself draws a connection to Christ,

we should draw it confidently; where it does not, we should describe rather than decode. That rule leaves some genuine ambiguity, since Hebrews does not claim to exhaust every connection, and careful readers differ on how far the pattern extends. But it keeps us from reading our own imaginations into the text and calling them God's Word.

The first thing God asks for is an offering: "Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give" (Exodus 25:2). Unlike the tithe, which had a fixed measure, this contribution was entirely voluntary, given as each person's heart moved them. And the response was overwhelming. Later the craftsmen would come to Moses and say, "The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the LORD commanded to be done," and Moses had to send word through the camp telling the people to stop giving (Exodus 36:5-7). Giving that flowed from willing hearts outran the need. The same spirit appears in the churches of Macedonia, who, in the middle of severe poverty, gave "even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people" (2 Corinthians 8:3-4).

Notice the similarity between this giving and the giving Paul commends to Christians: "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). As we noted in the previous chapter, our own view is that Christians are not commanded to tithe, though giving is strongly encouraged in the New Testament, especially to support those who carry the gospel and to care for believers in need. We therefore do not believe believers should be pressured into giving a fixed percentage or into supporting this ministry or that building project. Give as you are moved in your heart. And as

you give, give especially to meet the needs of those who are truly in want, for it is as we love one another in practical ways that the world sees Christ in us: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

This raises a related question on which Christians have long differed: how those who minister should be supported. Our own view here is admittedly a minority one, and we offer it with that in mind. Jesus sent His disciples out without a money bag, telling them to stay in the homes that welcomed them, “eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages” (Luke 10:7). Paul acknowledged that “the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14), but he refused to use that right: “we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ” (1 Corinthians 9:12). His reward, he said, was “that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge” (1 Corinthians 9:18). He reminded the Ephesian elders that “these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak” (Acts 20:34–35). And he told the Thessalonians that he had worked night and day, “not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate” (2 Thessalonians 3:9). We take Paul’s example to mean that support for ministers is a permission rather than a command, and that there is wisdom in ministers following his pattern of self-support where they can, so that money never becomes an obstacle to the gospel. We also worry that when giving is channeled mostly into salaries, programs, and buildings, it can release ordinary believers from their personal responsibility to care for the needy themselves, as though the church could hire professionals to do the ministry for them.

Most Christian traditions, however, read the same passages as establishing supported local ministry as fully biblical, and their case deserves to be heard. Paul writes that “the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor” (Galatians 6:6), and that “the elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For Scripture says... ‘The worker deserves his wages’” (1 Timothy 5:17–18). He received the Philippians’ gifts with deep gratitude, calling them “a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (Philippians 4:18). On that reading, Paul’s refusal of support was a personal sacrifice for the sake of his mission, not a model binding on every pastor. Whichever way one reads these texts, the concern behind our view is one all traditions share: that money must never become an obstacle to the gospel, and that no system of giving can substitute for every believer’s personal care for those in need.

God could have sent His Son in a grand display that filled the whole world with the news of His coming. He did not. Jesus came to an obscure town and was laid in a manger. He chose to spread the gospel largely by word of mouth, through ordinary people telling others what they had seen and heard. We would probably have chosen a more impressive strategy. It is worth asking whether we sometimes lean more on the world’s methods—marketing techniques, business models, the latest technology—than on the simple faithfulness God asks of us. Such tools are not wrong in themselves, but they are not the power of the gospel. God is not anxious about the number of the saved; He knows those who are His, whose names were written “in the Lamb’s book of life” (Revelation 21:27; see Revelation 13:8; Ephesians 1:4). What He asks of us is that we be faithful in our calling, follow the leading of His Spirit, obey His Word, and speak and live Christ.

The first object God describes is the ark of the covenant, a chest of acacia wood overlaid with gold, with a cover of pure gold and two cherubim facing each other above it. “There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites” (Exodus 25:22). The ark represented God’s throne on earth, the place where His presence was manifested among His people.

Three things were eventually kept in or before the ark: the tablets of the covenant law (Exodus 25:16, 21), a jar containing an omer of manna “to be kept for the generations to come” (Exodus 16:32–34), and Aaron’s staff that budded, blossomed, and produced almonds, kept “as a sign to the rebellious” (Numbers 17:10; see Hebrews 9:4). Together they tell a coherent story. The tablets stand for the Law God gave; the manna for the provision He supplied; the staff for the leaders He appointed and confirmed. It was a small, self-contained museum of God’s faithfulness, carried at the center of the camp: what He commanded, how He provided, and whom He had chosen to lead. By Solomon’s day, only the tablets remained inside (1 Kings 8:9).

The ark appears again and again in Israel’s history. When the priests carrying it stepped into the Jordan, the river stopped flowing so that all Israel crossed on dry ground (Joshua 3:15–17). At Jericho it was carried around the city for seven days (Joshua 6). When the Philistines captured it, it brought them affliction until they sent it back (1 Samuel 5–6). Finally it was placed in the Most Holy Place of Solomon’s temple, where the high priest approached it only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, with the blood of sacrifice for the sins of the nation (Hebrews 9:7). What became of it when Babylon destroyed the temple, Scripture does not say.

One small detail in the ark's design becomes important later: "Cast four gold rings for it and fasten them to its four feet, with two rings on one side and two rings on the other. Then make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. Insert the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark to carry it. The poles are to remain in the rings of this ark; they are not to be removed" (Exodus 25:12–15). Later we learn that when the camp moved, the priests were to cover the ark first, and only then could the Kohathites, a particular clan of Levites, carry it by its poles. They were warned: "they must not touch the holy things or they will die" (Numbers 4:15).

Now consider what happened centuries later, when David set out to bring the ark to Jerusalem. "They set the ark of God on a new cart.... When they came to the threshing floor of Nakon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. The LORD's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God" (2 Samuel 6:3, 6–7). It was a terrible end to a joyful celebration. At first glance it seems that a man was killed for trying to do something good. But the details of Exodus and Numbers explain what the passage in Samuel does not. The ark was supposed to be carried on poles by Levites, not hauled on a cart like a piece of cargo—the very method the Philistines had used when they sent it back (1 Samuel 6:7). And no one was to touch it. Some have also questioned whether Uzzah and his brother were Levites at all; Scripture does not say, and we should not claim more than the text tells us.

David himself later recognized what had gone wrong. When he tried again, he told the Levites, "It was because you, the Levites, did not bring it up the first time that the LORD our God broke out in anger against us. We did not inquire of him about how to do it in the prescribed way." And this time, "the Levites

carried the ark of God with the poles on their shoulders, as Moses had commanded in accordance with the word of the LORD” (1 Chronicles 15:13, 15). Notice that David does not simply blame Uzzah. The failure was corporate: David had organized the procession, and the whole community had neglected the prescribed means. Reverence includes responsible preparation by those who lead the work.

What lessons can we learn from this? First, even the “boring” construction details of Exodus can be important for understanding the “less boring” parts of Scripture. Second, we get a sense of how seriously God takes His holiness and His commands. It was no light matter then, and it is no light matter now. Third, good intentions are no substitute for carefully following the Word of God. A sincere desire to honor God calls for patient attention to what He has actually said.

At the same time, we should not turn this episode into a threat that God will strike down worshipers for every inadvertent mistake. It concerns the holy ark within Israel’s covenant order. We approach God through Christ’s priestly work, and Hebrews calls us to “draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings” (Hebrews 10:22), while also urging us to “worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’” (Hebrews 12:28–29). Confidence and reverence are not opposites, and neither should be used to erase the other. Careful obedience is not a rival to joyful worship; it can be one of its truest expressions.

The rest of these chapters describe the furnishings of the tabernacle and the structure that housed them. There is a table for “the bread of the Presence... before me at all times” (Exodus 25:30), a golden lampstand with seven lamps shaped like almond blossoms, a tent of fine linen and goat hair and ram skins, a curtain to “separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy

Place" (Exodus 26:33), a bronze altar for burnt offerings at the entrance, and a courtyard enclosed by linen hangings. The priests were to keep the lamps burning continually with pure olive oil (Exodus 27:20–21).

Here, too, the New Testament guides our reading. John tells us that "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14); the word translated "made his dwelling" literally means "pitched his tent" or "tabernacled." What the tabernacle was in shadow, Jesus is in reality: God dwelling among His people. The bread of the Presence reminds us of the One who said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). The lampstand reminds us of the One who said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). The single entrance into the courtyard reminds us of the One who said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The golden cover of the ark, the place where sacrificial blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement, is echoed in Paul's words that "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood" (Romans 3:25). And the curtain that barred the way into the Most Holy Place was "torn in two from top to bottom" at the moment Jesus died (Matthew 27:51). Hebrews explains what that means for us: "since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body... let us draw near to God" (Hebrews 10:19–20, 22).

What does all this mean for us as Christians today? We no longer need an ark, a tent, or a temple in Jerusalem. God now dwells in His people by His Spirit: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" (1 Corinthians 6:19). We no longer need to travel to a particular place to meet with God. And we no longer need animal sacrifices, because Christ Himself, the Lamb of God, offered His own blood once for all (Hebrews 9:12). But

the tabernacle still teaches us what it cost for God to dwell with sinners, and it still calls us to approach Him with the same combination of confidence and reverence that Israel was meant to learn, in the shadow of that tent, in the middle of the camp.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. God said, “Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.” What does it mean to you that God desires to dwell with His people? How has He fulfilled that desire in Christ and by His Spirit?
2. The people gave so generously to the tabernacle that Moses had to tell them to stop. What motivates your own giving? How might you give more freely and cheerfully, especially to those in real need?
3. Christians differ on how ministers should be supported. What concerns lie behind each view? How can churches guard against money becoming an obstacle to the gospel?
4. The ark contained the Law, the manna, and Aaron’s staff—reminders of God’s commands, provision, and appointed leaders. What “memorials” of God’s faithfulness do you keep in your own life?
5. Uzzah’s death shows that good intentions are no substitute for obeying what God has said. Where might you be relying on sincerity rather than careful attention to God’s Word?
6. The curtain of the temple was torn in two when Jesus died. How does knowing that you may “draw near to God with a sincere heart” through Christ affect your prayer and worship?

Chapter Ten

Exodus 28–29

“...a quarter of a hin of oil from pressed olives” (Exodus 29:40). Chapters like these are hard going for many readers, and there is no shame in admitting it. The detail is so intricate that it takes real concentration to keep things straight: the ephod and its shoulder pieces, the breastpiece with its twelve stones, the robe, the turban, the tunics, the sashes, and then the precise sequence of offerings for the priests’ ordination. It is natural to wonder, “What is the point of all this detail? Does it really matter what the priests wore? Does it matter whether they used a quarter of a hin of oil, or half a hin, or a teaspoon?”

Of course it matters. The most important reason is not the detail itself but the One who commanded it. As we have seen, the weight of a command lies in the God who gives it. But there may be another reason as well. Solomon observed that people “seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart” (Ecclesiastes 5:20). If we dwelt constantly on the vanity of earthly life, we would be miserable; instead, God graciously fills our days with occupations and joys that keep us from being crushed by it. Could it be that the details of Israel’s worship served a similar purpose—keeping Israel’s attention fixed on God? When the priests were occupied with half a hin of this and an ephah of that, with the morning sacrifice and then the evening sacrifice, there was less room in their days for the evil intentions of their hearts to take root.

