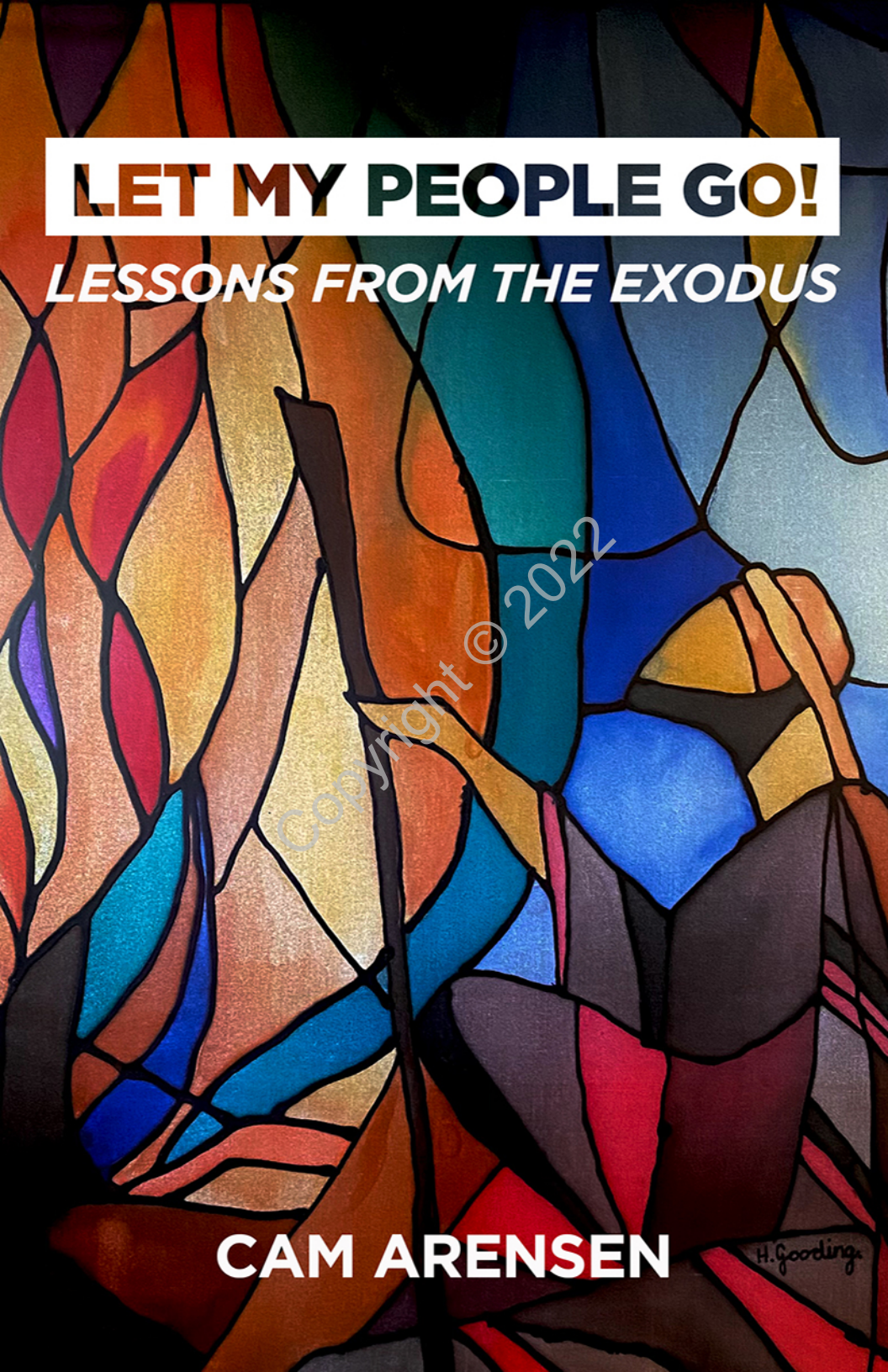


The background is a vibrant stained glass artwork. It features a central figure, possibly a person in a long robe, rendered in shades of blue, yellow, and brown. The figure is surrounded by large, abstract shapes in warm tones like orange, red, and yellow, which could represent flames or a landscape. The entire composition is defined by bold black outlines, characteristic of stained glass. A diagonal watermark reading 'Copyright © 2022' is visible across the center.

LET MY PEOPLE GO!

LESSONS FROM THE EXODUS

CAM ARENSEN

H. Gooding

LET MY PEOPLE GO!

LESSONS FROM THE EXODUS

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Cover picture: Original painting by Henry Gooding. Henry, a citizen of India, was a member of our church in Abu Dhabi and presented me with the painting as a retirement gift. It now hangs on the wall of our home in Bend, Oregon.

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Thanks to Bruce Quarles for proofreading help and comments and for encouragement to move forward with completing the project.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother who first introduced me to the stories and lessons of the Exodus. Thanks, Mom!

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AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

Do you like stories? I do! I've loved to read since I was very young, but even before I learned to read, I loved stories. Growing up in a Christian family I especially learned to love the stories of the Bible. I first heard the stories of the Exodus when my mother read them at Bible story time in the evening. They fascinated me then and they continue to fascinate me today. They contain all the elements of good literature: heroes, villains, courage, fear, crises, defeat, victory, and faith. But these are more than good stories. They are the true account of God's working on the pages of human history and in the lives of real people; people just like you and me. So, there is more than good entertainment in these stories. There is truth. Truth about God and his character. Truth about God's plans and eternal purposes. Truth about human nature. Truth about what God desires in those who would call on his Name and follow him. There are also important lessons for us to learn. Paul says it this way, in 1 Corinthians 10:11. After reciting several of the Exodus stories he adds: *Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction...*

In these pages we shall explore the "story" sections of Exodus through Deuteronomy. As we do so, I invite you to journey with Moses and the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt to the borders of the Promised Land. Studying the stories of the Exodus is like riding a roller coaster with highs and lows around every corner. We will follow the narrative from defeat to victory and back to defeat in rapid succession. In other words, a lot like my life and yours. But the accounts also draw us ever forward in the challenge to "walk by faith and not by sight."

These chapters were originally delivered as a series of messages in the Evangelical Community Church of Abu Dhabi, an international congregation of believers from over 60 countries who live and work in the United Arab Emirates. It was my privilege to shepherd this unique congregation of God's people for over 25 years.

One word about my approach. In most serious writing, the author seeks to remain anonymous or invisible. However, preaching is different than writing. There is interaction with an audience, and it often requires a personal touch. I have chosen to write as I preach, often in the first person, and to insert personal examples and stories when they might be helpful for understanding a concept or in making application to life.

It's time to buckle on our sandals and pick up our walking sticks and begin the journey!

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WHEN ISRAEL WAS IN EGYPT'S LAND

Exodus 1:1-2:10

There is a question that we are required to answer over and over, every day of our lives. Our answer to this question will do more to shape our lives, actions and personalities than almost anything else. It is the question; **CAN GOD BE TRUSTED?** Tuck that away for now. We'll come back to it.

There are three men of God who stand head and shoulders above the rest in the Old Testament. They stand out for their larger-than-life characters, for their impact on their nation and upon history. They stand out for the sheer volume of sacred text that is devoted to their story, and for the number of references to them in the New Testament. The three men are Abraham, Moses and David. In these chapters, we will be focusing on the second man on the list. Moses.

To do that, we are going to trace the narrative sections of the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy, books two through five of the Pentateuch. The chapters we will be studying tell the story of the formative events of Israel's story. These are the traumatic, dramatic, exciting events that brought the nation of Israel into existence and established its corporate identity.

Every nation has its story. This story becomes part of the national identity and is part of what binds a nation together and gives it a sense of cohesiveness and unity. As an American, I was raised on stories of America's history: Christopher Columbus, the Mayflower and the early Pilgrims, the Boston Tea Party and the Revolutionary War, the Declaration of Independence and George Washington at Valley Forge. Those stories give me a sense of what it means to be an American. You may come from a different nation, but your nation also has a story, and that story has not only shaped your nation. It has shaped you and your perception of yourself and your place in the world as an Indian,

or a Canadian, or a South African. So it was with Israel. Down through Israel's history, if you were to ask any Israelite what it meant to be an Israelite, he or she would soon have been telling you the story of the Exodus and the nation's deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

As the story unfolds, we will find that there are three main characters who will draw our attention. The first, obviously, is Moses. The second main actor on the stage is the nation of Israel. As a group, they assume a corporate identity, and they make choices and decisions that have very real and drastic consequences.

The third main character in the drama is God himself. In fact, if we were choosing, we might say that he is the true main character. The story of the Exodus is truly His Story, the record of his actions in forming and delivering the nation of Israel, providing for them, revealing himself to them and leading them to the Promised Land. And he says it so clearly. "I will do these things so that they will know that I am the LORD."

The Book of Exodus picks up right where Genesis leaves off. *These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household...* The writer gives the names of Israel's (Jacob's) sons, and their number, and then he states: *Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation.*

The descendants of Jacob were all now in Egypt. As we recreate the story from the concluding chapters of Genesis, we find that Egypt was a perfect, God-designed "womb" in which this family of approximately seventy people could become a nation. (See Genesis 46: 31-47:12) First, when they were tiny, they had a favored status under Joseph. They were settled in one of the most fertile areas for grazing cattle, where they could not only survive but thrive. On top of that, they were protected from the threat of assimilation, because the Egyptians disliked foreigners, (especially herdsmen and shepherds) and refused to allow them to assimilate. We cannot say that there was no impact of Egyptian culture on the Israelites. But it was limited, and they remained a separate and distinct ethnic and cultural identity within the nation of Egypt. That was God's plan.

So, what do you think happened in that "womb?" Exactly what you expect to happen in a womb. Look at verse 7: *But the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them.*

Do you remember what God promised Abraham, back in Ur of the Chaldees? In Genesis 12:3, he said, *“And I will make of you a great nation...”* He says it again in Genesis 15:5: *“And he brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’”* In Exodus 1:7 we see that God is fulfilling that promise as the nation multiplied and filled the land. God is keeping his promise. He is carrying out his plan.

But there is one constant of the Biblical record. It is a sobering one. It is one we need to keep in mind. **Whenever God works, and wherever God works, Satan opposes him.** The path of the growth of God’s kingdom is never smooth and trouble free. There is always opposition. So it was for the nation of Israel even while they were still in the womb.

Exodus 1:8-11 tells the story: *Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, ‘Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.’ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses.*

Pharaoh was threatened by the multiplication of God’s people. But notice what happens despite his strategy of oppression: *But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad...* (Exodus 1:12)

When this strategy didn’t work, Pharaoh turned up the heat. He made their work even harder. Not only that, but he instructed the Hebrew midwives to control their population growth through infanticide, killing any baby boys at birth. His strategy was thwarted, however, when the midwives refused to carry out his commands. The result? *So, God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong.* (Verse 20)

Remember that principle: **Whenever God works, Satan opposes him.** Here is the other side of the story. **Satan’s opposition cannot prevent God from fulfilling his plan.** God was intent on growing a nation. No matter what Satan (through Pharaoh) attempted, God moved his plan forward. The nation continued to grow and to multiply.

These are twin truths that we need to keep always in front of us

as we engage in God's work and as we seek to live out his will in our lives. It will never be easy. Satan will always oppose the work and will of God. Problems and difficulties will arise. But Satan's opposition cannot prevent God from fulfilling his plan.

Exodus 2:1-10 records a story that has long been a favorite of children in countless Sunday School classes and Bible story books. It is the story of the birth of Moses. In this harsh environment in which all Egyptians have been commanded to throw Hebrew baby boys into the Nile River, a young Hebrew couple gives birth to a child. No doubt there was a real mixture of emotions when they discovered their newborn child was a boy. But with divine courage and parental love, they sought to hide the child from harm. For three months they succeeded in concealing him in their home. But as he grew, his cries became louder, and the threat of discovery was more intense. Now they faced the risk of endangering the rest of the family if they are discovered.

So careful preparations were made. I admit to being rather uncertain about their strategy. Did they indeed plan on the baby being discovered by Pharaoh's daughter? More likely they are complying with the letter of the law (putting the baby in the Nile) yet doing it in a secure little boat made of reeds and covered with pitch. Maybe they intended only to hide him in this way during daylight hours while bringing him back into their home at night. We can't be sure. But with gentle hands and pounding hearts and more than a few tears, the baby is placed in the boat and hidden among the reeds along the bank of the river. His older sister (from later Scripture, we know her name to be Miriam) was assigned the task of keeping watch.