Scripture itself offers several reasons for the detail. The tabernacle and its service were made according to the pattern shown on the mountain (Exodus 25:40), a shadow of heavenly realities that would find their fulfillment in Christ (Hebrews 8:5). The care required in every step taught Israel that

approaching a holy God is never casual. And the daily offerings framed every day with worship: “This is what you are to offer on the altar regularly each day: two lambs a year old. Offer one in the morning and the other at twilight.... For the generations to come this burnt offering is to be made regularly at the entrance to the tent of meeting, before the LORD. There I will meet you and speak to you” (Exodus 29:38–39, 42).

There is a lesson here for us. Regular rhythms of devotion help protect the heart. Daniel prayed three times a day, “just as he had done before” (Daniel 6:10). The psalmist wrote, “Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice” (Psalm 55:17). The early church “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). One believer we know describes his own week this way: Scripture reading and memorization every morning, prayer morning and evening, a weekly men’s Bible study, Sunday School and worship on the Lord’s Day, time invested in teaching his family, and a deliberate effort to remove distractions that tend to become spiritual stumbling blocks—right down to choosing a seat facing the wall when he studies in a coffee shop. None of these habits makes anyone more spiritual, and none of them earns God’s favor. But they help keep us from becoming less spiritual. They are means of grace that keep the heart turned toward God in the ordinary flow of days. Each of us might ask: What is my “quarter hin of beaten oil”? What small, faithful practices keep my attention on the Lord rather than on vain things?

Chapter 28 describes the garments of the high priest, made “to give him dignity and honor” (Exodus 28:2). Two details in particular show us what the high priest was for. On his shoulders, set in gold filigree, were two onyx stones engraved with the names of the twelve tribes, “and Aaron is to bear the names on his shoulders as a memorial before the LORD”

(Exodus 28:12). And over his heart was the breastpiece, with twelve precious stones, each engraved with the name of one of the tribes: “Whenever Aaron enters the Holy Place, he will bear the names of the sons of Israel over his heart on the breastpiece of decision as a continuing memorial before the LORD” (Exodus 28:29). The high priest carried the people of God on his shoulders and over his heart every time he came into God’s presence. On his turban was a gold plate engraved with the words “HOLY TO THE LORD” (Exodus 28:36).

What a picture this is of our great High Priest. Jesus bears His people on His shoulders in strength and over His heart in love. “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (Hebrews 7:25). He is holy to the Lord in a way Aaron never was, and yet He is also able “to empathize with our weaknesses” because He “has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (Hebrews 4:15). Our names are not engraved on stones; they are written in the Lamb’s book of life, and He carries them before the Father.

It is worth noticing, too, how these garments were made. God told Moses, “Tell all the skilled workers to whom I have given wisdom in such matters that they are to make garments for Aaron” (Exodus 28:3). A few chapters later He will say of Bezalel, the chief artisan, “I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills” (Exodus 31:3). It is striking that the first person in Scripture explicitly described as filled with the Spirit of God is a craftsman, filled for the purpose of design, metalwork, and stonecutting. That complicates any assumption that spiritual gifting belongs only to preaching or leading. God equips His people for the work He gives them, whether it is building an ark like Noah, leading a nation like Moses, or cutting stones for a

priest's breastpiece. Our daily work, done for Him, can be holy work.

Inside the breastpiece were placed "the Urim and the Thummim... so they may be over Aaron's heart whenever he enters the presence of the LORD. Thus Aaron will always bear the means of making decisions for the Israelites over his heart before the LORD" (Exodus 28:30). What were they? Readers have long asked, and the answer is that Scripture tells us only a little. A good way to study a question like this is to look at every passage where the term appears. When Joshua succeeded Moses, God said he was to stand before Eleazar the priest, "who will obtain decisions for him by inquiring of the Urim before the LORD" (Numbers 27:21). When Saul sought to find out who had broken his rash oath, he prayed, "If the fault is in me or my son Jonathan, respond with Urim, but if the men of Israel are at fault, respond with Thummim," and "Jonathan and Saul were taken by lot, and the men were cleared" (1 Samuel 14:41). Later, when Saul had turned from God, "He inquired of the LORD, but the LORD did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets" (1 Samuel 28:6).

From these passages it appears that the Urim and Thummim were a means of seeking God's decision on specific questions—often choices between two options, or determinations of guilt or innocence—functioning something like the casting of lots. "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD" (Proverbs 16:33). They were not the only way God spoke to His people; 1 Samuel 28:6 lists them alongside dreams and prophets. But whereas dreams and prophecy were typically initiated by God, the Urim and Thummim allowed the leaders of Israel to bring a question to Him.

How exactly they worked, we do not know. The words may mean something like "lights" and "perfections." Jewish tradition developed various theories, including the suggestion that the

stones of the breastpiece lit up to spell out an answer, but these are later conjectures rather than anything Scripture tells us, and we should hold them loosely. What we can say is that their use seems to fade over time. After the exile, the leaders of the returning community had to set aside certain questions “until there was a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim” (Ezra 2:63), which suggests the practice had already fallen out of use. The last time lots were cast to discern God’s will in Scripture was when the apostles chose Matthias to replace Judas, before Pentecost (Acts 1:26). Since then, God has given us something better: His Son, His completed Word, and His indwelling Spirit. “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Hebrews 1:1–2).

Around the hem of the high priest’s robe were pomegranates of blue, purple, and scarlet yarn, alternating with gold bells. “Aaron must wear it when he ministers. The sound of the bells will be heard when he enters the Holy Place before the LORD and when he comes out, so that he will not die” (Exodus 28:35). Many of us have heard it preached that the high priest also had a rope tied to his ankle when he entered the Most Holy Place, so that if God struck him dead the other priests could drag his body out without entering themselves, and that the bells let them know whether he was still alive. It makes a vivid illustration. The only problem is that there is no support for it in Scripture. No rope is mentioned anywhere. Nor is it mentioned in the earliest detailed Jewish descriptions of the Day of Atonement; the story appears to come from much later legend. And the high priest did not even wear this robe when he went behind the curtain on the Day of Atonement. On that day he wore plain linen garments (Leviticus 16:4, 23–24). The bells were heard in the Holy Place, not the Most Holy Place.

That is a good reminder to check the illustrations we hear—and tell—against the text itself. The expression “so that he will not die” is not unique to the bells. It is applied to the priests’ garments and procedures generally (Exodus 28:43; 30:20–21). Failing to wear the prescribed garments or to carry out the prescribed procedures could bring death, as Nadab and Abihu learned when they offered unauthorized fire (Leviticus 10:1–2). God’s word to Aaron afterward explains why: “Among those who approach me I will be proved holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored” (Leviticus 10:3).

The bells themselves had a gentler meaning. Their sound was heard by the people outside as the high priest went in and came out. The people knew their representative was ministering before God on their behalf. Early Jewish tradition records that on the Day of Atonement the high priest did not linger in the sanctuary, so as not to alarm the people waiting anxiously outside for him to reappear. That anxiety was real even without a rope. Hebrews sees in this a picture of Christ, who “did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12), and who “will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:28). The people waiting for the high priest to come out became a picture of the church waiting for its Lord’s return.

So we must ask ourselves: Do we treat God as holy today? Do we make light of His grace by neglecting careful study of His Word and diligent obedience to it? Have we honored God by teaching our children to love and fear Him? Let us consider our ways and align ourselves with what we clearly understand to be His will.

Chapter 29 describes the ordination of Aaron and his sons. It is an ordered movement into service. The priests do not appoint

themselves on the strength of enthusiasm or personal competence. They are brought to the entrance of the tent of meeting, washed with water, clothed in their garments, and anointed (Exodus 29:4–9). Then come the offerings. A bull is offered as a sin offering, with its blood put on the horns of the altar and its flesh burned outside the camp, signifying cleansing from sin. A first ram is offered as a whole burnt offering, signifying complete dedication and acceptance by God. A second ram, the “ram for the ordination,” is slaughtered, and some of its blood is put “on the lobes of the right ears of Aaron and his sons, on the thumbs of their right hands, and on the big toes of their right feet” (Exodus 29:20), with blood and anointing oil sprinkled on their garments. Portions of that ram, with bread, are waved before the Lord and burned; other portions—the breast and thigh—are given to the priests to eat as their share. The whole ceremony is repeated over seven days (Exodus 29:35).

Many have suggested that the blood on the ear, thumb, and toe signified that the priests’ hearing, their work, and their walk were all consecrated to God. The text does not spell out that meaning, and we should be modest about it. But the broader point is clear: consecration reached the whole embodied person, even the clothes worn in service. The priesthood was not merely a title or an inward sense of calling. The person and the work alike were brought under the Lord’s claim.

It is also worth noticing that not every offering in the sacrificial system dealt with sin, and not every offering was entirely burned. The grain and drink offerings involved no blood at all. The ordination ram and the fellowship offerings were partly burned, partly given to the priests, and in the case of fellowship offerings, partly eaten by the worshiper and his family. The system included provision for gratitude and fellowship as well as atonement, and it provided for the

sustenance of those who served. Holiness did not mean treating ordinary needs as irrelevant. When we read the sacrifices exclusively through the lens of what Christ's death fulfilled, it is easy to lose sight of that richness. Yet the heart of the system was the offering of blood for sin, and here the New Testament is emphatic: the only atoning sacrifice God finally accepts for our sin is the one Jesus offered on the cross.

Beyond the ordination, God commands a continual burnt offering every morning and every evening, a lamb with fine flour, oil, and wine, "for the generations to come" (Exodus 29:38–42). Day after day, year after year, these offerings would be made, until the one sacrifice to which they pointed was offered. Hebrews draws the contrast: "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 10:11–12). The temple sacrifices continued historically for a time after the cross, until the temple itself was destroyed in AD 70, but their purpose had been fulfilled. Christ's sacrifice is not one more installment in an endless series; it is final.

The chapter ends with the purpose of the whole enterprise: "Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God" (Exodus 29:45–46). Notice that God describes the exodus itself as being for this purpose: He brought them out so that He might dwell among them. Redemption was never an end in itself. God rescued Israel in order to live with them. It is sobering to think of how much grace this represents. God chose them, delivered them, equipped them, and provided priests to minister before Him. He chose to hear their cries, their groaning,

their complaints, and their prayers. And how many times were they faithless, and He forgave them anyway?

The same grace reaches us. Peter tells believers that “you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). We are not ordained with the blood of rams, but we have been cleansed by the blood of Christ and set apart for His service. Our ears, our hands, and our feet belong to Him. Paul’s call follows naturally: “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1).

Some readers of these chapters have noticed that in our own day there are groups in Israel preparing garments, vessels, and even a breastpiece for a hoped-for rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Many Orthodox Jews believe the Messiah Himself will rebuild the temple and restore its sacrifices. Christians who read biblical prophecy in a futurist way often see a rebuilt temple in passages such as 2 Thessalonians 2:4, while other Christians understand such passages differently and do not expect a literal third temple. Whatever one’s view of prophecy, what is uncontroversial is that the sacrifices described in these chapters have already found their fulfillment. We do not wait for another altar or another high priest. We wait for our High Priest to come out from the presence of God and bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. The details of Israel’s worship may have helped keep their attention on God. What is your “quarter hin of beaten oil”—the small, regular practices that keep your heart turned toward the Lord? Which one might you need to add or recover?

2. The high priest carried the names of Israel on his shoulders and over his heart. How does it encourage you to know that Jesus bears you in strength and love before the Father?
3. Bezalel was filled with the Spirit of God for skilled craftsmanship. How might your ordinary work be an offering to God and a means of serving His purposes?
4. The popular story of the rope on the high priest's ankle has no basis in Scripture. Why is it important to test even appealing illustrations against the text? Have you ever discovered that something you believed was not actually in the Bible?
5. The priests' consecration reached their ears, hands, and feet. In what areas of your life—what you listen to, what you do, where you go—do you most need to recognize that you belong to the Lord?
6. God said He brought Israel out of Egypt “so that I might dwell among them.” How does it change your view of salvation to see that God's purpose in rescuing you is to be with you?

Chapter Eleven

Exodus 30–32

Chapter 30 continues the instructions for the tabernacle with a few final furnishings, and each one repays attention. The first is the altar of incense, which stood in the Holy Place directly in front of the curtain. Aaron was to burn fragrant incense on it every morning and every evening, “so incense will burn regularly before the LORD for the generations to come” (Exodus 30:8). And he was warned, “Do not offer on this altar any other incense or any burnt offering or grain offering” (Exodus 30:9). The recipe for the sacred incense was so specific that no one was permitted to make it for personal use: “consider it holy to the LORD” (Exodus 30:37).

Scripture later connects incense with prayer. David prayed, “May my prayer be set before you like incense” (Psalm 141:2). In Revelation, the elders before the throne hold “golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people” (Revelation 5:8; see also 8:3–4). And Luke’s Gospel opens with Zechariah burning incense in the temple while “all the assembled worshipers were praying outside” (Luke 1:10). Every morning and evening, the fragrance rising before the curtain was a picture of a people’s prayers rising before God.

The instruction about “unauthorized” incense becomes important soon afterward. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest was to take “a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain” (Leviticus 16:12). The fire for the incense came from the altar of burnt offering. But on the very day the priests began their ministry, Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu “took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the

LORD, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them” (Leviticus 10:1–2). We are not told exactly what made their fire unauthorized, though it may well be that it did not come from the altar as God had prescribed. What we are told is God’s explanation: “Among those who approach me I will be proved holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.” And “Aaron remained silent” (Leviticus 10:3). The closer the access, the greater the reverence required.

There is a striking parallel at the beginning of the church. Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property and brought part of the money to the apostles while pretending it was the whole amount. They lied to the Holy Spirit, and both died. “Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events” (Acts 5:11). At the inauguration of the priesthood and at the inauguration of the church, God displayed His holiness in a way no one could forget. He does not appear to strike people down in the same way today. But that does not mean we should treat His holiness with any less seriousness. We still must study His Word carefully and apply it correctly.

It is in that light that we share a concern. Our own view, as we noted in an earlier chapter, is that the miraculous and revelatory gifts of the apostolic era were foundational and ceased with the completion of Scripture, and that the tongues of the New Testament were real foreign languages. We are troubled by teaching in some quarters that attributes to the Holy Spirit words, experiences, and practices that have no clear warrant in Scripture, and we believe believers should be alert to such teaching. Many sincere Christians hold a continuationist view and would describe their own experience very differently, and we do not doubt the sincerity of their love for Christ. But on this all sides should agree: whatever is offered to God in the name of His Spirit must be tested by His Word, and none of us

may bring “unauthorized fire” before the Lord simply because it feels like worship to us.

The second provision in chapter 30 is easy to read past, but it proves significant later. “When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must pay the LORD a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them” (Exodus 30:12). Every person counted was to give half a shekel, a small sum. And the text insists, “The rich are not to give more than a half shekel and the poor are not to give less when you make the offering to the LORD to atone for your lives” (Exodus 30:15). The money went to the service of the tent of meeting, “a memorial for the Israelites before the LORD, making atonement for your lives” (Exodus 30:16).

That provision is not putting a price on human life. It is saying something about equality before God. A sliding scale would have implied that some lives were worth more than others. A flat sum, deliberately set low enough that no one was excluded, implied the opposite. Every Israelite, rich or poor, stood before God on the same footing, in need of the same ransom. The census was, in effect, an act of worship: each person counted was acknowledged as belonging to God and living by His grace. The New Testament echoes this in a small scene where Jesus pays the temple tax for Himself and Peter with a coin from a fish’s mouth (Matthew 17:24–27), a scene that points to a far greater ransom He would pay: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

This little paragraph may also shed light on a puzzling event in David’s reign. David ordered a census of Israel, and a plague followed in which seventy thousand people died. Scripture tells us that “Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census” (1 Chronicles 21:1), and also that “the anger of the LORD

burned against Israel, and he incited David against them” (2 Samuel 24:1). Afterward, “David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the LORD, ‘I have sinned greatly in what I have done’” (2 Samuel 24:10). Who was responsible—David, Satan, or God? And what exactly was the sin? When David asked why God would not punish him alone instead of the people, God gave no answer. Like Job before him, David learned that God’s sovereign actions are not subject to our demands for explanation.

But we may venture a suggestion about the nature of the sin. One Bible teacher has observed that in the ancient world a person had the right to count only what belonged to him. Israel did not belong to David; it belonged to God. A census was God’s to command, and if one was taken, it required the ransom prescribed in Exodus 30, “then no plague will come on them.” That would explain both God’s anger and David’s stricken conscience. Other interpreters emphasize David’s pride in his military strength, or his reliance on numbers rather than on God. Even Joab, a hardheaded general, objected, “Why should he bring guilt on Israel?” (1 Chronicles 21:3). These explanations are not mutually exclusive. Whatever the precise nature of the wrong, David had treated God’s people as though they were his own possession.

Before the golden calf, it is worth pausing on how Scripture holds together two truths about human beings that we are prone to separate. Consider your own small body, sitting in a room, in a building, in a city, on a continent, on a planet, in a solar system, in a galaxy that is a hundred thousand light-years across, among countless galaxies in a universe of almost unimaginable size. God says, “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9). Compared to God, there is nothing about us that could obligate Him. “LORD, what are

human beings that you care for them, mere mortals that you think of them?” (Psalm 144:3). Apart from Him, we are dust: “for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19).

And yet we have value—because God values us. The same God who formed us from dust called us His image (Genesis 1:27). He numbers the very hairs of our heads (Matthew 10:30). He so loved the world that He gave His only Son (John 3:16). The psalmist’s question is asking *why* God should notice such creatures; it is not answering that He doesn’t. Both truths are needed. Without the first, grace becomes a fair transaction and stops being grace. Without the second, it becomes impossible to explain why God bothered at all—and a reader who already struggles to believe he matters might find in the first truth a confirmation Scripture never intended to give. Nothing about us obligated God, and God has nonetheless judged us worth rescuing.

Chapter 31 names the craftsmen God has filled with His Spirit to build the tabernacle, Bezalel and Oholiab (Exodus 31:1–6), and then restates the Sabbath as “a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy” (Exodus 31:13). Then comes the climax of Moses’ forty days on the mountain: “When the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant law, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God” (Exodus 31:18).

It is worth remembering what those forty days looked like from the foot of the mountain. From the people’s side, they were silent. Moses had gone up with his assistant Joshua, leaving Aaron and Hur in charge (Exodus 24:13–14). There was no word from Moses, no new message from God. But Exodus 25–31, the very chapters that fill that silence, record God speaking to Moses continuously—and what He was describing was the tabernacle, the means by which He would come down to dwell

in the middle of their camp. While the people concluded that Moses was gone and that they needed a god they could see, God was preparing to live among them. The calf was a counterfeit of what was already being prepared.

“When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, ‘Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him’” (Exodus 32:1). Aaron asks for their gold earrings, and “He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, ‘Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD’” (Exodus 32:4–5).

Notice the name Aaron uses: *the LORD*, the covenant name of Israel’s God. He does not announce a feast to Apis or to Baal. He associates the golden calf with the very God who had just brought them out of Egypt. The people would still be worshipping “the LORD,” in their minds, but they would do it through the vehicle of a calf they could see. That is what makes this episode more disturbing than a simple turning to foreign gods. Israel was trying to worship the true God through a false, self-designed image—precisely what the second commandment, spoken just weeks earlier, forbade: “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them” (Exodus 20:4–5). The people had heard that command and promised, “Everything the LORD has said we will do” (Exodus 24:3). God’s verdict is simple: “They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them” (Exodus 32:8). Centuries later, Jeroboam would set up golden calves in

Bethel and Dan with almost the same words: “Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt” (1 Kings 12:28).

The people’s impatience with Moses is part of the setting. They could not bear the uncertainty of waiting, and the calf gave them something to organize themselves around immediately—an object, a feast, a celebration. That is the psychological force of idolatry: impatience can make an unauthorized substitute seem more reassuring than faithful waiting. They had lived in the presence of God in the pillar of cloud and fire since leaving Egypt, and yet they could not trust Him because His human representative had been gone too long. Isn’t this what we do? Time and again God shows us His character, and time and again we keep a backup plan in case He does not come through in the way or the time we want.

The lesson for our own day is sobering. Religious language can remain familiar while the substance of obedience is quietly altered. Calling something worship does not make it honor the God named in it. In our own culture, it is easy to assume that anyone who uses the name of Jesus must be worshiping the same Jesus revealed in Scripture, or to treat the Bible as a work of art whose meaning each person discovers for himself rather than as the objective Word of God. Some who appeal to personal prophecies, dreams, and visions treat them as though they carry authority alongside Scripture. We believe these trends deserve careful scrutiny. At the same time, the golden calf offers a principle of discernment, not permission to avoid careful description. Different traditions and movements must be evaluated by what they actually teach, not lumped together. And the danger is not confined to practices we already find strange. A community can use biblical words while making money, status, a leader’s personality, or a desired emotional experience its practical center. Many popular forms of preaching today reshape God into a more convenient image—a God who exists

to grant our wishes and never calls us to repentance. The danger in our day is rarely an outright abandonment of Christianity; it is Aaron's subtler move of still claiming to worship the true God while reshaping Him into an image that pleases the crowd. We should ask of our own churches and our own hearts: What actually governs our decisions? What is beyond question? Is our confidence accountable to the God who speaks in Scripture? The aim of discernment is not the satisfaction of identifying someone else's calf, but a more faithful relationship with God ourselves.

"Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry" (Exodus 32:6). Paul quotes this very verse to warn the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 10:7). And on the mountain, God tells Moses what is happening: "I have seen these people... and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation" (Exodus 32:9–10).

It is easy to read quickly over those words. Pause and feel their weight. After everything God had done to grow and deliver this people over hundreds of years, He was prepared to destroy them and begin again with Moses, as He had begun again with Noah after the flood and with Abraham after Babel. Do you notice a pattern? People in every generation fail to meet the standard God requires. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

And we tend to hold far too high a view of ourselves. We naturally assume we are like Noah, not like the multitudes who perished. We assume we are like Moses, not like the people God was ready to destroy. We identify with Joshua and Caleb, not with those whose bodies fell in the wilderness. What accounts for that assumption? Is it not the old desire, inherited from Adam, to "be like God" (Genesis 3:5)—to see ourselves at the

center of the story as the hero rather than as the rebel in need of rescue? There is no warrant for reading ourselves automatically into the faithful minority. We would do well to reflect on our own mortality and on God's sovereignty, and to recalibrate our perspective.

But notice where the story goes. Moses does not leave God alone. He intercedes. He appeals to God's reputation—"Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains?'"—and to God's promises: "Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self" (Exodus 32:12–13). "Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened" (Exodus 32:14). The episode is not finally about God's readiness to discard people. It is about a mediator standing between a people and the judgment they deserved.