The drama is at its height. The suspense of the story is finely balanced. Pharaoh's daughter came down to the river. Whether this was her regular custom and her regular place, we do not know. Whether she has come to do a ritual ablution in the Nile River as one of Egypt's many gods, or whether she came simply for a cooling dip in the water, we cannot be sure. She did not come alone, but with her usual entourage of attendants. We can imagine the rapid beating of Miriam's young heart, as there was a cry of discovery. Pharaoh's daughter pointed toward the little basket and commanded one of her slave girls to fetch it. When she opened the basket, she discovered the

baby, probably crying his eyes out. Her heart melted, and she gently lifted the baby from the basket. She recognized the baby as a Hebrew. She was surely aware of the command for such babies to be killed. But she elected to disobey her father and exert her royal privilege. She will keep this baby! In fact, she will adopt him!

At this point in the story, a young girl did a very brave thing. Miriam approached the princess. With fear and trembling, she nonetheless spoke out: “Your highness, would you like me to find a Hebrew woman who will be able to nurse the baby for you?”

Surprised, but pleased at this offer, the princess responded, “Yes, do as you have suggested.”

Miriam ran! Can you guess where she went? Straight to her own and Moses’ mother. Together they rushed back to the riverbank. There the deal was sealed, and the contract was made. “Take this baby and nurse him for me. I will pay you well.”

Can you imagine the rejoicing in that home that evening? Not only did they have their precious son back with them, but the long nights of anxiety and hushing a crying baby were at an end. The awful fear of his being cast headlong into the river, if discovered, was gone. With Pharaoh’s daughter’s protection, they could move about freely. Their baby was safe. There were difficult days ahead. There would come the day when he was weaned and old enough to go and live at the palace. But for now, he was safe, and he was theirs to love and cherish.

Let’s step back from the canvas and details of this wonderful story. Let’s consider the wider sweep of what is taking place. God is at work! He is forming a nation. From that nation he will single out one tribe, and from that tribe he will raise up a dynasty from the descendants of David. From that dynasty will come the Messiah, who will save his people from their sins.

This chosen nation has now been formed and grown in the womb. It is almost time for it to be born. God now moves in history to provide the human leader, the deliverer who would lead his people to freedom. He is born a Hebrew, in a Hebrew home. But he will be raised in Pharaoh’s palace with all the advantages of culture and education that such an upbringing can provide. Only God could put such a plan together! This is a divine story of God at work.

But it is also a very human story. That is why we are so fascinated

by it. It is a story of real people with real emotions, who trust God and through whom God works to carry out his plan; a plan that included the Israelite midwives as well as Moses' parents and his sister Miriam. Here is the key question. What is the link between the Divine element and the human element in this story? What creates that essential spark by which the power of God is released into this very human story?

That essential link is something the Bible calls faith. What is faith? Remember that question we raised at the beginning of the chapter. **Can God be trusted?** Faith is answering YES to that question. The faith of the midwives is clear right here in the text in verse 17: *But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live.*

Some people want to stop here and talk about the ethics of the midwives in their answer to Pharaoh. I am going to leave that as a little riddle for you as the reader to think about. That is not what the Biblical writer focuses on. *The midwives feared God.* And lest we miss the point, he says it again in verse 21: *And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.* To fear God is one of the manifestations of faith. It means to believe in him and take him at his word; to place him above all other authorities and fears in our lives. Thus, they chose to obey God rather than Pharaoh's awful command.

The ingredient of faith is also clearly displayed in the actions of Moses' parents. This time the commentary is provided by the New Testament, in Hebrews 11:23: *By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.* Once again, their faith in God was the link to God's working through them. That same faith is the key link if we want God to work in and through us. From this story we find three areas in which we can rest our faith and thus "live by faith."

1. Faith in God's promises.

We cannot be sure how aware the Israelites, particularly Moses' parents and the midwives, were of their own spiritual history and heritage. But we do know the history. We know the promise of God in Genesis 15:12-16.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold,

dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

This was God's promise to Abraham to bring his descendants out of a strange land. It is made even more clearly to Jacob in Genesis 46:3-4. *Then he said, "I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes."*

As difficult as things were in Egypt, the promise of God was still an absolute rock for his people to stand on if they only would. Can God be trusted to keep his promises? Faith answers YES!

2. Faith in God's plan.

This cannot really be separated from the previous principle. God's promises are often very clear, but his plan is sometimes obscure. We don't see how God is going to do it. But as we see the unfolding of God's plan in Genesis and then Exodus, we cannot doubt that he has a plan and that it is a great plan. It is often the same in our lives. We may be clinging to the promises of God and have no clue how God is going to fulfill them. Imagine the Israelites as they suffered under the slave master's whip. "Some plan, God!" they might have cried. But there was a plan, and the plan was moving forward, even though they couldn't see it. Does God have a plan and is it a good plan? Can God be trusted? Faith answers YES!

3. Faith in God's providence.

This principle puts the previous two together. God makes promises. God has a plan. Providence includes the steps whereby God arranges the circumstances to fulfill his plan and keep his promises. The story of Moses' birth is a wonderful story of God's providence to protect the baby and bring him up in an environment that would prepare him for the task that lay ahead. Is God able to accomplish his

plan in the everyday details of life? Can God be trusted? Life asks the question. Faith answers YES!

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MOSES' CHOICE

Exodus 2:11-22

Oh, the glories of Egypt! It was one of the most sophisticated and highly developed civilizations of the ancient world. It still has the capacity to fascinate us today. When the treasures and artifacts of the pharaohs' tombs are displayed around the world, they never fail to draw crowds of interested people. The statues, the intricate artwork, the incredible wealth of the kingdom astound us. Engineers still speculate on the technology that built the massive pyramids. This civilization, this opulence, this sophistication formed the environment of Moses' growing up years.

In the previous chapter we looked at the story of Moses' birth. We saw how God, in his providence, not only spared the baby's life but so arranged circumstances that he would be raised in the palaces of Egypt as an adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. It is rather frustrating that we know so little about those years. This has led to speculation and different ideas about Moses' development and his life in the palace. Movies have tried to fill in some of the blanks. The classic Cecil de Mille movie, The Ten Commandments tells the story as though Moses grew up ignorant of his Hebrew heritage and in a deadly rivalry and competition with Ramses for the throne of Egypt. The animated feature film, The Prince of Egypt paints a story of friendly competition and brotherly affection between the two princes, making their later rift a poignant side-plot of the story.

Such speculations remain just that. The only divine commentary we have on Moses' life during those years is given to us in the New Testament in the preaching of Stephen in Acts 7:22: *And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.* That is all we are told. The rest is left to our imaginations.

The Biblical account in Exodus picks up in Exodus 2:11-22 in

which the author relates three incidents in Moses' early life. What can we conclude about Moses based on these events? What kind of man was he? What do we learn about his character? What were his values?

The first incident occurred when Moses went out to watch his own people at work. We know he was a grown man at this point. In fact, the Biblical chronology puts him at around 40. We don't know if this was his first visit or one of many. But on this occasion, he witnessed a particularly vicious Egyptian, beating a Hebrew slave. Overtaken by a strong passion, he looked around, and seeing no one, he defended the poor slave, and killed the Egyptian. Did he do it with a weapon or with his bare hands? Did he intend to kill him or just to teach the man a lesson? We don't know the answers to these questions. But when he was done, the Egyptian man lay dead at his feet. So, he hid his deed by burying the body in a shallow grave in the sand.

The second incident took place the next day. Once again, he went to where the Hebrew slaves were working. Once again, he witnessed an act of violence, only this time, it was not an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. It was two Hebrews fighting each other. Moses tried to intervene. He determined one to be in the wrong and challenged him. "Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?" It is dangerous to intervene in a quarrel, as Moses quickly found out. The man turned on him, and with angry sarcasm he shouted at Moses: "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you intend to kill me like you did the Egyptian?"

At this point, Moses knew he was in trouble. His murder of the Egyptian must have become common knowledge! In fact, Pharaoh did hear of it, and decreed the death sentence for Moses. Moses was forced to flee for his life. He fled fast, and he fled far; to the east, into the region of Midian; a desert area, either on the Sinai Peninsula, west of the Gulf of Aqaba or on the Arabian Peninsula to the east of it. From the palaces of Egypt into the empty wilderness; from the densely populated and fertile Nile delta into the harsh and lonely desert.

There is one more incident related to us by the author. There in the desert, Moses found himself sitting beside a well. He was roused by the arrival of a flock of sheep or goats. They were being tended by seven sisters. Quickly they went about their work, drawing the water

from the well, filling troughs for the sheep. But in the midst of their work, there was a shout of challenge. Other shepherds had arrived on the scene. Rudely they pushed in, driving away the girls' flocks, putting their own animals to drink from the filled troughs. Moses could not allow himself to stand by. With a shout of indignation, he confronted the shepherds. Whether verbally, or with a few well-placed whacks of his staff, he soon had the shepherds and their flocks on the run. He then called to the young women to return, and he began to refill the watering troughs for them.

What conclusions can we draw about Moses from these three events? Do you see any common theme emerging? Here is one that strikes me. **Moses was a man with a strong passion for justice and the rights of the oppressed.** That is a common element in all three of these incidents. Someone is being oppressed, persecuted or treated unfairly by someone else: the Hebrew slave by the Egyptian, the weaker Hebrew being struck by the stronger one, the young women's flocks being chased away by the stronger shepherds. In all three cases, Moses intervened to protect the rights of the underdog, to right the wrong, to strike a blow for justice.

Consider this. If you are choosing a man to lead a nation of slaves to freedom, is that a good quality for him to have? If you are choosing a deliverer, a savior for your people, is that a useful passion for him to display? I recall the words to the old song about Moses, sung by slaves in early America. "Go down Moses! Way down in Egypt's land. Tell old Pharaoh, 'Let my people go!'" You need passion for a job like that. Moses had it. Somewhere in his upbringing that passion was kindled and grew to a hot flame. Admittedly, Moses' early actions were misguided. He acted out of turn and out of order, and he actually caused more harm than good, at least in the first two cases. His methods and his timing would need tempering and channeling. But these incidents still tell us a great deal about what was in him. It was good stuff! I think this passion of Moses was one that God himself put in his heart and kindled there for the task that lay ahead. It is the stuff of which deliverers and saviors are made. We should not ignore the passions and deep urgings within us, if they align with God's purposes. With tempering and guidance, they may be just what we need to fulfill the task God has for us to do.

What else do we know about Moses during this stage in his life?

Here we may have to do a little more reading between the lines, but we still have some strong Biblical evidence to go on. At some point during these years, Moses recognized his dual heritage. We are not sure how or when he found out. He may well have known about it from his very earliest years when he was nursed by his own mother. But 3 or 4 is pretty early to be taken from your family and still remember their lessons. Maybe Moses continued to have some contact with his real parents during his years in the palace. Or maybe he grew up without any knowledge of his background and was only made aware of it in some way as an adult. We simply do not know the details. But we do know that as an adult, he was aware of his divided identity: born to Hebrew parents, adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, Hebrew by birth, Egyptian by upbringing. Also, we know that at some point he became aware that he would have to make a choice. This is the second crucial thing we know about Moses in this formative time in his life: **The most important choice of his life was grounded on eternal values.**

We know this by the New Testament commentary on his life, given to us in Hebrews 11:24-26.

It was by faith that Moses, when he grew up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to share the oppression of God's people instead of enjoying the fleeting pleasures of sin. He thought it was better to suffer for the sake of Christ than to own the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to his great reward.

This is crucial. Moses was faced with an excruciating choice! At a fundamental level, every believer, every follower of God ultimately faces this same choice. But few face it with quite the same stark contrast that Moses did. He could continue to identify himself as a son of the palace and a member of the royal family, or he could cast his lot with a nation of slaves; what an agonizing choice! We can only imagine the nights and days of soul-searching that must have torn him apart. The easy choice, the pleasant path, the luxuries and pleasures of the palace; and yet, he could not keep himself from going to see the plight of his people, his own flesh and blood. When he did, he witnessed the whips falling, and they cut him to the heart. And so, he made his choice. He made this most important choice of his life with his eyes firmly fixed on eternal values.

Look at how the writer of Hebrews describes what he gave up and what he turned away from. *"He refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's*

daughter...” (v.24) He determined not to enjoy “*the fleeting pleasures of sin...*” (v.25) He gave up “*...the treasures of Egypt...*” (v.26).

But more important than that, what did he turn toward? What did he choose instead? He chose, “*to share the oppression of God’s people...*” He chose, “*to suffer for the sake of Christ...*”

That puzzled me at first. It struck me as an anachronism to introduce Jesus into Moses’ story. But then it clicked. It doesn’t say “Jesus.” It simply says “Christ.” In other words, “Messiah.” Remember, God was at work in history to prepare a nation through whom would eventually come “the Christ,” the Redeemer. Moses made a choice to identify himself with that nation, for that Cause, even though it meant disgrace in the world’s eyes. He did it for a Messiah yet to come, even as we are sometimes called to suffer disgrace for a Messiah already come, a Messiah we know as Jesus.