Does this mean that God can be persuaded to change His mind? In one sense, yes; in another, no. Scripture says both that the Lord relented here and that "God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind" (Numbers 23:19). Our own understanding is that God fully knew that Moses would intercede and that He would relent; the possibility of mercy was built into the very invitation to intercede. From our side, real change happens through prayer—"The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (James 5:16)—and our prayers genuinely matter. Yet God also foreknew exactly the change our prayers would bring, so that His good and perfect will moves forward without fail. Other Christians emphasize that God's relenting shows a real, responsive relationship with His people, while agreeing that His character and purposes never change. Either way, this is hard for our small minds to grasp. David confessed about God's knowledge, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain" (Psalm 139:6). What should not be hard to

grasp is the practical point: God invites His people to pray, and He answers.

When Moses comes down and sees the calf and the dancing, he throws the tablets down and shatters them at the foot of the mountain. He burns the calf, grinds it to powder, scatters it on the water, and makes the Israelites drink it (Exodus 32:19–20). What a bitter drink that must have been—what a valley after the mountaintop they had just been on.

Then Moses turns to Aaron: “What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?” (Exodus 32:21). Aaron’s answer is a study in how responsibility gets distributed away. “Do not be angry, my lord.... You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, ‘Make us gods who will go before us.’ ... So I told them, ‘Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.’ Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!” (Exodus 32:22–24). First he blames the people. Then he removes his own agency altogether. The narrator has already told us that Aaron took the gold and fashioned it with a tool (Exodus 32:4). The account and the excuse do not match, and the text has been arranged so that we can see the gap. It is the same move Adam and Eve made in the garden, shifting the blame to someone else. “Out came this calf”—just like that!

It is easy to react to Aaron by saying, “Come on!” But if we are honest, we quickly remember all the times God could say the same to us. These were people who had not merely read about God’s power; they had lived it. And still there was room for rebellion to grow. Aaron had seen every miracle in Egypt and the desert, had even taken part in some of them, and yet he gave in to the crowd within weeks. That is why it is so important to look into the mirror of Scripture and see our own face. “But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but

doing it—they will be blessed in what they do” (James 1:25). We cannot live a blessed life by willpower—how can we overpower ourselves? We cannot live it by cleverness—how can we outsmart ourselves? Because we are sinful, we must die to self in order to live well. “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). And those who know most deeply how sinful they are tend to become the most merciful toward others: “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13).

Moses saw “that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies” (Exodus 32:25). He called out, “Whoever is for the LORD, come to me,” and the Levites rallied to him (Exodus 32:26). The judgment that followed was severe. Then Moses went back up to the Lord: “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written” (Exodus 32:31–32). God answered, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book” (Exodus 32:33), and a plague struck the people (Exodus 32:35).

What is this “book”? Scripture speaks in several places of God’s book (Psalm 69:28; 139:16), and the New Testament speaks of “the book of life” in which the names of the redeemed are written (Philippians 4:3; Revelation 3:5; 20:15; 21:27). It is not clear that every reference means the same thing. In Psalm 139:16, David speaks of all the days ordained for him being written in God’s book, which seems to refer to physical life. In the immediate context of Exodus 32, God’s judgment takes the form of a plague. And in Numbers 11:15, Moses again ties his

fate to the people's, asking God to take his physical life rather than leave him to bear the burden alone. It may be, then, that Moses is asking to die physically in place of the nation's destruction—a costly, concrete offer of substitution. Others read Moses as offering even his eternal standing for his people, as Paul later wished himself “cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people” (Romans 9:3). On either reading, Moses does not plead the people's innocence; he says plainly that they have sinned greatly, and he offers himself in their place. That is where Exodus locates the language of atonement: “perhaps I can make atonement for your sin” (Exodus 32:30).

And it is worth remembering where Aaron's story goes. Despite this failure, he is consecrated as Israel's first high priest (Leviticus 8). It is fair to wonder how effectively a man who fell so quickly could intercede for his people's sins. And yet Hebrews says that every human high priest “is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness” (Hebrews 5:2). How marvelous, then, that we have a High Priest who understands our weakness without sharing our sin: “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:14–16). Moses offered to be blotted out for his people. Christ was actually cut off for His. “Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us” (Romans 8:34).

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. The incense rising every morning and evening pictured the prayers of God's people. What would it look like for your prayers to rise "regularly before the LORD"?
2. Every Israelite paid the same half shekel regardless of wealth. How does the truth that we all stand before God on equal footing shape the way you view others—and yourself?
3. Aaron proclaimed "a festival to the LORD" while leading the people in idolatry. Where might you be tempted to reshape God into a more convenient image while still using His name?
4. Israel made the calf because they could not bear to wait. What "backup plans" do you keep in case God does not act in the way or the time you want?
5. Aaron blamed the people and then claimed the calf simply "came out" of the fire. How do you tend to deflect responsibility for your sin? What would honest confession look like?
6. Moses offered to be blotted out of God's book for his people's sake. How does his intercession help you appreciate what Christ has done and is doing for you as your High Priest?

Chapter Twelve

Exodus 33–35

After the golden calf, God tells Moses to lead the people on toward the land He had promised—but with a devastating qualification: “I will send an angel before you.... But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way” (Exodus 33:2–3). Israel could have the land, the milk and honey, the victory over their enemies, everything except the presence of God Himself. “When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments” (Exodus 33:4). God had told them, “Now take off your ornaments and I will decide what to do with you,” and the text adds a remarkable note: “So the Israelites stripped off their ornaments at Mount Horeb” (Exodus 33:5–6), and they did not wear them again from that point on.

Why would God command such a thing? Part of the answer may lie in how the golden calf was made. Aaron had told the people to take off the gold rings in their ears and bring them to him, and from that gold he fashioned the calf (Exodus 32:2–4). And where had that gold come from? From the Egyptians, on the way out of Egypt (Exodus 12:35–36). It was plunder from their deliverance, given to them, in effect, by God Himself—and within weeks it had been melted into the very thing that nearly destroyed them. That trajectory, from gift to idol in a matter of weeks, is a warning to all of us. The good things God gives can so easily become the things we trust in place of Him.

But the removal of ornaments seems to have been more than a precaution. The people “began to mourn.” Setting aside their finery was a physical expression of grief and repentance. In our own image-conscious culture, a reminder may be in order. God is not first concerned with our outward appearance but with the

condition of our hearts. When Samuel was sent to anoint a king from Jesse's sons, the Lord told him, "The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Peter urges believers to cultivate "the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight" (1 Peter 3:4), and James warns against favoring a man with a gold ring and fine clothes over a poor man in shabby clothes (James 2:2-4). The New Testament's instructions about adornment are not only about appearance but about ostentation and status. God does not want us drawing attention to ourselves and our beauty or wealth; He wants our lives to draw attention to Him.

Moses, meanwhile, pitched a tent outside the camp and called it the "tent of meeting." When he went there, the pillar of cloud would come down and stand at the entrance, "and the LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exodus 33:11). Joshua, his young assistant, did not leave the tent. There is something deeply moving in that description. In the aftermath of Israel's worst failure, God still spoke with one man as a friend.

And that man pleads with God. "If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people" (Exodus 33:13). Notice what Moses asks for. He does not ask for success, protection, or even instructions. He asks to know God's ways so that he may know God Himself. The knowing is the goal; everything else is secondary. God answers, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Exodus 33:14). But Moses presses further, for the whole nation: "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from

all the other people on the face of the earth?" (Exodus 33:15–16).

That is one of the great prayers of the Bible. Moses understood that the Promised Land without the presence of God would not be worth having. What made Israel distinct was not its land, its law, or its army; it was that God dwelt among them. The same is true of the church. Our buildings, programs, and resources mean nothing if God is not in our midst. And God answered: "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name" (Exodus 33:17). It took the pleading of one man on behalf of the whole nation. Here is another facet of God's character: He responds to earnest prayer, and He has mercy on those who come to Him. Again and again in Israel's history we see God's anger and then His mercy in response to the sins of a stubborn people. As Christians, we can read that history as one long display of undeserved grace.

There is a curious exchange running through these chapters that some readers find almost amusing. After the calf, God tells Moses, "Go down, because *your* people, whom *you* brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt" (Exodus 32:7). Moses replies, "LORD, why should your anger burn against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of Egypt?" (Exodus 32:11). God says, "Leave this place, you and the people *you* brought up out of Egypt" (Exodus 33:1). Moses answers, "Remember that this nation is *your* people" (Exodus 33:13). It is as though each is handing the people back to the other. But this is more than a grammatical game. In covenant language, whose "people" a nation is called is a statement about relationship and responsibility. God's calling them Moses' people reads almost like a parent distancing himself from a child's disgraceful behavior, and Moses' refusal to accept that description is itself an act of intercession. He will not let God's ownership lapse, even in the middle of Israel's worst failure. And God finally

settles the matter. He promises, “Before all *your* people I will do wonders never before done in any nation” (Exodus 34:10), and later He will declare without qualification, “I am the LORD, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy” (Leviticus 11:45).

What does God say about us? Peter tells believers, “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:10). Paul, quoting Hosea, writes, “I will call them ‘my people’ who are not my people; and I will call her ‘my loved one’ who is not my loved one” (Romans 9:25). Thank You, Lord, that You have chosen us and call us “my people” and “my loved one.”

Then Moses makes an astonishing request: “Now show me your glory” (Exodus 33:18). God’s answer both honors the request and sets a limit on it. “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But... you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Exodus 33:19–20). God places Moses in a cleft in the rock, covers him with His hand as He passes by, and lets him see His back but not His face.

When the moment comes, the Lord passes in front of Moses proclaiming: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation” (Exodus 34:6–7). Moses asked to see God’s glory, and what God revealed first was not His power but His character—and the first words were compassion and grace. Asked to show His glory, God recited His mercy.

This self-description became one of the most quoted passages within the Old Testament itself. It reappears, sometimes almost word for word, in Numbers 14:18, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalms 86:15, 103:8, and 145:8, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2, and Nahum 1:3. Israel's prayers and prophets returned to it again and again. Jonah even quoted it as a complaint: he fled from his mission to Nineveh because, as he told God, "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jonah 4:2). And John tells us where this glory is finally seen in full: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Moses saw God's back from the cleft of a rock; we see "the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

The two declarations of God's name in these chapters—"I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy" (Exodus 33:19) and "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God" (Exodus 34:6)—almost need to be read together with Paul's use of them to appreciate their full significance. "What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (Romans 9:14–16).

Both declarations concern the same theme, God's grace and compassion, but they highlight different aspects of it. The first proclaims God's sovereign freedom to bestow mercy on whomever He chooses. The second proclaims His justice, both in forgiving and in punishing. Interestingly, when Paul argues for God's justice in Romans 9, he cites the first declaration, the one about sovereignty. Isn't that because God's justice and His sovereignty are intimately connected?

Look carefully at the second declaration and you will see what seems like a tension. God forgives "wickedness, rebellion

and sin,” and yet He “does not leave the guilty unpunished.” Which is it? Will God forgive, or will He punish? The text says both. On what basis, then, does God determine whom He forgives and whom He punishes? Our own view is that the answer lies in His sovereignty. All deserve punishment, because all are guilty of wickedness, rebellion, and sin (Romans 3:9–18, 23), but God is gracious and compassionate toward some according to His sovereign choice (Romans 9:16). That is how He is both just and merciful at the same time. And ultimately the tension is resolved at the cross, where God punished sin fully in the person of His Son, “so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:26).

We are not trying here to settle the whole debate about election and free will, though our convictions on that question are clear from earlier chapters. Christians in other traditions read Romans 9–11 as concerned primarily with God’s freedom to include the Gentiles and to shape the destiny of peoples in His saving plan, noting that the section ends with God’s purpose “that he may have mercy on them all” (Romans 11:32). All agree that God’s mercy is free and undeserved and that no one can claim it as a right. What matters most is a proper understanding of God Himself, who has declared His name to be both sovereign and just, both merciful and holy. A mistaken view here affects not only how we understand salvation but how we understand God.

A word should also be said about the phrase “he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.” This does not mean that God condemns innocent children for their parents’ sins; Ezekiel is clear that “the child will not share the guilt of the parent” (Ezekiel 18:20). The second commandment specifies that this applies to “those who hate me” (Exodus 20:5), the children who continue in their parents’ rebellion. And the contrast in

proportion is striking: God's punishment extends to three or four generations, but His love to "thousands."

God then renews the covenant. Moses chisels out two new tablets like the ones he had broken, and God writes on them again (Exodus 34:1, 28). And He repeats a warning that would prove critical to Israel's future: "Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you.... Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.... And when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same" (Exodus 34:12, 14, 16).

Keep this command in mind as we move through the rest of the Old Testament. Breaking it would bring Israel to the brink of destruction. Israel would fail again and again to take the land, not because of military weakness but because of moral and spiritual weakness. The concern was never merely about maintaining group boundaries. It was that relationships and obligations would reshape the people's allegiance, drawing their hearts away from the Lord. A community can appear strong while undermining the very relationship that gives its life meaning. The New Testament carries the principle forward for believers: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14). At the same time, this warning should not become a prohibition on respectful relationships with people outside the faith. Christians are called to love their neighbors and bear witness among the nations. The enduring concern is faithfulness to God amid real relationships, not withdrawal from everyone who is different. We can receive people with dignity while refusing commitments that would require disobedience.

There is a lesson here about how we measure success. Too often we look at outward measures: how many retreats we have attended, how often we have responded to an altar call, whether

we raise our hands in worship, how much we have given. These things can be good, and some of them Scripture itself calls for. But none of them infallibly reveals the heart. God cares whether we obey His Word from the heart, and that requires two things above all: knowing God's Word and doing it. "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22). Everything else is either an expression of that or an encumbrance to it. A useful test is to ask what happens when a religious activity conflicts with a plain responsibility. Does ministry busyness become an excuse to neglect our families? Does public generosity mask dishonest dealings? The issue is never whether our practices are visible, but whether they express obedience or conceal its absence.

When Moses came down from the mountain with the new tablets, "he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD" (Exodus 34:29). The people were afraid to come near him, and afterward he wore a veil over his face except when he went in to speak with the Lord. Paul reflects on this scene in 2 Corinthians 3, explaining that the glory of the old covenant, glorious as it was, was fading, while the glory of the new covenant is greater and lasting. "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). Moses' face shone because he had been with God. Ours are meant to reflect Christ increasingly as we spend time in His presence and His Word. And notice: Moses was not aware that his face was shining. The people who most reflect God's glory are often the last to know it.

Chapter 35 begins the construction of the tabernacle in earnest. Moses reminds the people of the Sabbath (Exodus 35:2-3) and then invites their offerings: "From what you have, take an offering for the LORD. Everyone who is willing is to bring

to the LORD an offering of gold, silver and bronze” (Exodus 35:5). And the people respond: “everyone who was willing and whose heart moved them came and brought an offering to the LORD” (Exodus 35:21). Men and women alike brought brooches, earrings, rings, and ornaments of gold. Women who were skilled spun yarn and goat hair. Leaders brought precious stones and spices (Exodus 35:22–28). “All the Israelite men and women who were willing brought to the LORD freewill offerings” (Exodus 35:29).

What a contrast with chapter 32! The same people who had once given their gold to make an idol now gave their gold to build a dwelling place for God. The same hands that had fashioned the calf now spun yarn for the tabernacle. That is what repentance and restoration look like. God did not simply forgive Israel’s sin and leave them where they were. He gave them a new way to use the very things they had misused. The gifts that had become a snare became an offering. And the tabernacle they built would stand as a daily reminder that the God who had every reason to withdraw His presence had chosen instead to dwell among them.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. The gold Israel received as a gift from God became an idol within weeks. What good gifts in your life are most in danger of becoming substitutes for God Himself?
2. Moses prayed, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.” Would you want God’s blessings without His presence? What would it look like to make knowing God your highest goal?
3. When Moses asked to see God’s glory, God proclaimed His compassion, grace, patience, love, and faithfulness. Which of

these attributes do you most need to remember today, and why?

4. God declared, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy." How does the truth that mercy is never owed to us shape your gratitude and your view of others?
5. God warned Israel against alliances that would draw their hearts away from Him. How do you maintain loving relationships with people outside the faith without allowing them to reshape your allegiance?
6. The people who once gave their gold for an idol later gave it freely for God's tabernacle. What in your life, once misused, might God be calling you to offer back to Him?

Chapter Thirteen

Exodus 36–38

By now we are about a month into the daily reading plan that this book follows. Some readers may have already let their Bible reading go the way of so many New Year's resolutions. If that is you, treat today as a fresh first day, and resolve again to persevere. Some things are worth continuing no matter how often we stumble in them. And if you have not yet found others to read and share with, consider looking for them. There may be nothing more helpful for growing in the discipline and understanding of God's Word than sharing it regularly with others, whether in a small group, a class, or even a simple exchange of messages with a few friends. The early church met "every day" to hear the apostles' teaching and encourage one another (Acts 2:46). That is quite different from the single weekly service that has become customary for many of us, but through daily reading and sharing we can recover something of that early heartbeat. "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together" (Hebrews 10:24–25).

Exodus 36–38 records the actual construction of the tabernacle, and much of it repeats, almost word for word, the instructions of chapters 25–31. It is tempting to skim. But the repetition is deliberate. It shows that the people did exactly what God had commanded. After their spectacular failure with the golden calf, Israel now builds with care and obedience, and the narrative lingers over every detail to show it. The section will close with the refrain, "The Israelites had done all the work just as the LORD had commanded Moses" (Exodus 39:42).

The construction begins with the craftsmen. "So Bezalel, Oholiab and every skilled person to whom the LORD has given

skill and ability to know how to carry out all the work of constructing the sanctuary are to do the work just as the LORD has commanded” (Exodus 36:1). Then “Moses summoned Bezalel and Oholiab and every skilled person to whom the LORD had given ability and who was willing to come and do the work” (Exodus 36:2).

Different translations render that last phrase in slightly different ways. Some read it as though the initiative lay with the people: those who were willing came. Others bring out more clearly that the Lord had put wisdom in their hearts and that their hearts were stirred to come. The underlying Hebrew speaks literally of “everyone whose heart lifted him up,” and the same verse attributes the skill to the Lord’s giving. Both renderings preserve both elements—God’s gifting and the people’s willingness—but they distribute the emphasis differently, which is a useful reminder of why comparing translations can be worth the effort. Our own inclination is to see God as the one who initiates the willingness. After all, who among us naturally wants to work? It is God who overcomes our inclination toward idleness and self-interest: “for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13). Yet Paul says that in the very same breath in which he tells believers to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). Scripture holds divine initiative and human willingness together without explaining exactly how they fit, and the passage here does the same: God put the wisdom there, and the people came willingly.

It is worth noticing the two men named as leaders of the work. Bezalel was from the tribe of Judah, the tribe that would become the royal line. Oholiab was from Dan, one of the smaller and less prominent tribes. “Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, made everything the LORD commanded Moses; with him was Oholiab son of Ahisamak, of the tribe of

Dan—an engraver and designer, and an embroiderer in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen” (Exodus 38:22–23). The text does not treat Oholiab as a mere assistant; it names his particular skills in detail. The construction account is careful to give credit to both, and to the many unnamed men and women who worked alongside them. The work belonged to the whole community.

Bezalel’s name appears again centuries later, in a way that shows how God’s purposes run through history. When Solomon became king, he went to Gibeon to worship, for “the bronze altar that Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, had made was in Gibeon in front of the LORD’s tabernacle; so Solomon and the assembly inquired of him there” (2 Chronicles 1:5). It was at that altar that God appeared to Solomon and granted him wisdom, along with wealth, riches, and honor. The altar built by a Spirit-filled craftsman in the wilderness was still standing, still in use, when the kingdom reached its height. Biblical history is never merely history. It is God’s own hand connecting people and events across centuries to fulfill His covenant promises and accomplish His purposes. We too are part of that connected story, which is still moving toward its culmination in the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. The faithful work we do today may serve purposes we will never see.

And then comes one of the most remarkable scenes in Scripture. “The people continued to bring freewill offerings morning after morning” (Exodus 36:3), until the skilled workers came to Moses and said, “The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the LORD commanded to be done.” So Moses sent word throughout the camp: “No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary.” And so the people were restrained from bringing more, because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work (Exodus 36:5–7).

Scripture contains a great many appeals for generosity and very few instances of anyone being asked to stop. And the scale of what they gave is astonishing. According to Exodus 38:24–25, the gold used for the sanctuary came to twenty-nine talents and 730 shekels, roughly a ton of gold, and the silver to more than a hundred talents, well over three tons. By modern prices that would amount to many tens of millions of dollars. Where did a people of former slaves get so much? From the Egyptians, who had given them silver, gold, and clothing as they left, so that “they plundered the Egyptians” (Exodus 12:35–36). “Plundered” seems almost an understatement. And the golden calf, it turns out, was only the tip of the iceberg.

But what is even more remarkable than the quantity they possessed is their willingness to give so much of it, and more, for the building of God’s sanctuary. Their offering was not only material. It included their skills, their time, and their labor. One small detail in chapter 38 is especially touching: “They made the bronze basin and its bronze stand from the mirrors of the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting” (Exodus 38:8). The very objects that might have served personal vanity became the basin where the priests washed before serving God. In the previous chapter we saw the people strip off their ornaments in mourning; now their possessions were being turned to worship.

Can you imagine how this pleased God? He gave them the desire to build a place for Him, and then watched them bring more than was needed. Their willingness to offer both their abilities and their resources was a test of where their hearts were. Paul says, “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). What a witness it would be if our own churches gave and served so abundantly that leaders had to restrain us! Is that impossible? It is a lovely

thing to hope for. But we should be careful here too. Dwelling on what others are not giving can lead us down the road of quietly accusing them, which becomes its own stumbling block. We should encourage one another toward good, but “each of us will give an account of ourselves to God” (Romans 14:12). Let us examine our own hearts rather than watching what others are not doing.

This passage is often used as the basis for sermons on generous giving, and rightly so. But it raises a puzzle as well. How could such a generous people also be called stiff-necked and rebellious? This very same generation would soon grumble against the Lord about entering Canaan, and God would sentence them to forty years in the wilderness until everyone twenty years and older had died. God would declare of them, “They shall never enter my rest” (Psalm 95:11; Hebrews 3:11). Only chapters earlier, they had given their gold just as eagerly for the golden calf (Exodus 32:2–4).