Why did he make such a choice? The rest of the verse tells us why: “*...for he was looking ahead to his great reward.*” A more complete expansion of the vocabulary might go like this: “He turned his eyes away from all other things and fixed his eyes attentively on the eternal reward.” There is the key. He made his choice based on eternal values. Remember the earlier phrase about the pleasures of sin? He recognized something else. The complete phrase reads: “*...to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin...*” The King James Version says, “*...to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season...*” That was the contrast that Moses saw; the temporary pleasures of sin, the transitory treasures of Egypt, the fleeting thrill of fame and deference as a member of royalty; or the opportunity to identify with the people of God, to cast his lot with God’s plan to send his Christ, and ultimately the reward of enjoying eternal pleasure in God’s presence.

Moses made his choice. He chose the permanent over the temporary. He made the most important choice of his life based on eternal values. We all face the same choice. The contrast may not be as clear and as stark as the choice Moses faced. But we are making choices every day, and these countless small choices all grow out of one fundamental choice. Temporary or eternal? God’s way or man’s way? Sin’s pleasure or faith’s reward?

Jim Elliot, one of the missionaries who died at the hands of the Auca Indians in 1956 said it so well in his diary. “He is no fool who

gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” He could have been describing Moses. I wonder if he would describe your choices and mine in the same way.

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“WHAT IS YOUR NAME?”

Exodus 3

In the first chapter, we mentioned that there are three main characters in the story of the Exodus. One of those, of course, is Moses. The other is the people of Israel as a whole. The third, and truly the main character is God himself.

In Exodus 3 and 4, we have the well-known account of God appearing to Moses in the burning bush. It is such an important, foundational text that we are going to spend two chapters on it. In the next chapter we are going to focus on Moses, and what we can learn from his experience and reactions in this account. In this chapter, however, we will focus on what we can learn about God from this passage.

It is an appropriate text for such a focus as we can tell from two techniques used by the writer. The first is a change in what narrative analysts call “focalization.” It relates to the point of view assumed by the narrator of the story. Typically, this point of view is external, in which events are recorded as by an eyewitness. Another point of view can be internal, in which the narrator not only tells us what is happening, but also tells us what the character is thinking or feeling. But there is a third point of view that is called omniscient. In this case the narrator moves behind the scenes and describes what is happening behind the scenes, from God’s point of view. In the last few verses of Exodus 2, the writer assumes this omniscient point of view.

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

In this paragraph, we are told not only what is happening on earth, particularly back in Egypt. We are also told what is happening

in heaven. Such texts are very important and helpful to us, because they reveal God and his character to us in a “plain language” kind of way. They provide divine commentary on earthly events.

The second narrative technique that is very common and useful in Hebrew narrative is the extensive use of dialogue or speech. They are parts of the text that are placed in direct quotation marks. Such “speeches” are also very helpful in revealing what is going on in the speaker’s mind. Exodus 3 is a treasure house of such insight, because 20 out of the 22 verses include direct quotations, and the entire chapter represents a dialogue between God and Moses. We learn a great deal about God from this chapter because much of the text is God speaking in his own words.

With this introduction, let’s look at the account. After giving us the omniscient point of view in the end of chapter 2, we pick up the narrative back in Midian. Moses was still herding his father-in-law’s flock. He had been doing this now for 40 years. In all probability, he assumed that this would be his job for the rest of his life. He was out with the flock in what is called the “far side” of the desert. One day he witnessed a very strange phenomenon. He saw a bush on fire. Now this might have been strange in and of itself. How was this fire started? Are there people around he has not seen? Why is there only this one bush burning? But what really intrigued him and aroused his curiosity was that while the bush burned, it wasn’t being consumed. The bush itself did not turn black and collapse in ashes. It remained fresh and vibrant even as the flames burned. So, he turned aside to witness this strange thing.

As he approached the bush, we are told that God spoke to him from the bush. He called him by name. “Moses! Moses!” Thus began one of the most intriguing conversations in the Old Testament. God spoke, and as he spoke, he revealed vital truths about himself.

As we unpack God’s words, we will highlight six truths we can learn about God.

1. HE IS A HOLY GOD.

Look at God’s words in verse 5: *Then he said, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”*

This is the first use of the word “holy” in the Bible. This word, either in Hebrew or in English translation, does not occur in the book

of Genesis, yet it becomes a major theme of the book of Exodus, with 53 occurrences.

First occurrences are significant. The holiness of God is not a concept thought up by men. Its first occurrence is from the mouth of God himself. It is a somewhat unshaped and undefined concept in this first passage. There is a sense of separation or distance, when God says, “Don’t come any closer.” There is also the notion of cleanliness and freedom from contamination in the instructions for Moses to take off his sandals. What will become increasingly clear through the book of Exodus is God’s freedom from all sin and moral contamination and the need that those who approach him must also be holy and cleansed from sin.

This passage is not an exposition of God’s holiness, but it is an introduction. “Take off your sandals, Moses, for the place where you are standing is holy ground, and it is holy because of my presence.” Our God is a holy God. One of the titles for God in the Old Testament, especially in the book of Isaiah, is “The Holy One of Israel.” Exodus 3 is where “the Holy One” begins his self revelation to Moses.

2. HE IS A PROMISE KEEPING GOD.

We find this in verse 6: *And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”*

Why does he mention these men? What is their significance to the text? Is it simply a matter of family history? No, there is more involved than that. Look back at Exodus 2:24: *God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob.* God had formed a covenant with Abraham. It was a relationship based on certain promises that he made to Abraham in Genesis 12 and then expanded and reiterated in Genesis 15 and 17. These promises involved making Abraham’s descendants into a great nation, giving his descendants the land of Canaan for an inheritance, and then, through Abraham’s seed to bless all the nations of the earth. These same promises and this same covenant were then confirmed to Isaac and to Jacob. When God says to Moses, “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” he is committing himself to the keeping of his covenant promises. He has not forgotten his promises. He remembers his covenant. This

is a second truth we learn about God from his own mouth. He is a promise keeping God.

3. HE IS A HEARING, SEEING, AND KNOWING GOD.

In verse 7 we read his words: *Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings..."* One of the literary devices for highlighting or emphasizing something in Hebrew literature is the use of repetition. The verbs in Exodus 3:7 contain a very deliberate and strong repetition of the words used back in Exodus 2:23-25:

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

Note the repetition of the same verbs. In Hebrew narrative, that is the equivalent of the author using bold print and underlining and circling all at once. Don't miss this! God heard their cries and he saw their misery. There is a word that is used in both 2:25 and 3:7 that is translated "God knew." He not only knows. He cares. He is a hearing, seeing, knowing (and caring) God.

4. HE IS A DELIVERER.

Look at God's words in verse 8: *"...and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land..."*

I love that phrase. *"I have come down to deliver them."* That is our God speaking! That is the kind of God he is! He is a God who comes down to deliver his people. This is the point of this whole dialog. This is the reason for the appearance to Moses. See verse 10: *"Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."* This is Moses' commission. But it is not for him to do alone. It is God's work, through Moses. *"I have come down to deliver them."* God will deliver them. He has come down!

For the rest of the Old Testament, this will be one of his most prominent titles. I am the LORD, your deliverer, who redeemed you out of Egypt. Our God is a deliverer.

5. HE IS THE ETERNALLY PRESENT GOD.

During their dialog together, Moses asked God an interesting question. We find it in verse 13: *Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"*

What is Moses asking for here? Scholars have a variety of opinions. Some believe he is asking for a name to single out and identify God as the one true God as distinct from all the false gods of Egypt. Others suggest that the name of the God of Abraham was already known to the Israelites, but was kept secret from outsiders; therefore, the test for whether Moses truly represented the God of their fathers would be whether he knew the secret name.

I think the answer is both more profound and less mysterious. In the cultures of the Old Testament, a person's name was far more than just a label. A name was synonymous with identity, reputation and character. When the Israelites would ask, "What is God's name?" they would be asking, "What is he like? What kind of God is he? How has he revealed himself to you? What do you know about him? Is he a God who can be trusted?"

So how did God answer Moses' question? It is found in verse 14: *God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"*

This is a difficult verse to translate and to fully grasp. It involves a play on the Hebrew verb "to be." The form used is timeless, or more accurately, includes all of time. One commentator translates it, "I am he who is, was and will be." That is what I have attempted to capture in the phrase "the eternally present God." "I am the one who is, I am the one who was, and I am the one who will be. I am the eternally present one."

Then he turns this into a proper name at the end of the verse. *"Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"* The word translated I AM is the name Yahweh. It is a formalized name using the root letters (YHWH) of the Hebrew word "to be."

This name, Yahweh, was lost for many years due to an excessive reverence for this name that calcified into something approaching superstition. At some point in Israel's history, Jewish scholars looked at Exodus 20:7 and read, *"You shall not misuse the name of Yahweh your God, for Yahweh will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his*

name.” Reading that, they concluded that one sure way to never misuse the name of Yahweh was to never use the name at all. So, this became their practice. They had far too much reverence to ever change the actual script of the ancient texts, so the four root consonants YHWH remained in the text. But when they added the markings for the vowels, they put in the markings for another Hebrew word, Adonai or Lord. And whenever they came to the name in the text as they read, they would pronounce the word “Adonai.” It is this combination of the four original consonants YHWH and the vowel sounds from Adonai, that gave rise to the name Jehovah, a word that actually has no meaning in Hebrew. Only relatively recently have scholars reconstructed the original name from the text.

Most versions of the Bible are still hesitant to use this spelling and name in their translations, for fear that it will sound strange to modern ears. But many versions (like the English Standard Version that I am using) have given us a way to discern when this name of God occurs in the original text. Whenever it occurs in the text, they still translate it Lord, but they put the word in all capital letters (LORD) to distinguish it from actual occurrences of the Hebrew word Adonai or master. So, you can know that whenever you see LORD in all capitals, it is this name of God, Yahweh. Such a rendering is found here in the text in verse 15 as God expands his instructions to Moses: God also said to Moses, *“Say this to the people of Israel: ‘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, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.*

That is a brief history lesson and a Hebrew grammar lesson all rolled up in one! It is not so important that you remember the etymology, or even the history. What really matters is the theology. His name reflects his nature. He is the eternally present God. “I am he who is, was and will be. That is my name.”

A note about my practice in the chapters that follow: I have been rather inconsistent and random in inserting the actual name (Yahweh) into the text and keeping the common rendering (LORD). Either way, you can (by paying attention to the capitalization) always know when “the Name” occurs in the Biblical text.

These are five truths which God revealed about himself when he appeared to Moses in the burning bush: He is a holy God. He is a promise keeping God. He is a hearing, seeing, knowing God. He is a Deliverer. And he is the eternally present God.

That's five, but I promised you six. For the sixth, we need to turn to the New Testament, to John 8. In this chapter, Jesus is engaged in a long debate with the Jewish leaders. The Jews are claiming Abraham as their father. Jesus states that if they were truly Abraham's children, they would believe in him. Let's pick it up in John 8:56: Jesus is speaking:

Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."

It was a stunning claim in the light of Exodus 3! He was claiming for himself the Name, the memorial name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who appeared to Moses. *"Before Abraham was, I AM!"* The eternally present God. You may notice that the Jews did not miss the intent of his claim. It says in verse 59, *"So they picked up stones to throw at him."* Why? Because in their view he had committed the sin of blasphemy by claiming to be God. And he had claimed exactly that. The issue isn't whether he claimed it or not. The only controversy can be over whether or not his claims are true.

That leads us to our **sixth truth** about God. **He is an incarnate God.** As the gospel of John states in John 1:14: *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory..."* The eternal I AM became flesh and dwelt among us. He was given the name Jesus, which is the Greek version of the Old Testament name Joshua. Joshua, by etymology means literally, "Yahweh saves."

Do you see how the Bible completes and interprets and fulfills itself? Our God is a holy God who cannot tolerate sin. Yet he is also a promise keeping God who promised to send a deliverer. He is a hearing, seeing and knowing God who knows our misery and our bondage. As a saving God, he not only sent a deliverer, but he also became our deliverer. The eternal I AM came in the flesh to redeem us from our sin.

“PLEASE GOD, SEND SOMEONE ELSE!”

Exodus 3:1-4:20

Did you ever have an argument with God? Has he ever asked you to do something, and you argued with him about it? If you answered yes to those questions, then let me also ask you this: did you ever make God angry with your arguments?

In Exodus 3 and 4, we find the account of God appearing to Moses in the burning bush. He appeared to Moses to commission him to go back to Egypt to lead the Israelites to freedom. But Moses talked back to God. He had a whole list of reasons why he was not the one for the job. He argued with God. At the end of the exchange, we are told very specifically in Exodus 4:14: *Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses...*

In this chapter we will look at Moses' objections and arguments and then look at God's answers. We will try to discover what it was that triggered God's anger.

As we examine the passage (which runs from Exodus 3:1 to 4:20) we find that Moses raised five questions or objections.

Moses' First Objection: Who am I?

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11)

“Who am I?” That is a very common and natural question when we are faced with God's call to a particular task. What was Moses really asking? His question covers a number of concerns.