Scripture seems to present this not as a contradiction but as a portrait of the human heart. Generosity and devotion can be directed toward God or away from Him with the same enthusiasm. Our own conviction is that this reveals the unsteadiness of faith that rests on human resolve: it may blossom for a moment and wither at the first adversity, and only faith that God Himself sustains will endure. Christians who understand the relationship between grace and human choice differently would still agree on the practical lesson. A great moment of generous giving can be followed by widespread rebellion and unbelief. So while we encourage one another to give generously, we must not become complacent about our spiritual health because we gave. Samuel’s words to Saul still apply: “To obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Samuel 15:22). The heart of the matter is not the giving but obedience to God. What good is it to give to this or that cause while neglecting what God

has clearly commanded? Israel's generosity at Sinai did not spare them at Kadesh Barnea.

At the same time, the Exodus narrative clearly honors the giving itself. It lingers on the "willing" hearts and the skilled men and women who contributed (Exodus 35:21–29). Giving did not earn God's favor, but it was a genuine act of worship when offered from a willing heart.

There is also a warning here for how we ask others to give. In the late Middle Ages, the sale of indulgences led many to believe they could purchase God's pardon with money given to the church. It was one of the great corruptions of that era and helped spark the Reformation. Today, believers are sometimes pressed to give to a particular project or ministry with the promise that God will bless them in return. But such projects, however worthy, are usually not something God has specifically commanded, and Scripture provides no basis for promising blessing in exchange for giving to them. There may be nothing wrong with the projects themselves. But we must be careful when we say things like "God commands us to..." or "If you want to be part of what God is doing, then you must..." We must draw a clear line between what God has commanded and what we desire to do for Him. Christians across traditions share this caution against manipulative appeals. Giving should never be coerced, and it should never be presented as a transaction.

Chapter 37 describes the making of the ark, the table, the lampstand, and the altar of incense. The lampstand is worth pausing over. "They made the lampstand of pure gold. They hammered out its base and shaft, and made its flowerlike cups, buds and blossoms of one piece with them" (Exodus 37:17). Six branches extended from its sides, three on each side, each with cups shaped like almond blossoms, and "They made the lampstand and all its accessories from one talent of pure gold" (Exodus 37:24). It was not simply a functional light source but

an object of careful beauty, a stylized tree in bloom, hammered from a single piece of gold.

Sometimes a picture helps in reading passages like this. Looking at an almond blossom, or at a thoughtful modern reconstruction of the lampstand, can help us notice details a hurried reading would miss. It can be surprisingly instructive to compare various modern replicas of the ark of the covenant with the biblical description. Some omit the gold overlay on the poles; others place the rings at the top or middle rather than at the feet, as the text specifies; some leave out the cherubim's faces turned toward the cover, or the cover itself, or make it round despite its stated rectangular dimensions.

We should be fair here. Exodus gives many details, but not every contour or angle, and anyone who makes a model must make interpretive decisions where the text is silent. A modern educational model is not the consecrated ark, and an imperfect replica is not evidence of contempt for Scripture. But where the text is explicit and a model ignores it, the exercise does raise a searching question about our own lives. God treated the details of His dwelling with exacting precision. What attention do we give to His priorities in our lives, our families, and our work? Are God's interests overshadowed by our own? Would our holiness and obedience be described as precise and wholehearted, or merely approximate—in the ballpark, or perhaps on the sidelines?

The most fruitful way to ask that question is concretely. Are there clear responsibilities we neglect while concentrating on religious appearances? Do we take care with our speech, our promises, how we treat our families, and how we use what God has entrusted to us? That kind of careful faithfulness in plain matters is more fruitful than an anxious precision about every uncertain detail. "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much" (Luke 16:10). "Whatever you do,

work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord" (Colossians 3:23). Attention to detail, rightly understood, is an expression of love, because the work is directed toward a relationship God Himself has initiated.

It may help, as we near the end of Exodus, to picture the tabernacle as a whole. Its courtyard was about 150 feet long and 75 feet wide, roughly half the length of an American football field. Worship moved from east to west, from the entrance of the courtyard toward the Most Holy Place, from the most common area to the most holy. In the courtyard stood the bronze altar of burnt offering and the bronze basin, where priests and Levites carried out the sacrifices. Inside the tent was the Holy Place, entered only by priests of Aaron's line. It held three furnishings: the golden lampstand, kept burning continually; the table with the bread of the Presence, which only the priests could eat; and the altar of incense, burned morning and evening. Behind the curtain was the Most Holy Place, containing the ark of the covenant with its atonement cover, regarded as the throne of God among His people. Only the high priest could enter there, once a year on the Day of Atonement, with blood and with a cloud of incense.

One Bible teacher has helpfully explained what "holy" means in all this. At its root, the word means "set apart" or "different." God is holy because He is utterly different from everything else, distinct from every so-called god and completely separate from sin. The Holy Place and the Most Holy Place were set apart because God's presence was there in a unique way. Since Israel was forbidden to make images of God, He gave them the tabernacle, and later the temple, as the place where His presence dwelt among them.

The tabernacle thus taught two truths at once: God's nearness and His holiness. He dwelt in the middle of the camp, yet because of their sin He remained inaccessible behind a

curtain. That tension found its resolution in Christ. Jesus declared Himself the light of the world (John 8:12) and the bread of life (John 6:35). And when He died, three Gospels record that the curtain of the temple was torn in two (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). The way into God's presence was now open to all who come through His death. "Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings" (Hebrews 10:19–22).

The story of the tabernacle does not end there. The Bible's final vision is its ultimate fulfillment: "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Revelation 21:3). What the tabernacle anticipated in shadow, and what Christ accomplished at the cross, God will one day complete in a new heaven and a new earth, where there will be no curtain at all.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. If your daily Scripture reading has slipped, what would it look like to begin again today? Who might you invite to read and share with you?
2. God gave the craftsmen skill and stirred their hearts to work. What abilities has God given you, and how might you offer them for His purposes?
3. The people gave so abundantly that Moses had to stop them. What keeps you from giving freely and cheerfully? How can

you examine your own heart without comparing yourself to others?

4. The same generation that gave generously for the tabernacle later rebelled in unbelief. Why is generosity alone not a reliable measure of spiritual health? What does obedience look like beyond giving?
5. Imperfect replicas of the ark raise the question of how carefully we attend to God's priorities. In what plain, concrete responsibilities does God want you to be more faithful?
6. The tabernacle taught both God's nearness and His holiness. How does the torn curtain change the way you approach God in prayer and worship?

Chapter Fourteen

Exodus 39–40

Exodus ends with obedience. Chapter 39 describes the making of the priestly garments, and chapter 40 describes the setting up of the tabernacle, and running through both chapters like a refrain is a single phrase: “as the LORD commanded Moses.” It appears again and again—after the ephod, after the breastpiece, after the robe, after the tunics, after the sacred diadem engraved “HOLY TO THE LORD” (Exodus 39:30–31), after each step of assembling the tent and placing its furnishings. The instructions had already been given in full in chapters 25–31. This section is not about the instructions; it is about their fulfillment. The repetition functions almost like a checklist being verified item by item, and the narrative wants us to feel, through sheer repetition, just how completely and carefully Israel carried out what God had said.

The work comes to its conclusion with words that echo the end of creation: “So all the work on the tabernacle, the tent of meeting, was completed. The Israelites did everything just as the LORD commanded Moses.... Moses inspected the work and saw that they had done it just as the LORD had commanded. So Moses blessed them” (Exodus 39:32, 43). At the beginning of Genesis, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good,” and “on the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing” and “blessed” it (Genesis 1:31; 2:2–3). Now Moses sees the work, finds it done as commanded, and blesses the people. And in the next chapter, “Moses finished the work” (Exodus 40:33). The language is deliberate. The tabernacle is a kind of new creation, a small world ordered around the presence of God, built by a redeemed people in the middle of a wilderness.

God commanded that the tabernacle be set up “on the first day of the first month” (Exodus 40:2), and “the tabernacle was set up on the first day of the first month in the second year” (Exodus 40:17). Almost exactly a year had passed since the first Passover. The new calendar that began with Israel’s deliverance now marked its first anniversary with the dedication of God’s dwelling. Deliverance had led to worship; redemption had led to God’s presence.

Then came the moment the whole second half of Exodus had been building toward. “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Exodus 40:34–35). The same thing would happen centuries later when Solomon dedicated the temple: “the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple” (1 Kings 8:11).

Notice what brought the glory. It came after the work was done “just as the LORD commanded,” before a single sacrifice had been offered on the new altar. It was obedience that preceded the glory. And it is worth setting this ending beside the golden calf. The structure of Exodus places them deliberately side by side: several chapters of detailed instructions for the tabernacle, then the calf, then several chapters of those instructions being carried out. The calf was improvised, made quickly out of what was at hand, by people who could not wait and who tried to establish their own way to God by their own ingenuity. The tabernacle was built slowly, to specification, by people who had learned to wait on God’s word. The calf brought judgment. The tabernacle brought glory.

What is our choice today? Are we still depending on our own feeble minds and strength to find our way to God, though that way is doomed to fail? We have nothing to boast about. God saw

us long before we saw Him and determined to save us, and those who trust in Christ have become recipients not of a righteousness of their own “that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith” (Philippians 3:9). Our access to God’s presence, like Israel’s, rests entirely on His provision, not on our improvisation.

Sadly, the lesson of obedience was one Israel would struggle to remember. The tabernacle, and later the temple, became the center of Israel’s sacrificial system. Moses and the people did an excellent job following the exact instructions for building the tabernacle, but later generations came to place more importance on the rituals of worship than on what God actually delights in. Saul is the classic example. Commanded to destroy the Amalekites completely, he spared their king and the best of the livestock, and when confronted he claimed he had obeyed and had kept the animals only to sacrifice them to the Lord. Samuel’s reply cuts to the heart: “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king” (1 Samuel 15:22–23). The very obedience that once brought God’s glory into a tent was exactly what a king, centuries later, failed to offer even with explicit instructions in hand.

That is one reason why reading God’s Word together, day by day, matters so much. How can we obey what we do not know? Let us continue faithfully in what we have committed to, so that we may become genuinely obedient servants of Christ Jesus our Lord.

The final verses of Exodus look ahead to the whole journey still to come: “In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the

cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels” (Exodus 40:36–38).

Isn’t that amazing? God’s visible presence, the cloud by day and the fire by night, was not only with them at the exodus, not only at the Red Sea, not only at Sinai. It remained with them throughout forty years in the wilderness. They moved when God moved and stayed when God stayed. There is a picture there of the Christian life: “For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God” (Romans 8:14). We do not have a visible cloud, but we have the Spirit dwelling within us and the Word to guide us, and the posture God asks of us is the same—to move when He leads and to wait when He does not.

And yet, as amazing as this is for us to read, we have to ask a hard question. Did that miraculous presence at some point become common and unremarkable to the people of Israel? Did they grow less aware of God as the years passed, begin to cut corners in their obedience, and forget the great displays of power they had witnessed? It seems the most sensible explanation of how a generation that followed a pillar of fire every day could still be known for stubborn rebellion and unbelief. God Himself asked at Kadesh Barnea, “How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them?” (Numbers 14:11). Signs alone did not produce lasting faith. Familiarity did what hardship could not; it dulled them to the wonder of what they were living inside.

This also explains why God placed such importance on telling children the stories of His mighty acts and the reasons behind them. Later generations would not see the same miraculous displays of His glory, so they would need to hear of

them through the reading and teaching of His Word. Scripture makes this point again and again. God hardened Pharaoh's heart "that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians" (Exodus 10:2). When children asked what the Passover meant, parents were to tell them (Exodus 12:26–27). "Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them" (Deuteronomy 4:9). The great command, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one," was to be impressed on children at home and on the road, lying down and rising up (Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 11:18–20). Every seven years the whole people—men, women, children, and foreigners—were to gather to hear the Law read, so that "their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 31:12–13). And in his final words Moses urged them, "Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you—they are your life" (Deuteronomy 32:46–47).

We believe the same principle applies to us. Our faith is not primarily strengthened by seeking signs, prophecies, and miraculous experiences. There was a time for a great outpouring of miracles in Moses' day, and again during the earthly ministry of Jesus and His apostles. But as in the generations after Moses, those who came afterward were expected to find and grow in faith by hearing the Word of God. "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ" (Romans 10:17). Jesus said that those who would not listen to Moses and the Prophets "will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31), and He pronounced a blessing on "those

who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). As we have noted before, Christians differ on whether miraculous gifts continue today, and many who believe they do would nonetheless agree wholeheartedly that faith is nourished primarily by God’s Word. On this, all can stand together.

So let us speak especially to parents. It is our responsibility to teach our children the Word of God. We must know it and obey it ourselves, and then train our children, bringing them up “in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). One of the main reasons Israel fell away from the Lord was that they forgot Him, and they forgot Him because one generation failed to teach the next: “another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel” (Judges 2:10). Let us not be the generation that neglects to pass on what God has done.

Exodus ends where the burning bush first pointed: with God dwelling among His people. The book opened with Israel enslaved in Egypt, crying out under their burdens. It closes with the glory of the Lord filling the tabernacle so completely that even Moses could not enter. Between those two points God had kept His promise to Abraham, broken the power of Pharaoh, led His people through the sea, fed them in the desert, spoken to them from the mountain, forgiven them after their rebellion, and come down to live in the middle of their camp.

And the story does not end there. John deliberately echoes this final scene when he writes that “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory” (John 1:14). The word he uses for “made his dwelling” literally means “tabernacled.” In Jesus, the glory that once filled a tent in the wilderness came to live among us in human flesh. Through His death the curtain was torn, and now by His Spirit God dwells in His people, who are “being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22). And one day

the voice from the throne will announce the final fulfillment of everything the tabernacle promised: “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them” (Revelation 21:3).

The cloud lifted, and Israel set out. So must we—following the God who goes before us, remembering what He has done, and teaching it faithfully to those who come after.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. The phrase “as the LORD commanded Moses” is repeated again and again in these chapters, and God’s glory filled the tabernacle after the work was done. What does this teach you about the relationship between obedience and experiencing God’s presence?
2. The golden calf was improvised, while the tabernacle was built patiently according to God’s word. Where are you tempted to improvise your own way to God instead of waiting on what He has said?
3. Israel moved when the cloud lifted and stayed when it did not. How do you discern when God is leading you forward and when He is asking you to wait?
4. The miraculous presence of God may have become ordinary to Israel over forty years. What blessings of God have become so familiar to you that you no longer notice them? How can you recover a sense of wonder?
5. God repeatedly commanded Israel to teach His works to the next generation. What story of God’s faithfulness in your life should you tell to your children, grandchildren, or someone younger in the faith?

6. John says the Word “tabernacled” among us. As you finish Exodus, how has this book deepened your understanding of what it means that God dwells with His people in Christ?

Conclusion

From Deliverance to Holiness

We began this book with a furnace—a people enslaved, their infant sons under sentence of death, a God who seemed, for over eighty years, to have gone silent. We close it with a tent filled with glory, a former slave nation transformed into a kingdom of priests, and a cloud of fire resting visibly over their camp every night of their journey. Between those two points lies one of the most concentrated displays of God’s character anywhere in Scripture: His memory, His justice, His holiness, and His relentless determination to dwell among a people who, by every honest measure, did not deserve Him.

Three threads ran through nearly every chapter of this study, and it is worth naming them once more before we move on. The first was God’s sovereignty, displayed most starkly in the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart—a hardening announced before Pharaoh had done anything to earn it, repeated through ten devastating wonders, and finally explained by God Himself: I raised you up for this very purpose, that my power and my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. We did not try to soften this into something more comfortable. Paul did not soften it either, reaching back into this very story centuries later to ground his entire doctrine of election. The God of Exodus does not govern history from the sidelines. He directs it, including the sin of those who oppose Him, toward the display of His own glory—and the only fitting response to that truth is not protest but worship, gratitude for mercy we did nothing to deserve.

The second was memory—the constant, repeated command to remember what God had done and to teach it to children who had not personally witnessed it. The Passover, the consecration of the firstborn, the stones at the Jordan still to come, the daily

rhythm of the tabernacle's sacrifices: all of it existed to keep a single truth alive across generations who would never see a plague, never watch a sea divide, never stand beneath a visible pillar of fire. And yet, even surrounded by that daily, visible glory, this same generation drifted into complaint, rebellion, and finally unbelief. Familiarity did what hardship could not; it dulled them to the wonder of what they were living inside. We are not so different. The discipline of remembering—of telling the story again, of teaching it deliberately to those who come after us—is not a quaint religious custom. It is, Exodus insists, the only reliable defense against forgetting the very God who delivered us.

The third was holiness, worked out in agonizing, exacting detail across the second half of this book. A tent measured to the cubit. A robe with a precise number of bells and pomegranates. A quarter hin of oil, no more and no less. It would be easy to read these chapters as antiquarian trivia, safely skimmed. But the same God who tore a curtain in two at the death of His Son is the God who first specified, with this much precision, exactly what it would take to approach Him at all. The tabernacle was never merely a building project. It was a sustained lesson in what holiness actually costs, a lesson that makes the access we now have through Christ—direct, immediate, unmediated by priest or veil—almost too remarkable to fully take in.

Exodus does not end the story; it ends with the tabernacle built, God's glory filling it, and the cloud beginning to lead Israel onward. But a question hangs over that ending that the next book exists to answer: now that God dwells among His people, how exactly are they to live in His presence? A holy God has just moved into the middle of an unholy camp. What happens next? Leviticus is the answer—a book even more exacting in its detail than the second half of Exodus, governing everything from the mechanics of sacrifice to the rhythms of the calendar to the

precise boundaries of clean and unclean. Many readers stall out in Leviticus, and it is not hard to understand why; its detail makes even the tabernacle's construction look brief by comparison. But if Exodus has taught us anything, it is that God's exacting detail is never arbitrary. It will be worth pressing forward to discover what Leviticus reveals about the holiness of the God who chose, against every reasonable expectation, to make His dwelling among us—and what that holiness still requires, and still makes possible, for us today.

Appendix

Daily Bible Reading Plan

This is the same daily Bible reading plan used at dailyqt.org, covering the entire Bible—Old and New Testaments alike—in three hundred sixty-five daily readings. It does not begin on January 1st, and neither must you; the schedule below simply starts in Genesis and moves forward from there in canonical order until it loops back around through Revelation. The fourteen readings that correspond to the chapters of this book—Exodus 1–3 through Exodus 39–40—fall a few weeks into the sequence, but the complete year-long plan is reprinted here, as it is in every volume of this series, so that wherever you are in your reading you always have the whole plan close at hand. Check off each day’s passage as you complete it, and feel no need to catch up if you fall behind by a day or a week. The goal was never a perfect record. It was a daily habit of opening God’s Word, kept up faithfully enough, and long enough, that it becomes less a task to complete than simply the shape of an ordinary day.

Date	Passage
☐ 1/10	Gen 1-3
☐ 1/12	Gen 8-11
☐ 1/14	Gen 16-18
☐ 1/16	Gen 22-24
☐ 1/18	Gen 27-29
☐ 1/20	Gen 32-34
☐ 1/22	Gen 38-40
☐ 1/24	Gen 43-45
☐ 1/26	Gen 48-50
☐ 1/28	Ex 4-6
☐ 1/30	Ex 10-12

Date	Passage
☐ 1/11	Gen 4-7
☐ 1/13	Gen 12-15
☐ 1/15	Gen 19-21
☐ 1/17	Gen 25-26
☐ 1/19	Gen 30-31
☐ 1/21	Gen 35-37
☐ 1/23	Gen 41-42
☐ 1/25	Gen 46-47
☐ 1/27	Ex 1-3
☐ 1/29	Ex 7-9
☐ 1/31	Ex 13-15

Date	Passage
☐ 2/1	Ex 16-18
☐ 2/3	Ex 22-24
☐ 2/5	Ex 28-29
☐ 2/7	Ex 33-35
☐ 2/9	Ex 39-40
☐ 2/11	Lev 5-7
☐ 2/13	Lev 11-13
☐ 2/15	Lev 16-18
☐ 2/17	Lev 22-23
☐ 2/19	Lev 26-27
☐ 2/21	Nu 3-4
☐ 2/23	Nu 7
☐ 2/25	Nu 11-13
☐ 2/27	Nu 16-17
☐ 3/1	Nu 21-22
☐ 3/3	Nu 26-27
☐ 3/5	Nu 31-32
☐ 3/7	Nu 35-36
☐ 3/9	Dt 3-4
☐ 3/11	Dt 8-10
☐ 3/13	Dt 14-16
☐ 3/15	Dt 21-23
☐ 3/17	Dt 28-29
☐ 3/19	Dt 32-34
☐ 3/21	Jos 5-8
☐ 3/23	Jos 12-15
☐ 3/25	Jos 19-21
☐ 3/27	Jdg 1-2
☐ 3/29	Jdg 6-7
☐ 3/31	Jdg 10-12
☐ 4/2	Jdg 16-18
☐ 4/4	Ruth
☐ 4/6	1 Sa 4-8
☐ 4/8	1 Sa 13-14
☐ 4/10	1 Sa 18-20
☐ 4/12	1 Sa 25-27
☐ 4/14	2 Sa 1-3

Date	Passage
☐ 2/2	Ex 19-21
☐ 2/4	Ex 25-27
☐ 2/6	Ex 30-32
☐ 2/8	Ex 36-38
☐ 2/10	Lev 1-4
☐ 2/12	Lev 8-10
☐ 2/14	Lev 14-15
☐ 2/16	Lev 19-21
☐ 2/18	Lev 24-25
☐ 2/20	Nu 1-2
☐ 2/22	Nu 5-6
☐ 2/24	Nu 8-10
☐ 2/26	Nu 14-15
☐ 2/28	Nu 18-20
☐ 3/2	Nu 23-25
☐ 3/4	Nu 28-30
☐ 3/6	Nu 33-34
☐ 3/8	Dt 1-2
☐ 3/10	Dt 5-7
☐ 3/12	Dt 11-13
☐ 3/14	Dt 17-20
☐ 3/16	Dt 24-27
☐ 3/18	Dt 30-31
☐ 3/20	Jos 1-4
☐ 3/22	Jos 9-11
☐ 3/24	Jos 16-18
☐ 3/26	Jos 22-24
☐ 3/28	Jdg 3-5
☐ 3/30	Jdg 8-9
☐ 4/1	Jdg 13-15
☐ 4/3	Jdg 19-21
☐ 4/5	1 Sa 1-3
☐ 4/7	1 Sa 9-12
☐ 4/9	1 Sa 15-17
☐ 4/11	1 Sa 21-24
☐ 4/13	1 Sa 28-31
☐ 4/15	2 Sa 4-7