It covers the **question of personal status**. At this point in time, Moses was a shepherd on the far side of the desert. He had been a

shepherd for approximately 40 years. “Who am I? No one will pay attention to me! I am just a shepherd.” Status is assigned in many ways in human society. It can be assigned based on race or nationality. It can be assigned based on occupation or rank in the company. It can be assigned based on education, qualifications or income. Sometimes, even as Christians, we buy into that ranking system. When God calls us, we say: “Who am I? I’m just a...”

This objection also covers the **question of personal adequacy**. The question “who am I?” is an inherent question of adequacy. “I am not the right person for the job. I am not adequate! It is a job from someone bigger, more qualified, more adequate than I am.”

If we read between the lines here, I believe Moses’ objection also covers the **question of prior failure**. We know that Moses had tried, many years before, to act as a deliverer for his people. He tried in his own strength. This led to his killing an Egyptian and then being rejected by the Hebrews when he tried to sort out one of their quarrels. He ended up fleeing for his life. This failure bit deep into Moses’ self esteem. We know this from Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7:25: *Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not.* (NIV) His attempt at deliverance was a colossal failure. Now God is sending him to deliver Israel. His response is, “Who am I? Been there, done that, failed! You’ve got the wrong person, God.”

We may have the same doubts and ask the same question. *Who am I, Lord?*

Let’s look at how God answers Moses’ first objection in Exodus 3:12: *He said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”*

God bypasses Moses’ objection. “Who you are is irrelevant, because I will be with you. Moses, your status is not the point because I, the only true God, will be by your side. Your adequacy is not the issue, because I, the eternally adequate God, will be your strength. Your prior failures are not significant, because this time, I am sending you and I will empower you.” The promise of God’s presence is the answer to all the “Who am I?” questions we raise.

Let us ask at this point; was God angry when Moses asked the “Who am I?” question? No. He graciously and patiently answered

Moses. It is a fair question to ask as long as we listen carefully to God's answer.

Moses' Second Objection: Who are you?

Look at Exodus 3:13: *Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"* This question is cloaked in a little bit of double talk on Moses' part. He puts the question in the mouth of the Israelites. "What if they ask?" But I believe that Moses is also asking this question for himself.

In this objection, Moses is raising **questions of God's adequacy**. When Moses raised the objection of his own adequacy, God responded by promising his own presence. The next logical question is, "Who are you? How do I know that you are adequate? Are you a God who can be trusted?"

To this objection, **God answered by revealing himself**. This, of course, takes us back to the previous chapter on the Name and character of God; that he is a holy God; that he is a promise keeping God; that he is a God who hears and sees and knows; that he is a Deliverer; that he is the eternally present God, the great I AM. We might summarize it all in the phrase, "I am the All Sufficient One. I AM adequate to the task I have called you to do, and I will be with you."

Now let's ask again; was God angry when Moses asked him, "Who are you? What is your name?" No! He gladly and graciously revealed himself to Moses. Once again, it is a fair question to ask. But once again, when we ask the question, we must take time to listen to the answer.

Moses' Third Objection: What if...?

We find this question in Exodus 4:1: *Moses answered, "What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, 'The LORD did not appear to you?'"* (NIV)

We all tend to ask "What if" and "What about" questions when we are confronted with a task or assignment. They can spin off in different directions, even as Moses' question did here. First, there is the **question of authority and authentication**. What if they do not believe that you sent me? How will you authenticate my ministry?

This also raises the **question of resources**. How will I persuade them? What resources will I have to accomplish the task you are sending me to do? Over it all is the simple **question of the difficulty of the task**. Moses knew from prior experience how difficult the task would be, and most difficult of all would be the task of injecting hope into the hearts of the Israelites; hope that God had indeed come down to deliver them.

We also are quick to ask the same kinds of questions. What if? What about? How? We see all the difficulties, all the hurdles and the size of all the mountains we will have to cross. So, how did God answer Moses? **God answered by promising him the necessary resources for the task.**

In this case, God gave Moses three specific, supernatural signs. He told Moses to throw down his shepherd's rod. When he did so it turned into a snake so that Moses fled from it. Then God told him to grab it by the tail. If you know anything about snakes, you know that is not a good way to grab a snake! But when he did so, it turned back into a rod. God said, "This will convince them that I have appeared to you."

Then he gave him a second sign. He commanded Moses to thrust his hand inside his cloak. When he withdrew it, his hand was white with leprosy. It must have been a terrible shock to Moses to look at his own hand, shriveled and white in front of him. But then God told him to put it back into his cloak. When he withdrew it again, it was whole and healthy.

Then God went even further. "Just in case there are still some doubters in the group, take water and pour it on the ground." When he did so, the water turned to blood on the ground. Each of these signs was supernatural, done only by the power of God. Each was designed to turn the doubt in the Israelites' heart into faith in God and into confidence that Moses was indeed his messenger.

For most of us, the tasks that God sends us to do will not require supernatural signs and wonders. But inevitably they will require resources that exceed our meager supply. The overall principle of God's kingdom is that **when God sends, he also supplies the resources**. They may be resources of ability or power or wisdom or strength. They may be physical resources like finance and physical facilities. To quote the pioneer missionary, Hudson Taylor, "God's

work, done God's way, will never lack for God's supply." That is the ultimate answer to all the "What if?" and "What about?" questions we ask.

By the way, did God get angry when Moses asked the "What if?" question? No! He responded by giving him the resources he would need for the task. It is fair to ask questions of authentication, of resources, of difficulty. In fact, we might be considered irresponsible if we didn't ask these questions. Let's just be sure to listen carefully to God's leading and answers.

Moses Fourth Objection: But I can't...

This objection is found in Exodus 4:10: *But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue."*

In this objection, Moses raises the **question of ability**, or more accurately, the **question of disability**. We are not exactly sure what Moses is referring to here. One of the film versions of the Exodus story depicts Moses as having a speech impediment. He stuttered. Others suggest that he is saying that after 40 years in the desert, communing only with his sheep, he has lost fluency in the languages of either the Egyptians or the Hebrews. Others believe that he is simply referring again to his failure to convince the Israelites on his last attempt that he was called to be their deliverer. "I simply lack the eloquence and power of persuasion for such a great task."

We all face questions of disability, don't we? If we are honest, we all have a list of things we think we can't do. These lists may have come from our past failures. They may have come from critical parents or families that tore down our self esteem by telling us we would never amount to anything, that we were useless. These lists are often exaggerated in our mind. But let's face another fact. Sometimes our list of disabilities may be absolutely accurate! We really do stutter, or become tongue-tied, or whatever we feel our disability is.

So, how did God answer Moses' objection? Look at Exodus 4:11-12: *The LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak."*

This is an important Scripture for us to grasp. God is saying to

Moses, “I made you and I will help you! I create each individual unique. I am the God of abilities and disabilities. I know exactly how I designed you. And if I am calling you or sending you to do a task, then you can do it, because I will go with you and help you do it, disability or not.” There is an old Christian saying that says, “God’s will, will not take you where his grace cannot keep you.” I would suggest a corollary to that truth that goes like this, “God’s commission will not send you where his power will not equip you.” Where God calls, he also enables.

Did God get angry with Moses when he raised the objection of his disability? No! Once again, he graciously reassured him of his support and help for the task that lay ahead.

I wish we could stop right here. It would make for a nice, positive conclusion. But the text does not stop here, so neither can we. Moses raises one final objection.

Moses Fifth Objection: But I don’t want to...

Look at Exodus 4:13: *But he said, “Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.”*

The original language is a little complicated here. The essence of it is: “Send anyone you want to send,” but the force of it is: “Anyone but me!” In this final objection, we come down to the core issue. It is the **question of willingness**. “I don’t want to.” Now, I will admit to a great sympathy for Moses at this point. You see, I’ve read the rest of the story. I know what God was calling Moses to do. He is being asked to take on an incredibly difficult, stressful and often thankless task. I am not sure I would have wanted the job either. In fact, I am quite sure I would not want the job! But God doesn’t always call us to easy, fun, happy tasks. He calls us to difficult tasks and hard work. He calls us to sacrifice, to suffer and sometimes even to die for his kingdom. And at the heart of the question for each one of us is the question of willingness. Will we go?

Let me ask you this. Did God get angry when Moses raised his fifth objection? Yes, he did. Exodus 4:14 says: *Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses*. God patiently answered and addressed all of Moses’ other objections and concerns. But when all of those were stripped away, addressed and answered, it came down to the final question: Moses’ willingness.

It will ultimately come down to that for us as well. When God calls us to a task – be it a life calling, or the general call to every believer to bear witness to the Gospel of Christ or a call to volunteer in the church - he waits for our answer. He is open to our questions and our objections. He will graciously respond to our concerns: Who am I? Who are you? What if? But I can't! He doesn't get angry at any of those objections. But what about the final one? "But I don't want to..." That one makes God angry.

The story here in Exodus does have a happy ending. God, even in his anger at Moses, was gracious. He said, "Yes, I will send someone else. I am sending your brother Aaron. But I am sending him to help you, not to do the job for you. Now take your staff and go." And Moses went.

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“IS THIS WHY YOU SENT ME?”

Exodus 4:21-7:7

Did you ever take on a new task for God or make a renewed commitment to him in some area of life – and things became worse? You really, honestly felt God’s leading and responded to it and took positive steps to address a problem or meet a need – and instead of helping, you made matters more complicated, more painful, more difficult, not only for yourself but for others?

That’s what happened to Moses in the passage before us in this chapter. Moses responded to the call of God and returned to Egypt. His first task was to meet with the leaders of the Israelites. He told them of God’s message and of God’s intention to deliver them from slavery. He and Aaron demonstrated the special signs God gave them. We are told in Exodus 4:31 that the people believed and were so overcome by God’s concern for them that they bowed down and worshiped. It was a great beginning.

Then Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and asked him to release the Israelites so they could go into the desert to worship and hold a religious festival to God there. Pharaoh’s response was scathing. *“Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.”*

His harsh answer was bad enough, but that is not all. He was so infuriated by the request that he makes their work even harder. He told them to keep making bricks, but now they will not be supplied with the straw that is a key ingredient in brickmaking. Instead, they must gather their own straw wherever they can find it, but they must still make the same number of bricks! When they failed, the Hebrew foremen were whipped for not producing the usual quota. When the foremen went to appeal to Pharaoh, he accused the people of being lazy! Why else are they asking for time off to go into the desert? He sent them out with a command to go back to work and to meet their quotas!

As they left Pharaoh's presence, they met Moses and Aaron outside. The foremen turned on them angrily. "This is your fault! Some deliverers you are! All you have done is make things worse. Now Pharaoh is out to kill us." They actually call on God to judge Moses and Aaron for causing them trouble.

Put yourself in Moses' sandals right at that point. Can you imagine how he felt? We don't have to rely totally on our imaginations, because he immediately told God how he felt in 5:22-23: *Then Moses turned to the LORD and said, "O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all."*

You can almost taste and feel Moses' despair and discouragement. "God, I trusted you! I did what you told me to do, and it has only made things worse. Is this what you had in mind? Is this why you sent me?"

Have you ever been in that position and felt the way Moses did? I remember watching the film, The End of the Spear that tells the story of the five missionaries who were killed trying to bring the Gospel to a violent tribe of warriors in the jungles of Ecuador. They went because they believed God was calling them to share Jesus with these people. They knew it was dangerous. But they went anyway. I wonder what went through their minds when the warriors ran out of the forest with their spears raised? Some must have experienced the horror of seeing their companions speared first before they themselves were attacked. I wonder if the thought came to mind, "God, is this why you sent us?" These young men were in the prime of life. They all left young wives behind, most of them left young children. Surely their wives must have wondered, "God, is this what you had in mind? Is this why you sent us?"

To answer Moses' question, let us step back and go behind the scenes in Exodus 4-7. What we are witnessing is the buildup to an epic battle, a mighty conflict. Picture it as the spiritual equivalent of a heavyweight boxing match. The stage is set, the lights are on, and the public address announcer is introducing the fighters.

"And in this corner, Pharaoh, ruler of all Egypt! Undefeated and undefeatable, lord of all he surveys!" The Egyptians worshiped Pharaoh as a god. Each Pharaoh, they believed, was sent from heaven

as a special gift to the Egyptians to rule over them and bring them power and prosperity. There are mentions in Egyptian inscriptions of the “mighty hand” of Pharaoh. His word was the final authority in the land. His pronouncements were introduced with the words, “Thus says Pharaoh!”

Arrayed alongside of Pharaoh are all the other gods of Egypt: the mighty Nile River which they worshiped as a deity. The sun god, Ra was revered. So were various other gods of crops, fields and fertility, all of which protected Egypt and ensured her prosperity.

“Now, in the other corner...who?” A nation of slaves? A shepherd with a staff in his hand? An unknown God with a strange name? Moses speaks out, “Yahweh, the God of Israel says, ‘Let my people go!’” And Pharaoh sneers, “Who is Yahweh? I do not know Yahweh! Why should I listen to him?”

The great conflict begins. The bell sounds. The mighty Pharaoh comes out snarling and immediately deals some devastating body blows. “Take this! And this! And this! How dare you challenge me?”

By the time the first round is over, Moses and the Israelites are clinging to the ropes, gasping for breath, blood streaming from their cuts, ready to quit. “Where was Yahweh? Where was their champion?”

Exodus chapter 5 ends very bleakly. What a disaster! Whose idea was it to engage in this battle anyway? But what we must keep in mind is that the end of chapter 5 represents only the end of Round One. Is this a one round fight? No. In fact, we will find that this fight is scheduled to go 12 rounds. Yogi Berra, a well-known baseball manager in America, was famous for the remark: “It ain’t over ‘til it’s over.” Round one has been a disaster. But the fight is not over.

As Moses and the Israelites retreat to their corner after the first round, let’s listen in to what God has to say to Moses. His words are so clear and so reassuring in Exodus 6:1: *But the LORD said to Moses, “Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand, he will send them out, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land.”*

It is as if God is saying, “We’ve got Pharaoh right where we want him! Now watch and see what I will do with my mighty hand.”

God continues speaking in Exodus 6:2-8. Remember that God’s

speeches in the Hebrew narrative are one of the best ways we have of determining God's perspective on what is going on in the story.

God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD, I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.'"

Once again, in God's own words we see his character revealed. He repeats many of the same themes we saw when he spoke to Moses in the burning bush. He has heard the groaning of his people and he has remembered his covenant. He has come down as a deliverer, to bring the people out of bondage and to redeem them from slavery. The themes of deliverance and redemption are here. But he adds another one. It is the theme of adoption in verse 7: *I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.*

In fact, this is even more explicit back in Exodus 4:22-23: *Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'*

And why will he do all this? The emphasis is clear in his words to the Israelites in 6:6: *I am the LORD (Yahweh)...* He repeats it in verse 7: *...and you shall know that I am Yahweh your God.* And lest we missed the first two statements, he says it again at the end of verse 8: *I am Yahweh.*

Who is in the boxing ring against Pharaoh? Ultimately, it is not the Israelites, or even Moses. It is Yahweh, the eternally present God of the universe. And when he starts to fight and raises his powerful

hand, two things will happen. The Israelites, God's own people, will know who he is. They will know that "I am Yahweh!" But even more than that, look down at chapter 7, verse 5: *The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD (Yahweh), when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them.*"

We are watching the beginning of a mighty battle. The fight has opened badly for our side. Score round one for Pharaoh. But remember, this is only the first round. And listen to God's promise. When it's over, when the final round is fought, everyone will recognize who the victor is: Yahweh, the one and only true God.

Well, that is what is going on in these chapters. Yes, things look bleak. But God has a plan, and he has the power, the "mighty hand" to accomplish his plan. "Now watch," he says, "and see what I am about to do."

But as we have mentioned several times, there are three main characters in the book of Exodus. The first is God himself. We have been looking at the story through his eyes so far. But let's look at it through the eyes of the other characters. First, let's look at the Israelites. How did they respond? If we were to graph their emotions through these 4 chapters, we would follow them from despair to faith in 4:31 and then back to despair again. In fact, now their despair is darkened by the bitterness and anger that come with disappointment. Even when Moses delivers God's encouraging words, look at their reaction in 6:9 *Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery.*

Is that where you are? You trusted God, you took a risk, you launched out in faith – and the battle became fiercer and the struggle harder and you got knocked down in the very first round. Now you're angry and bitter and not about to trust God and try again. Just remember, the fight isn't over after one round. Or maybe we should put it this way: It's only over after the first round if you quit!

Let's look at the story through Moses' and Aaron's eyes. If we were to graph their spiritual journey through these chapters, we would find them traveling from doubt to faith to doubt and back to faith again. Doubt in the desert became faith when they confronted Pharaoh the first time. This turned to doubt again after Pharaoh's harsh reaction. "Is this why you sent me?" Even after God's extensive reassurance, Moses still wobbled. Look at his words in Exodus 6:12: *But Moses said*

to the LORD, “Behold, the people of Israel have not listened to me. How then shall Pharaoh listen to me, for I am of uncircumcised lips?” But after more reassurance and instructions in the first part of Exodus 7, Moses and Aaron got up, dusted themselves off and went back for round two. Look at Exodus 7:6: *Moses and Aaron did so; they did just as the LORD commanded them.* That is faith in action. They never shied from the battle against Pharaoh again. As the book of Hebrews says in Hebrews 11:27: *By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible.* He saw the true champion of the fight, invisible but standing tall to win the victory over the enemy.

Let’s go back to the wives of those missionaries in Ecuador. The first round ended disastrously, with their husbands’ bodies lying dead on a sand bar in the middle of the Amazon jungle. “Lord, is this why you sent us?” But that was only the end of round one. It was not the end of the battle. They gathered themselves together. Not long after, Elizabeth Elliot, the wife of one of the men who died, and Rachel Saint, the sister of the pilot who was also killed, made their way down river and made contact with the same village. They took the Elliots’ little girl with them. They stayed in the village with the same men who had done the killing. They began to share the Gospel with them. Over time, several of the other wives also visited, accompanied by their families. The love and forgiveness they shared broke down the barriers of hostility and fear and hatred. Today there is a thriving church among the tribe. Some of the very men who did the killing became leaders in the church. “Lord, is this why you sent us?” Yes!

But there is more here than a story of God’s grace in the Amazon. The death of the five missionaries captured world headlines. It was front page news. As the story spread, it released a flood of new missionary volunteers. Christians dedicated themselves to Christ’s service around the world because of what had happened on a sand bar in the Amazon. “Lord is this why you sent us?” Yes. A thousand times, yes! It ain’t over ‘til it’s over. The battle doesn’t end after round one. Moses “endured because he saw him who is invisible.” May we do the same. God is on our side.

“THAT YOU MAY KNOW THAT I AM YAHWEH!”

Exodus 7-10

In the previous chapter, we left the story at the end of round one of what will turn out to be a 12-round heavyweight championship boxing match. In one corner is Pharaoh, ruler of all Egypt, lord of all he surveys, reputed to be descended from and representing all the gods of Egypt. In the other corner is Yahweh, the God of Israel.

In the first round, Moses presented God's demands. We watched Pharaoh respond in fury. With vicious, raw power he struck against the helpless Israelite slaves, increasing their labor and punishing them when they failed to meet the increased demands. At the end of round one, both Israel and Moses were ready to quit. Pharaoh's power seemed unassailable. Score round one for Pharaoh.

But between rounds, God says to Moses, "Now we have Pharaoh right where we want him. Now watch and see what I will do with my powerful hand!"

The bell rings for the start of round two which is where we pick up the story in this chapter in the middle of Exodus 7. There is a preliminary flurry of blows in the center of the ring. Aaron throws down his staff. It becomes a hissing snake! Pharaoh counters with his magicians. They throw down their staffs, and they become hissing snakes! We are not sure if they do it by sleight of hand or a conjuring trick, or if they possess supernatural, occult powers. But before their eyes, a very strange and, for those sensitive to omens, a hugely significant thing happens. Aaron's snake/staff promptly strikes and then swallows the snakes/staffs of the Egyptians!

Then the fight gets serious. At God's command, Aaron lifts his rod and in Pharaoh's presence, he strikes the waters of the Nile, and instantaneously, the water turns to blood. Not only does the river

water turn to blood, but so does the water in all the canals and ponds and even the containers in their homes and palaces. The water stinks! The fish die! Pharaoh makes a feeble attempt at a counter blow. Once again, he turns to his magicians. By their magic power they also turn water into blood. But it is a weak response. What Pharaoh needed was someone who could change the blood back to water! There is nothing to drink. The people are reduced to digging around the river for water that is potable only because it has been filtered by the sand. For seven days the people suffer. Score the second round for Yahweh. The score is now: Yahweh 1, Pharaoh 1.

But Pharaoh does not give up. His heart is hard, his chin is set with determination. Round three begins when God, through Moses, announces a plague of frogs. Out of the river they come! There are thousands upon thousands of them, hopping up onto the land and into the houses and palaces, the kitchens, the tables, the beds of the Egyptians. This one is almost funny if you use your imagination. It isn't life threatening, but it is rather creepy. There are frogs everywhere you look! Once again, Pharaoh counters with his magicians. Once again, they are up to the challenge, and they are also able to summon up frogs. But Pharaoh doesn't need more frogs! He needs someone who can make the frogs go away! For some reason, these frogs get through to Pharaoh. He calls for Moses and begs him to ask Yahweh to remove the frogs and he will let the Israelites go. The score is now: Yahweh 2, Pharaoh 1.

The frogs die and are piled in smelly heaps. But between rounds, Pharaoh hardens his heart and changes his mind. He will not let the Israelites go! So, the stage is set for round four. At God's instruction Aaron strikes the ground with his rod, and the dust becomes a numberless horde of annoying insects. We are not sure of the identity of these insects as this Hebrew word only occurs in this passage and its meaning is uncertain. Various suggestions have been made; from mosquitoes to ticks, fleas, lice or gnats. Whatever they were, they were everywhere and very annoying! Pharaoh summons his magicians. They try, but this time, they are unable to reproduce any of the annoying insects. And of course, they still can't take them away. The score is now Yahweh 3, Pharaoh 1.

But Pharaoh's heart is still hard. He is not about to quit. He comes back for round 5. This time, Pharaoh is again given full

warning and a chance to let the Israelites go. When he refuses, swarms of flies infest the land. Actually, once again we are at a bit of a loss to identify the precise nature of this plague. In this case, the text does not even identify the insect by a Hebrew word. It simply states that the land was full of swarms. We are left to imagine what kind of swarms these are. But we know that they are everywhere, in their homes and in the air and on the ground. There is no place to go to find relief. Pharaoh's magicians have admitted defeat. They no longer even try to duplicate God's power. In distress, Pharaoh calls for Moses and offers to let the Israelites go to offer sacrifices if the swarms are taken away. After warning him not to go back on his word again, Moses prays, and the swarms are removed. The score is now: Yahweh 4, Pharaoh 1.

But again, when the swarms are removed, Pharaoh hardens his heart and changes his mind. The people are not allowed to go. Are you starting to see a pattern of repetition here? The rounds begin to tick off with almost monotonous regularity. The next round is a terrible plague that wipes out the livestock of the Egyptians. It's time now for Moses, with Yahweh's help, to throw some serious blows. A plague of boils breaks out on both animals and people. Then comes another round house bunc: a hailstorm more severe than has ever struck the land of Egypt before or since! Pharaoh is leaning on the ropes now but still on his feet. It's time for more and harder punches. Next is a plague of locusts so numerous that they literally cover the ground and devour every living plant that was not destroyed by the hail. This is followed by three days of total darkness; a darkness that can be felt as well as seen. It is so total that no one can even leave their homes for three days. As the rounds pass, the score mounts: Yahweh 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and still, Pharaoh 1.

Incredibly, despite intermittent calls for mercy, at the end of each round, Pharaoh gets up, hardens his heart and comes back for more. His nation is on its knees. Its economy is shattered. His counselors and people are begging for it to end. They are pleading with Pharaoh to throw in the towel. But still he refuses. Instead of letting the Israelites go, Exodus 10 ends with Pharaoh ordering Moses out of his sight and threatening to kill him if he ever comes into his presence again. Ten rounds of the fight are now over. The score is Yahweh 9, Pharaoh 1. But Pharaoh is still on his throne and the Israelites are still

slaves. The fight isn't over yet. The climactic, last two rounds are still to come. But you will have to read the next two chapters to find out what happens in the last two rounds.

What we want to do in the rest of this chapter is to step back and address some questions that may come into our minds as we read these chapters and try to make sense of what is happening. The first question is one of primarily intellectual interest. **What were the plagues? Specifically, were the plagues natural or supernatural phenomena?** This is a very old question, and many scholars seem to be in a great rush to offer natural explanations for these events, explaining the plagues as a cycle of natural disasters. One sample of such an effort goes something like this. The Nile River turning to blood is a description of either the runoff of a great flood upstream or an infestation of a red colored algae that looked like blood. The contaminated water then drove the frogs up on land. The piles of decomposing frogs bred the swarms of insects, the insects then spread a plague, possibly anthrax, to the cattle, and the boils were a skin disease, again, possibly a form of anthrax, caught from the livestock. Hail and locusts are naturally occurring phenomena. The three days of darkness can be explained as an intense dust/sandstorm aggravated by the stripped landscape.