Date	Passage
☐ 4/16	2 Sa 8-12
☐ 4/18	2 Sa 16-18
☐ 4/20	2 Sa 22-24
☐ 4/22	1 Ki 3-5
☐ 4/24	1 Ki 8-9
☐ 4/26	1 Ki 12-14
☐ 4/28	1 Ki 18-20
☐ 4/30	2 Ki 1-3
☐ 5/2	2 Ki 6-8
☐ 5/4	2 Ki 12-14
☐ 5/6	2 Ki 18-19
☐ 5/8	2 Ki 23-25
☐ 5/10	1 Ch 3-5
☐ 5/12	1 Ch 7-8
☐ 5/14	1 Ch 12-14
☐ 5/16	1 Ch 18-21
☐ 5/18	1 Ch 25-27
☐ 5/20	2 Ch 2-5
☐ 5/22	2 Ch 9-12
☐ 5/24	2 Ch 18-20
☐ 5/26	2 Ch 25-27
☐ 5/28	2 Ch 32-34
☐ 5/30	Ezr 1-3
☐ 6/1	Ezr 8-10
☐ 6/3	Neh 4-6
☐ 6/5	Neh 8-9
☐ 6/7	Neh 12-13
☐ 6/9	Esth 6-10
☐ 6/11	Job 5-7
☐ 6/13	Job 11-13
☐ 6/15	Job 17-20
☐ 6/17	Job 24-28
☐ 6/19	Job 32-34
☐ 6/21	Job 38-39
☐ 6/23	Ps 1-8
☐ 6/25	Ps 17-20
☐ 6/27	Ps 26-31

Date	Passage
☐ 4/17	2 Sa 13-15
☐ 4/19	2 Sa 19-21
☐ 4/21	1 Ki 1-2
☐ 4/23	1 Ki 6-7
☐ 4/25	1 Ki 10-11
☐ 4/27	1 Ki 15-17
☐ 4/29	1 Ki 21-22
☐ 5/1	2 Ki 4-5
☐ 5/3	2 Ki 9-11
☐ 5/5	2 Ki 15-17
☐ 5/7	2 Ki 20-22
☐ 5/9	1 Ch 1-2
☐ 5/11	1 Ch 6
☐ 5/13	1 Ch 9-11
☐ 5/15	1 Ch 15-17
☐ 5/17	1 Ch 22-24
☐ 5/19	1 Ch 28-2 Ch 1
☐ 5/21	2 Ch 6-8
☐ 5/23	2 Ch 13-17
☐ 5/25	2 Ch 21-24
☐ 5/27	2 Ch 28-31
☐ 5/29	2 Ch 35-36
☐ 5/31	Ezr 4-7
☐ 6/2	Neh 1-3
☐ 6/4	Neh 7
☐ 6/6	Neh 10-11
☐ 6/8	Esth 1-5
☐ 6/10	Job 1-4
☐ 6/12	Job 8-10
☐ 6/14	Job 14-16
☐ 6/16	Job 21-23
☐ 6/18	Job 29-31
☐ 6/20	Job 35-37
☐ 6/22	Job 40-42
☐ 6/24	Ps 9-16
☐ 6/26	Ps 21-25
☐ 6/28	Ps 32-35

Date	Passage
☐ 6/29	Ps 36-39
☐ 7/1	Ps 46-50
☐ 7/3	Ps 58-65
☐ 7/5	Ps 70-73
☐ 7/7	Ps 78-79
☐ 7/9	Ps 86-89
☐ 7/11	Ps 96-102
☐ 7/13	Ps 106-107
☐ 7/15	Ps 115-118
☐ 7/17	Ps 119:89-176
☐ 7/19	Ps 133-139
☐ 7/21	Ps 146-150
☐ 7/23	Prov 4-6
☐ 7/25	Prov 10-12
☐ 7/27	Prov 16-18
☐ 7/29	Prov 22-23
☐ 7/31	Prov 27-29
☐ 8/2	Ecc 1-4
☐ 8/4	Ecc 9-12
☐ 8/6	Isa 1-4
☐ 8/8	Isa 9-12
☐ 8/10	Isa 18-22
☐ 8/12	Isa 28-30
☐ 8/14	Isa 36-41
☐ 8/16	Isa 45-48
☐ 8/18	Isa 54-58
☐ 8/20	Isa 64-66
☐ 8/22	Jer 4-6
☐ 8/24	Jer 10-13
☐ 8/26	Jer 18-22
☐ 8/28	Jer 26-29
☐ 8/30	Jer 32-34
☐ 9/1	Jer 38-41
☐ 9/3	Jer 46-48
☐ 9/5	Jer 51-52
☐ 9/7	Lam 3:37-5:22
☐ 9/9	Eze 5-8

Date	Passage
☐ 6/30	Ps 40-45
☐ 7/2	Ps 51-57
☐ 7/4	Ps 66-69
☐ 7/6	Ps 74-77
☐ 7/8	Ps 80-85
☐ 7/10	Ps 90-95
☐ 7/12	Ps 103-105
☐ 7/14	Ps 108-114
☐ 7/16	Ps 119:1-88
☐ 7/18	Ps 120-132
☐ 7/20	Ps 140-145
☐ 7/22	Prov 1-3
☐ 7/24	Prov 7-9
☐ 7/26	Prov 13-15
☐ 7/28	Prov 19-21
☐ 7/30	Prov 24-26
☐ 8/1	Prov 30-31
☐ 8/3	Ecc 5-8
☐ 8/5	Ss 1-8
☐ 8/7	Isa 5-8
☐ 8/9	Isa 13-17
☐ 8/11	Isa 23-27
☐ 8/13	Isa 31-35
☐ 8/15	Isa 42-44
☐ 8/17	Isa 49-53
☐ 8/19	Isa 59-63
☐ 8/21	Jer 1-3
☐ 8/23	Jer 7-9
☐ 8/25	Jer 14-17
☐ 8/27	Jer 23-25
☐ 8/29	Jer 30-31
☐ 8/31	Jer 35-37
☐ 9/2	Jer 42-45
☐ 9/4	Jer 49-50
☐ 9/6	Lam 1:1-3:36
☐ 9/8	Eze 1-4
☐ 9/10	Eze 9-12

Date	Passage
☐ 9/11	Eze 13-15
☐ 9/13	Eze 18-20
☐ 9/15	Eze 23-24
☐ 9/17	Eze 28-30
☐ 9/19	Eze 34-36
☐ 9/21	Eze 40-42
☐ 9/23	Eze 46-48
☐ 9/25	Dan 4-6
☐ 9/27	Dan 10-12
☐ 9/29	Hos 8-14
☐ 10/1	Amos 1-5
☐ 10/3	Ob-Jonah
☐ 10/5	Nahum
☐ 10/7	Haggai 1-2
☐ 10/9	Zech 8-14
☐ 10/11	Mat 1-4
☐ 10/13	Mat 7-8
☐ 10/15	Mat 11-12
☐ 10/17	Mat 15-17
☐ 10/19	Mat 20-21
☐ 10/21	Mat 24-25
☐ 10/23	Mat 27-28
☐ 10/25	Mark 4-5
☐ 10/27	Mark 8-9
☐ 10/29	Mark 12-13
☐ 10/31	Mark 15-16
☐ 11/2	Luke 2-3
☐ 11/4	Luke 6-7
☐ 11/6	Luke 10-11
☐ 11/8	Luke 14-16
☐ 11/10	Luke 19-20
☐ 11/12	Luke 23-24
☐ 11/14	John 3-4
☐ 11/16	John 7-8
☐ 11/18	John 11-12
☐ 11/20	John 16-18
☐ 11/22	Acts 1-3

Date	Passage
☐ 9/12	Eze 16-17
☐ 9/14	Eze 21-22
☐ 9/16	Eze 25-27
☐ 9/18	Eze 31-33
☐ 9/20	Eze 37-39
☐ 9/22	Eze 43-45
☐ 9/24	Dan 1-3
☐ 9/26	Dan 7-9
☐ 9/28	Hos 1-7
☐ 9/30	Joel
☐ 10/2	Amos 6-9
☐ 10/4	Micah
☐ 10/6	Hab-Zeph
☐ 10/8	Zech 1-7
☐ 10/10	Mal 1-4
☐ 10/12	Mat 5-6
☐ 10/14	Mat 9-10
☐ 10/16	Mat 13-14
☐ 10/18	Mat 18-19
☐ 10/20	Mat 22-23
☐ 10/22	Mat 26
☐ 10/24	Mark 1-3
☐ 10/26	Mark 6-7
☐ 10/28	Mark 10-11
☐ 10/30	Mark 14
☐ 11/1	Luke 1
☐ 11/3	Luke 4-5
☐ 11/5	Luke 8-9
☐ 11/7	Luke 12-13
☐ 11/9	Luke 17-18
☐ 11/11	Luke 21-22
☐ 11/13	John 1-2
☐ 11/15	John 5-6
☐ 11/17	John 9-10
☐ 11/19	John 13-15
☐ 11/21	John 19-21
☐ 11/23	Acts 4-6

Date	Passage
☐ 11/24	Acts 7-8
☐ 11/26	Acts 11-13
☐ 11/28	Acts 16-17
☐ 11/30	Acts 21-23
☐ 12/2	Acts 27-28
☐ 12/4	Rom 4-7
☐ 12/6	Rom 11-13
☐ 12/8	1 Cor 1-4
☐ 12/10	1 Cor 9-11
☐ 12/12	1 Cor 15-16
☐ 12/14	2 Cor 5-9
☐ 12/16	Gal 1-3
☐ 12/18	Eph 1-3
☐ 12/20	Phi 1-4
☐ 12/22	1 Thess 1-5
☐ 12/24	1 Tim 1-6
☐ 12/26	Titus-Phm
☐ 12/28	Heb 7-10
☐ 12/30	James
☐ 1/1	2 Pe
☐ 1/3	2 John-Jude
☐ 1/5	Rev 4-8
☐ 1/7	Rev 13-16
☐ 1/9	Rev 20-22

Date	Passage
☐ 11/25	Acts 9-10
☐ 11/27	Acts 14-15
☐ 11/29	Acts 18-20
☐ 12/1	Acts 24-26
☐ 12/3	Rom 1-3
☐ 12/5	Rom 8-10
☐ 12/7	Rom 14-16
☐ 12/9	1 Cor 5-8
☐ 12/11	1 Cor 12-14
☐ 12/13	2 Cor 1-4
☐ 12/15	2 Cor 10-13
☐ 12/17	Gal 4-6
☐ 12/19	Eph 4-6
☐ 12/21	Col 1-4
☐ 12/23	2 Thess 1-3
☐ 12/25	2 Tim 1-4
☐ 12/27	Heb 1-6
☐ 12/29	Heb 11-13
☐ 12/31	1 Pe
☐ 1/2	1 John
☐ 1/4	Rev 1-3
☐ 1/6	Rev 9-12
☐ 1/8	Rev 17-19

About the Author

Eugene Han has spent more than a decade reading through the Bible chapter by chapter, recording his reflections at dailyqt.org, a daily Quiet Time devotional site he created to encourage consistent, unhurried engagement with Scripture. He also teaches Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in Dallas, where much of the material in this book was first tested in conversation with a community of fellow readers. He writes as a fellow student of the text rather than a credentialed scholar, in the conviction that careful, ordinary reading of God's Word—sustained over years rather than rushed in a season—is available to anyone willing to keep at it.

This book is also the fruit of that community. Many readers of dailyqt.org have shared their own reflections on these passages over the years, and their questions and insights are woven throughout these pages. They are offered here not as the final word on Exodus, but as an invitation to read it again, slowly, for yourself.