Such explanations may be intriguing, and I certainly do not rule out all natural explanations for some of the individual plagues. But I do object to any recreation of these events that limits them to purely natural causes. I would simply highlight certain features in the account that point directly and clearly to the supernatural power of God at work. The first feature is the instantaneous beginning point of each of the plagues, always at the word of God through Moses. The second is that the overwhelming extent and severity of these plagues point to a cause beyond that which is naturally occurring. Third is the instantaneous ending of the various plagues, once again in response to God's word or in answer to prayer to God. Fourth is the miraculous protection of the Israelites. From the fourth plague onward, we are clearly told that the land in which the Israelites dwelt was spared: be it the swarms of flies, the plague on the livestock, the hail. Even on the days of total darkness in Egypt, the text clearly states, *...but all the people of Israel had light where they lived.* (10:23) Such a clear and, by nature, purely arbitrary division between one part of Egypt

and another can only be explained by God's own supernatural power. Clearly, the only explanation of these events that does justice to the text is that given by God himself in Exodus 6:1: *Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country.* (NIV) By whatever combination of natural and supernatural forces, this is God's mighty hand on display.

The second question we need to consider together is: **Why did God send the plagues?** What was his purpose in pouring out these particular judgments and miraculous displays against the Egyptians? To answer this question, we will consider only the words of Scripture itself. In the Bible, we find that God was fulfilling three purposes in these chapters.

First, **God was punishing the Egyptians for enslaving and oppressing the Israelites.** We find this answer given in a prophetic passage, all the way back in Genesis 15 when God was talking to Abraham. This is what he says in Genesis 15:13-14. *Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.* In the plagues, God is punishing the Egyptians for their mistreatment of the Israelites.

Second, **the plagues demonstrate that Yahweh, the God of Israel is supreme in power over all the gods of Egypt.** We catch a hint of this in Exodus 12:12. This verse, which contains the prophecy of the tenth and final plague against the Egyptians, also tells us the purpose of all the plagues: *And on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD.* Bible scholars and Egyptologists have made many interesting connections between the plagues and the gods of Egypt. Some of their connections are more convincing than others.

We will just highlight the stronger links. First, the Nile River turning to blood: the Egyptians worshiped the Nile as the creator and sustainer of their nation. In fact, they had three gods that represented the Nile in its different phases or aspects: Osiris, Nu and Hapi. With one mighty strike of Aaron's staff, the power of God nullified the life-giving force of the Nile, turning its precious water to blood which stank and destroyed life, rather than gave life. What about the

second plague of frogs? The Egyptians also had a goddess called Hekt (or Heqet) which they portrayed as having the head of a frog. Thus, the frog was viewed as sacred in Egypt, and therefore could not be killed, leaving the Egyptians particularly vulnerable to this plague. One can only imagine the symbolic effect of the piles of dead and stinking frogs that remained after this plague. The fifth plague against the livestock, especially the cattle, struck at another of the Egyptians' gods. Cults dedicated to the worship of bulls were common in Egypt, and the goddess Isis was generally depicted with cow horns on her head. The devastation this plague caused to their beloved cattle was not only an economic loss. It was a blow against their gods. The connection between some of the other plagues and specific gods of Egypt is a little harder to demonstrate, until we recognize that the Egyptians worshiped a wide array of gods whose primary function was to protect them from natural disasters. The plagues against Egypt clearly portrayed that their divine protectors were helpless against the power of the God of Israel. Finally, the plague of darkness struck at the heart of the Egyptians' worship of the god they called Amon-Re or Ra, whom they identified with the sun. This god was closely identified with Pharaoh. In fact, Pharaoh was thought to be the son of Amon-Re. When the sun ceased to shine at the word of Yahweh, God was once again demonstrating his power over the gods of Egypt.

In the plagues God was doing more than simply demonstrating the power of his mighty hand. The plagues, taken individually and together, were hammer blows against the false gods and false worship of the Egyptians. *I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt.* Yahweh is supreme in power not only over Pharaoh, but over all the gods of Egypt.

Third, through the plagues, **God declared his identity and glory to Pharaoh, to Egypt, to Israel and to all nations.** Remember what Pharaoh said when Moses first went to him and said, *Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go!'* He roared his disdain! *Who is Yahweh? I don't know Yahweh and I will not let Israel go!*

It is significant that when we analyze the text, we find that five times God said specifically to Pharaoh *"I am doing this so that you will know that I am Yahweh."* Let's look at those verses.

Exodus 7:17: *By this you will know that I am Yahweh.* In Exodus 8:10: *It will be as you say so that you may know there is no one like*

Yahweh our God. In Exodus 8:22: So that you will know that I, Yahweh, am in this land. In Exodus 9:14: So that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth. And finally in Exodus 9:29: So you may know that the earth is Yahweh's. (All quotes from NIV) Pharaoh had issued a direct challenge: *Who is Yahweh?* Over and over again, Yahweh says to him, *I am doing this so that you will know that I am Yahweh.*

But it didn't stop with Pharaoh. God was declaring his power and glory to all Egypt. In Exodus 7:5, we read, *The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD (Yahweh) when I stretch out my hand against Egypt.* The plagues also had a purpose as a testimony to the people of Israel. God also wanted to be sure that the Israelites, would have this demonstration of God's power to remember and to tell their children. We see this in Exodus 10:1-2: *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am Yahweh (the LORD)."*

But even this is not the full extent of God's purpose in the plagues. He was declaring his glory to all nations. We find this in Exodus 9:16 when God says to Pharaoh: *But for this purpose, I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.* Wherever the Israelites went, the story of what God had done for them in Egypt went before them. This was the nation with a powerful God who delivered them from Egypt.

So, this was God's purpose behind the plagues: to punish Egypt for oppressing Israel, to demonstrate Yahweh's supremacy over the gods of Egypt and to declare his identity and glory to Pharaoh, to Egypt, to Israel and to all nations. *You will know that I am Yahweh.*

What lessons should we take away from these chapters? This isn't the sort of passage that lends itself to a nice tidy conclusion, and three easy steps to a better life. But there are some important lessons here. They are lessons in theology; lessons to shape our minds and our view of the world around us, to help us think Biblically. What do we learn about God from these chapters? We will highlight four truths to take away and think about.

Yahweh is a God of justice.

God says, “I will punish the Egyptians for oppressing my people.” God’s ways are not our ways. God’s timing is not our timing. But he is a God of justice. He will call all men and all nations to account. He is the judge of all the earth, and he will do right. This is a truth for us to consider seriously, whether we are the victims of others’ injustice and oppression, or whether we are tempted to act wrongly or unfairly toward others.

Yahweh is a God of power.

The story of the plagues and God’s deliverance of his people is one of the clearest manifestations of God’s power in the Bible. God demonstrated what he can do. He has all power to act, both supernaturally and naturally to accomplish his purposes. As the old Sunday School chorus declares: “Our God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there’s nothing our God cannot do!”

Yahweh is a sovereign God.

We see this in God’s battle against Pharaoh. Pharaoh thought that he was acting independently to oppose the purposes of God. And he was. Yet each time he hardened his heart, there is a telling phrase in the text, occurring six times: *As Yahweh had said*. There is a theological mystery here. Sometimes the text says that Pharaoh hardened his heart. Sometimes it simply says that his heart was hardened. But on at least 10 occasions the text specifically says that God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” Paul picks up on this truth in Romans 9:17-18: *For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills*. This mystery of the interaction between the sovereign choice of God and the free will of man has consumed endless pages and hours of theological debate. We shall not resolve it in this chapter. Let us simply declare this Biblically revealed truth, illustrated in the story of the epic battle between God and Pharaoh. **Yahweh is a sovereign God.** Such a truth is strong meat for our minds and our souls.

Yahweh is a God of grace.

This truth is based, at least in part, on the silence of the text. The people of Israel are almost totally missing from the story in Exodus 7-10. Back in Exodus 6:9, we read that *Moses repeated this to the Israelites, but they did not listen to him because of their discouragement and cruel bondage.* In other words, they have given up. They have no more hope, no more faith. Yet God, on his own and without their help, proceeds with his work of deliverance. In fact, the only time the people of Israel are mentioned in chapters 7-10 is to call attention to the fact that God is protecting them from the effects of the plagues directed at the Egyptians. Exodus 7-10 is not a story of a mighty nation. It is a story of a mighty God of grace, working to redeem his people from slavery.

The other source for this application is found in the words of Scripture: Deuteronomy 7:7-9 speaks to this truth: *It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.* In other words, I didn't choose you, Israel, because you deserve to be chosen. I chose you because of my grace, my unmerited favor.

These chapters tell the story of a mighty God, fulfilling his purposes and declaring his identity and glory on the earth. It is a chapter full of applied theology. It is worth taking some time to think about the relevance of these truths to our own life and times.

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

Exodus 11-13

Reading Exodus chapters 11-13 raises a storm of mixed emotions. On one hand, this is a dreadful story; a very dark night, pierced with the awful screams and the wailing of grieving parents holding the bodies of their firstborn sons. On the other hand, it is a story of triumph and victory, the story of freedom and emancipation from slavery, the story of the birth of a nation, as God's people marched out of Egypt. I cannot seem to fully reconcile the contradictory pulls on my emotions that the events of these chapters elicit. One phrase, however, sticks in my mind. It is found in Exodus 12:42, as translated in the King James Version: This is a *night to be much observed*. This is truly a "night to remember."

It is a night to remember for a number of reasons. First, it was **a night of sacrifice**. The evening began in Israelite homes all over Egypt with the death of a yearling lamb. Each family, following God's instruction through Moses, carefully selected a lamb without blemish. Then they cut its throat, collected the blood, and, using a branch from the hyssop plant, they splashed the blood on the door posts and over the door. Then they roasted the lamb and ate it along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They ate standing, with their cloaks tucked into their belts, sandals on their feet, staff held in one hand, ready for travel. The death of the lamb and the blood on the door posts were both critical. That very night, the destroying angel passed through the entire land of Egypt. Whenever it came to a home with the blood on the door posts, it would "pass over" that home, leaving all those within the home safe. The sacrifice of the lamb protected the family from the loss of their firstborn son.

Secondly, it was **a night of judgment** against Pharaoh and the people of Egypt. This note of judgment is clearly declared in Scripture. We find it all the way back in Genesis 15:14: *But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves...* This is the final plague, the final

punishment against the nation. We saw in the previous chapter that many of the plagues were directly targeted against the false gods of Egypt. Let's look at Exodus 12:12 again: *For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD.* This final plague directly targeted the deity of Pharaoh. As mentioned previously, the Egyptians believed that the Pharaohs were divine, descended from Aman-Re or Ra, the sun god. In the ninth plague, God blotted out the sun, or the "father of Pharaoh." Now in this final plague, the son of Pharaoh is slain, striking not only at their line of political succession, but also against their false theology. One of Egypt's "gods" died that night!

As we continue to consider this night of judgment against Egypt, let us also remember the brutal reign of terror that Pharaoh and the Egyptians have carried out against the Israelites. Do you remember Pharaoh's instructions in Exodus 1? First, he commanded the midwives to kill every male child at birth. When they refused, he gave all other Egyptians the right and the responsibility to kill the infant boys of the Israelites: not just the firstborn sons, but every son! It is a night of judgment as God exacts his justice.

But there is an even deeper, symbolic meaning to this night of judgment. It is elaborated for us in Exodus 4:21-23. And the LORD said to Moses, *"When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me. If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son."*

The battle between Yahweh and Pharaoh is not just an academic struggle of power and authority. It is a very personal struggle. Pharaoh had nine opportunities to repent, to change his mind and to let the Israelites go. Every time, he hardened his heart and refused. Finally, God says, "I am going to reach out and touch you where it hurts most. You have refused to let my firstborn son go, so now I will slay your firstborn son." The time for judgment has come.

The account of the events is given with rather simple, spare language in Exodus 12:29-30. *At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat*

on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians. And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead. It was a night of judgment.

Thirdly, **it was a night of deliverance.** This was God's promise to the Israelites through Moses. Look at Exodus 11:1: *The LORD said to Moses, "Yet one plague more I will bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt. Afterward he will let you go from here. When he lets you go, he will drive you away completely."* After more than 400 years in bondage, after nine plagues, after Pharaoh repeatedly refusing to let the Israelites go for even 3 days to worship God and hold a festival in the desert, God promised that they will not only be allowed to go, but they would, in fact, be driven out completely. This promise was literally fulfilled. Look at Pharaoh's words in Exodus 12: 31-32: *Then he summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, "Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the LORD, as you have said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone..."* The grammatical forms are very telling here. His speech is made up of a series of commands or imperatives: Get up! Leave! Go! Worship! Take! Go! He is literally driving them out! These are not half-hearted statements of permission. These are commands to urgent action. "Get out!" he cries. What is more, his urgency is echoed by the Egyptian people. In verse 33, we read: *The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste. For they said, "We shall all be dead."* Because of what happened on that final night, that awful tenth plague, the nation of Israel marched out of Egypt as free people. The summary statement is given in Exodus 12:51: *And on that very day the LORD brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their hosts.* It happened, just as God had promised it would.

Fourth, **it was a night of victory.** Remember the image of the boxing match? In the first round, Moses presented God's demands: *Thus says Yahweh, "Let my people go!"* And Pharaoh responded contemptuously, *"Who is Yahweh? I don't know Yahweh, and I will not let the Israelites go!"* That is what the fight has been about. Round after round, Yahweh has been hammering Pharaoh and his nation with plague after plague. But after each round, the result has been the same. Pharaoh has hardened his heart and set his jaw and declared,

“I will not let Israel go!” Finally, at the end of the 11th round, Yahweh lands this one mighty blow to Pharaoh’s jaw. His eyes roll back in his head, and he crumples to the floor. Yahweh has won the fight!

To see how complete, how overwhelming this victory is, let me point out two highly symbolic details in the text. The first is when God instructs the Israelites to ask for jewelry and other portable wealth from the Egyptians. This is a rather bizarre aspect of the story. We see it first in Exodus 11:2: *Speak now in the hearing of the people, that they ask, every man of his neighbor and every woman of her neighbor, for silver and gold jewelry.*” The King James Version translates the word “ask” as “borrow,” but that is not a good translation. There is no implication of paying them back. The word simply means “ask for.” We are told that the Israelites followed Moses’ instructions in Exodus 12:35: *The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing.* Bizarre behavior, don’t you think? But here is the most amazing thing: the Egyptians gave them what they asked! And we are even told why in verse 36: *And the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked.* Then we are told why this is so significant at the end of the verse. *Thus they plundered the Egyptians.* Now, in the custom of the day, what did a conquering army do to its enemies when the battle was over? “To the victor belong the spoils!” They plundered the conquered enemy. It was deemed the natural right of conquest. Here we are told that Yahweh’s victory over the Egyptians was so total, so absolute, that the Israelites walked out with all the plunder they could carry. And they did it without striking a blow. They just asked, and the Egyptians gave it to them! After 400 years of slavery, they left Egypt like a conquering army. It was a night of victory.

There is one more subtle, but very significant reference buried in the text. It is found in Pharaoh’s final words to Moses in Exodus 12:32. At the end of all those urgent imperatives, (“Get up, leave, go...”) we have this rather strange request by Pharaoh. *And bless me also.* Let’s unpack that request briefly. It is a self-evident truth that the greater blesses the lesser. This is illustrated in the climactic event in Jacob’s life, when he wrestled all night with the angel of the Lord. Finally, as dawn breaks, he hangs on with his remaining strength and pleads, “I will not let you go until you bless me.” Jacob acknowledged the superiority

of his opponent and begged for his blessing. I am not sure of what all is implied in Pharaoh's request here. We know from his subsequent actions that he has not exercised any true faith. But I do know this: Pharaoh is acknowledging that Moses and the God he represents is greater than he is, greater than any of the gods of Egypt. His request is a gesture, a word of surrender. They are the words of a beaten man. Pharaoh is defeated. Yahweh has won. It was a night of victory.

Fifth, **it was a night of faith.** The element of faith is clearly stated in Hebrews 11:28. *By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them.* The faith is attributed to Moses, but the Israelites also displayed faith by their obedience in Exodus 12:28: *Then the people of Israel went and did so; as the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did.* Without that faith, each home without the blood would have been judged just like the homes of the Egyptians. Each faithless home would also have risen during the night to find the firstborn son dead. Faith was the crucial ingredient that made the difference in the night being a night of judgment or a night of deliverance and victory.

Finally, **it was a night to be remembered.** The events of that long night represent, in many ways, the birth of the nation Israel as an independent entity on the world's stage. It was vitally important that the Israelites should never lose sight of the circumstances of their "birth." It is no accident that the vast majority of the text in these three chapters is given over to instructions to the Israelites on how they were to memorialize and celebrate these events throughout their history. In fact, they are told to rearrange their calendar, so that the month they became a nation would now become the first month in their calendar year. In addition, they are given instructions that fall into three categories of remembrance.

The first is the command to celebrate the feast of the Passover. Every year, even after they settled in the Promised Land, the Israelites were to celebrate on the 14th day of the first month by slaughtering a lamb and then eating it just like the Israelites did on the night they left Egypt. The second command is to observe a seven-day festival that began the night of the Passover but continued for an entire week. This was known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread. During this week, they were not to eat anything made with leaven. In fact, they were to search their homes and throw out any leaven that they found.

This, too, was an act of remembrance, to recall that they left Egypt in such a hurry that there was no time even to bake bread and allow the leaven or yeast a chance to do its work. Third, God commanded that the firstborn male of every womb was to be consecrated to him. The logic behind this command was simple. The destroying angel had gone throughout the land of Egypt to claim the firstborn of every household and every animal. He passed over the homes where he saw the blood. But in sparing them, God also claimed them as his own. Now he was simply demanding his due. Every first-born male animal was to be sacrificed to him. Every first-born male child was to be redeemed by giving a sacrifice in his place. The reason for these three observances is the same. It is given in Exodus 13:14-16. *And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore, I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.' It shall be as a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes, for by a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.*" Truly, as Exodus 12:42 says, this is *a night to be much observed*, a night to be remembered.

There is another night that is described in the Bible which also raises many of the same conflicting emotions that are raised by these events in Exodus. It is a night that fell, by no coincidence, on a Passover evening over 1400 years after the events we have been considering. It was the night that set-in motion the events of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. The link between these events is clearly made in Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 5:7, Paul writes these words: *For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*

Consider six links between these two nights. First, **it was a night of sacrifice**. On the first Passover night, yearling lambs all over Egypt were sacrificed. These lambs were carefully selected. They had to be without blemish. On this second Passover night, another Lamb was sacrificed. He also was carefully selected, even before the foundation of the earth. He was without blemish. This Lamb, our Passover Lamb, the Christ, was sacrificed.

Second, **it was a night of judgment**. On the first Passover night,

the judgment fell on the land of Egypt and on every firstborn son. On the second Passover night, God's judgment also fell. God's wrath was poured out. But it fell, not on the guilty, but on the innocent. Isaiah 53:4-6 says it all. *Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Third, **it was a night of deliverance.** On the first Passover night, the nation of Israel was led to freedom. On the second Passover night, Jesus led his people to freedom from the penalty and bondage of sin. This was the promise given to Joseph in Matthew 1:21, when the birth of the Christ child was announced: *...you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.* This is the deliverance that has been announced in the Gospel ever since. Listen to the confession of the Apostle Paul in Romans 7:24: *Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?* But now listen to the words of deliverance: *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

Fourth, **it was a night of victory.** Actually, while the seeds of victory were sown that night, the reality and extent of the victory were not known until the third day when Jesus rose from the dead and declared his victory over sin, death and the Devil. This victory is declared in 1 Corinthians 15:55-56. *"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

At the next one, though, we must pause. That first Passover night was **a night of faith.** Moses displayed faith. So did the Israelites when they slaughtered their lambs and sprinkled the blood on the doorposts. Now the critical question comes down to us. Do we have faith in Christ, the Passover Lamb who was slain for us? Just as on that first Passover night, the ingredient of faith will determine whether this night will result for us in judgment, or in deliverance and victory. John 3:16 says it so clearly: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son (as the sacrificial Passover Lamb) that whoever believes (has faith) in him should not perish (under God's judgment, like the firstborn of Egypt did) but have eternal life.*

IN REMEMBRANCE

Assorted Scriptures

In this chapter we shall continue to draw the connection we began at the conclusion of the previous chapter. It is the connection between the account of the first Passover in Exodus 11-13, and the fulfillment of the Passover imagery in the New Testament. The first Passover night was proclaimed in Scripture as “a night to be much observed.” It was a night to remember.

It is the Scripture itself that makes the connection between the first Passover, and the death of Christ. 1 Corinthians 5:7 states the link clearly: *For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*

We drew many of those parallels between the first Passover and the second Passover in the last chapter. What we will do in this chapter is to pick up on the theme of remembrance. Just as the Israelites were commanded to remember the first Passover, how shall we remember the second Passover and its central place in our lives?

There were three observances that God commanded the Israelites to keep in order to keep the memory of the first Passover alive in their hearts. They were to observe the Feast of Passover by killing a lamb. They were to observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread by abstaining from all food that contained yeast or leaven for seven days. Finally, they were to consecrate to God the first born of every womb, both animal and human. All three of these observances were to be done to keep alive the memory of God’s deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt.

In the New Testament, we find that there are three parallel observances that are commanded for us as believers today, to keep the second Passover alive in our hearts and memories. The first one parallels the Passover Feast that God commanded the Israelites to observe. On the night of his betrayal and arrest, Jesus met with his disciples in an upper room to celebrate the Passover together. During

that meal, Jesus took two of the elements that were a part of the Jewish observance, and he injected them with new meaning. He took the unleavened bread *gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying "This is my body, given for you."* Then he added these words, *"Do this in remembrance of me."* In the same way, after the supper he took the cup of wine and said, *"This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you."*

These symbols represent the body and blood of Christ, the Passover Lamb who was sacrificed for us. We are commanded to eat and drink in an act of remembrance, just as the Israelites were commanded to eat the Passover in remembrance of their deliverance from Egypt.

This is what churches do whenever they celebrate the Lord's Supper together. Regardless of how often they do it, or exactly how they do it, God's people around the world come together to remember the sacrifice of the Lamb of God for our sins. It is one of the most significant acts of the assembled Church. It is important for every follower of Christ to be present and participate regularly in this act of remembrance.

The second act of obedience the Israelites were commanded to observe to keep the memory of the Exodus alive was the feast of Unleavened Bread. In our minds, this is often confused and blended with the Passover meal itself. For the Hebrews, it began with the Passover feast, but it was to continue for seven days, after which they were to have another sacred assembly. During this week they were to purge their homes of all yeast or leaven. Once again, they were told that this act was to keep the events of the Exodus alive in their minds and hearts. In Exodus 13:8-10 we read: *You shall tell your son on that day, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.' And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt. You shall therefore keep this statute at its appointed time from year to year.*

What parallel do we find for this act of remembrance in the New Testament? Here we see an interesting development. In the Exodus account, the significance of the unleavened bread seemed to focus on the necessity for haste in their departure from Egypt. Look at Exodus 12:39: *And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had*

brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

However, over the years, leaven evolved into a common symbol for sin and its insidious and pervasive influence. It is interesting to find, then, that it is this use of leaven as a symbol of sin that Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, focuses on in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8.

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

What is the application for us as followers of Christ? How shall we remember the sacrifice of our Passover Lamb? We should do so by purging out the sin in our lives, just like the Israelites went through their homes in to find and purge out all leaven. It is a symbol of a fresh, new start. Let us not carry on with the old leaven. Let us not carry the remnants of our Egypt with us into our new life. And it is a symbol of lives that are holy and clean in God's sight. Let us act like a new batch of dough without yeast, because that is what we really are! We are to do it because *Christ, our Passover lamb has been sacrificed*, and this is how we are to remember him.

The third way in which the Israelites were commanded to keep the memory of the Passover and the Exodus alive was by giving the first offspring of every womb to God. If it was a "clean" animal like a lamb or a goat or a calf, they were to sacrifice it to the Lord. If it was an unclean animal, like a donkey, they were to redeem it by offering a clean animal in its place. But in every case, they were to remember and acknowledge that the first born belonged to the Lord. This, too, was to keep the memory of the Passover alive. When questioned by their children, they were to explain: *For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore, I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.*' (Exodus 13:15)

What parallel do we find for this act of remembrance in the New

Testament? We need to follow the reasoning carefully. The sacrifice of the Passover lamb spared the life of each firstborn son. Therefore, each firstborn son was to be consecrated to God in a special way. It belonged to him!

In the New Testament, *Christ, our Passover lamb has been sacrificed*. Now, the question comes, whose life was spared by this act of sacrifice? The answer is, “Everyone who puts his/her faith in Christ and trusts in his blood as the sacrifice for sin.” So, all of us who have trusted in Christ as Savior owe our lives to Christ and therefore are to be consecrated in a special way to him.

How is this expressed in the New Testament? Romans 12:1 says: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*. Note the connection to “the mercies of God.” Because we have been recipients of God’s mercy (as the firstborn sons of Israel were) we are to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice. Our bodies, our lives belong to him. Paul continues with this language of redemption and sacrifice in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: *Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body*.

Offering our bodies, our lives, ourselves to God for his exclusive use and service is a spiritual act of worship and a logical and required response to his sacrifice on our behalf.

Christ, our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed. We are commanded to keep the memory of his sacrifice alive in our hearts and minds. Remember him by gathering at his table. Purge the leaven (sin) from our lives. Offer our lives to him for his service. These are the ways we are to celebrate our own “Exodus” from our own bondage in “Egypt.”

THE LORD WILL FIGHT FOR YOU!

Exodus 14-15

Have you ever felt trapped by life's circumstances? Maybe you are even feeling trapped as you read this chapter; trapped by some situation or set of circumstances. We have some expressions in the English language to express this kind of dilemma: Caught between a rock and hard place. No way forward, no way back. Trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea.

That last expression is especially appropriate to our text in this chapter, because that is where we find the Israelites as Exodus 14 opens. Last time, following the tenth and final plague, we left the Israelites marching triumphantly out of Egypt. They carried with them the riches of Egypt in a symbolic plundering of the nation they had served as slaves for over 400 years. We might call the plunder "back wages." They marched out in victory. Exodus 13:18 says they went up out of Egypt *equipped for battle*. Literally, they went up in formation. Exodus 14:8 states that they were *going out defiantly*. The actual phrase states that they went out with raised hands.

If we reconstruct the metaphor of the boxing match, the end of round 11 was the apparent end of the fight. With the great, smashing blow of the tenth plague and the death of all the first-born sons of Egypt, Pharaoh is lying flat on his back in the center of the ring. God and the Israelites are triumphantly leaving the building, celebrating their victory,

The last section of Exodus 13 contains various geographical references which leave the scholars debating and scratching their heads. All we really need to know is that the Israelites do not follow the obvious short route toward Canaan. As they follow God's leading, they double back temporarily on their route. They end up at the edge of a large body of water, described in Hebrew as "*yam suph*" or "the

sea of reeds” Once again, scholars debate at length as to the actual identity of this body of water, whether it is to be identified with the Red Sea as traditionally translated, or whether it is one of the lakes that lay along their route. The only thing that is relevant to our understanding is that it was a large body of water and presented an absolute block to their forward progress.

Now, at this point, let us go back to the boxing match. Pharaoh is recovering from his knockout blow. He is taking stock of what he has lost, and what it has cost his nation. On top of that, he is getting reports that the Israelites seem to be wandering aimlessly in the wilderness. Suddenly he shakes himself and releases a cry of rage. “This fight isn’t over yet! Get my armor! Summon my chariot! Gather the army! We’re going after them. We’ll show them who is boss. We’ll show them who has the real power!” And so, this unorthodox 12th round begins as Pharaoh and his forces pursue the Israelites and find them camped by the sea. The Israelites were literally “trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea.”

What do we do when we are trapped? How do we respond? Let’s look at how the Israelites responded and see if we can see any parallels to our own experience. **The first thing they did was panic.** Exodus 14:10: *When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly.* I like the old King James language here: *they were sore afraid.* I would be too! They were trapped! There was nowhere to go. The sea in front of them and Pharaoh and his army behind them. What could they do? So, they panicked.

The second thing they did was to pray. The last part of verse 10 states: *And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD.* Now that is a good thing to do. That is absolutely the right response to make when we find ourselves trapped, with no way out. But we learn from this passage that there is prayer and there is prayer; there is believing prayer, but there is also doubting prayer. We know that the Israelites’ prayer was not believing prayer because of what they did next.

The third thing they did was to complain and to look for someone to blame for their dilemma. We find this in Exodus 14:11-12: *They said to Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: ‘Leave*

us alone that we may serve the Egyptians.’ For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

They complained and they blamed Moses. “This is all your fault! We should have known better than to follow you. Look at the awful predicament you have put us in!”

These are three common, almost universal responses to being trapped in a dilemma that seems to have no solution. Panic, pray (but without any real faith) and then complain and find someone to blame. Maybe that’s where you are today.

But here is where we see Moses in his role as a great leader, a spiritual leader, a leader par excellence. He stands before the people, and he challenges them by giving them, in both word and example, another way to respond. His words are recorded in Exodus 14:13-14: *And Moses said to the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”*

This is the stuff of great leadership. Moses is calling on the people to put their trust and confidence in God. “Don’t be afraid. Stand firm. Watch and see what God will do. Watch his deliverance, his salvation. He will fight for you. There is only one thing required of you. Be silent. Stop your complaining and your whining and your blaming. Just be still and watch God work.”

That’s hard to do, isn’t it? It is hard to wait and be still and to watch God work out his plan. It goes against our nature. But that is what God wants us to do. Be still. I remember reading this verse in my devotions at a time when I was facing a very difficult dilemma. As I read this passage it almost leapt off the page at me and settled in my heart. I memorized it and found myself quoting it numerous times each day to quiet my mind and heart when it would start to race and fret over the dilemma. It served to steady me and keep me focused and calm during a difficult time.

The rest of the chapter narrates one of the best-known stories in the Bible and in all of literature. The first thing God did was to put himself in between the Israelites and their enemies. Look at verses 19-20: *Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of*

Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night.

The end of chapter 13 introduced the pillar of God's presence into the text. It was a pillar of cloud by day, and it became a pillar of fire by night. It was the visible sign of God's presence, and it was his means of guiding them. When the pillar moved, they moved. They could travel by night or day. This pillar never left them for all the years they were to travel through the wilderness. Normally this pillar was positioned in front of the people to lead them forward. But on this occasion, it moved behind them and took up position between the people and the forces of Pharaoh. It gave light to the Israelites, but darkness to the Egyptians.

Then Moses, at God's command, stretched his rod out over the sea, and all that night a mighty wind blew and literally split or divided the sea in two, piling up the water on each side like a solid wall, with dry ground between. The Israelites, with all their possessions, were able to pass through the sea on dry ground. We cannot be sure what the pillar of cloud and fire did at that point as the text doesn't tell us. Did it move through the sea with them as their rear guard as they passed through? Or did it hold the Egyptians at bay until all the Israelites had passed through the sea? We do not know. But at some point, it moved, because the Egyptians were able to see the sea, and the path through the midst of the sea that the Israelites had used. We are told in Exodus 14:23: *The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen.*

Then two things happened. First, we are told that Yahweh looked down on them from the pillar of fire and cloud, and he threw them into confusion. The wheels of their chariots bogged down, jammed or fell off. They found themselves mired in the seabed. They knew they were in trouble and tried to flee. They cried out to one another: *"Let us flee from before Israel, for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians."* But as they attempted to flee, Moses, from the far shore, stretched out his rod once again, and those two massive walls of water collapsed as the waters of the sea rushed back to their normal levels. Not one of the Egyptian forces who had entered the sea survived. The Israelites saw the Egyptians only one more time, as their corpses washed up on the shore. Did Pharaoh enter the sea with his army to

be destroyed along with them? Or did he watch with horror from the far shore as his army was destroyed? The text does not tell us. But either way, this fight is over. Round 12 is the final knock out blow. Yahweh is the champion!

Let us briefly review what Yahweh, as Israel's champion, did for them. **First, he led them** and gave them guidance. He was in the pillar to guide them by day and by night. At times, he seemed to be leading them in circles. It was he who led them into what appeared to be a trap from which there was no escape. But he knew what he was doing. He had a plan. He was their guide.

Second, he protected them. He sent his cloud to stand between them and their enemy. Nothing and no one could touch them as long as he stood between them and the Egyptians.

Third, he opened a way for them to move forward. "God is able to make a way where there is no way." God, with his powerful breath, could split the sea and lead them through on dry land.

Fourth, he wiped out the enemy that pursued them. There is a military phrase that has become part of everyday speech. "Watch my back." That day, God was watching Israel's back. It was a wonderful act of deliverance.

That is the kind of God we have. I believe that he is performing all four of those functions constantly for every one of his children. He is guiding, he is protecting us while we wait for our deliverance, he is opening a way forward and he stands ready to protect us from the enemies that try to attack us from behind.

But why did God do it? This is important! Did he do it because the Israelites were in trouble and because they needed God to rescue them? Well, yes, in part. But the Bible is always God centered and not man centered. The text here tells us clearly that God had a deeper and more profound purpose in his actions that day. In fact, this is so fundamental to the story that it is repeated three times, quoting this time from the NIV Bible.

In 14:4: *But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army and the Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh.*

It is there again in 14:17-18: *And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. The Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh when I gain glory through Pharaoh and his chariots and his horsemen.*

There it is: *I will gain glory*. As the King James Version translates it in good, old-fashioned English; “I will get me honor.” All of God’s acts, both in history and in eternity, are ultimately for his own glory. “That the Israelites, and the Egyptians, and ultimately the whole world may know that I am Yahweh.”

This leads us to a very important perspective and profound life principle for us to take away from this passage: **Life’s impossibilities are God’s opportunities to display his glory.** When you and I are in a dilemma, when we are caught in a trap from which we can see no way out, we need to remember this truth. **Life’s impossibilities are God’s opportunities to display his glory.**

God’s glory is clearly on display in the hymn of praise that Moses recorded for us in the first 18 verses of chapter 15. We will not look at it in detail, but I encourage you to read it for yourself. We will just look at selected phrases which highlight God’s character and glory. (NIV translation, with God’s name (Yahweh) supplied as occurring in the original text.)

He is highly exalted (he has triumphed gloriously) (15:1)

Yahweh is my strength...he has become my salvation (15:2)

Yahweh is a warrior. Yahweh is his name. (15:3)

Your right hand, O Yahweh, was majestic in power. Your right hand, O Yahweh, shattered the enemy. In the greatness of your majesty, you threw down those who opposed you. (15:6-7)

Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders? (15:11)

Yahweh will reign forever and ever. (15:18)

Life’s impossibilities are God’s opportunities to display his glory.

We know it is an Old Testament principle. But is it a New Testament principle as well? Is it a truth for us to rest in today? Look at 2 Corinthians 1:8-11. As you read this, listen for the echoes of the events of Exodus 14: *For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers,*

of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

It's the same truth, isn't it? The same principle is declared in the New Testament. **Life's impossibilities are God's opportunities to display his glory.** *Fear not, stand firm and see the salvation of Yahweh which he will work for you today... Yahweh will fight for you and you have only to be still.*

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TESTING...TESTING...TESTING

Exodus 15-17

Everyone who has ever been to school knows the feeling; the one you get when the teacher begins to distribute that important exam or test for you to write. There is the slight tightening in the chest, the shortness of breath, the sweaty palms, the butterflies in the stomach.

School is full of tests and testing. But so is life. The Israelites found this out in a hurry. The nation of Israel was now out of Egypt. They were a free nation. Following God's final victory over the Egyptians when he drowned them in the Sea, the Israelites were free to begin their pilgrimage toward the Promised Land.

In the first few weeks of their journey, however, they faced four distinct crises. These are narrated for us in Exodus 15-17. The first one came after just three days of travel when they ran out of water. They arrived at an oasis or pool of water only to find that it was "bitter" or brackish and undrinkable. That was test number one. The second came about a month later, when the food supply they had carried with them from Egypt began to run out. Where would they find food in the wilderness for such a large multitude? This was test number two. The third test came on the next phase of the journey, when they once again ran out of water and could find nothing to drink. The fourth test came soon after when they were attacked by a warlike tribe of people called the Amalekites. All four of these tests were serious crises. They all threatened the very existence and survival of the new nation.

You are probably familiar with these stories. In each case, God was sufficient to meet their needs and ensure their survival under the most difficult of circumstances. At the edge of the oasis of bitter water, he showed Moses a particular tree or log. When Moses threw it in the water, the water became sweet, and the people were able to drink all they needed.

When the people became hungry, God literally rained food down on them from heaven. First, in the evening, a flock of migrating quail covered the camp. When I was about 11 years old, we were sitting in our house in Kenya one evening, when we heard a strange series of soft thumps hitting the roof and side of our house. When we went out to investigate, we found hundreds of small quail on the ground around our house. They were so exhausted or frightened or stunned that we could pick them up in our hands. This natural phenomenon of migrating quail was multiplied by God many times over, enough to feed the entire nation of Israel. Then in the morning when they went outside their tents, they found the ground covered with a strange white substance like flakes of frost. They gathered it and found it edible, suitable for grinding and boiling and baking. Puzzled, the people asked, “What is it?” The Hebrew for “What is it?” is “Man nu” and this became their name for this strange food supply – manna. It was to be their staple food for the next 40 years. Six days a week, every week until they entered the land of Canaan, God rained bread on them from heaven.

When they once again ran out of water, God instructed Moses to take his rod, and in the presence of the elders of the nation he commanded him to strike a rock. When he did so, water gushed from the rock; enough to satisfy the thirst of the entire nation. Then when the nation was attacked by the Amalekites, God fought for them, and they were able to defeat the fierce enemy.

Crisis after crisis, God was there to supply all their needs and to protect them from their enemies. But I want to pursue the idea of testing a little further. First, how do we know these were tests, and not just tough life circumstances? We know it because the text tells us so. Look at Exodus 15:25b: *There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them.* The KJV says, “...there he proved them”. The word has the idea of testing or proving the quality of someone or something, often through adversity or hardship.

So, we know that God has arranged these circumstances as a test. But just what is God testing for? I always had a strategy when I was in school. My strategy was to pay close attention to what the teacher emphasized during the term. My theory was this: The teacher would emphasize what was important to him or her. And if something was important enough to emphasize in the class lectures, chances are it

would be important enough to appear on the exam. This theory rarely let me down over 19 years of formal education. I think we can apply that strategy here as well. If we know what is important to God and if we know what he is looking for when he sets the exam, we are much more likely to produce a good result.

In the case of the Israelites, it is not difficult to figure out that God is looking for two things. The first is trust. Will the Israelites trust him? Each of these four crises clearly brings the issue of trust into the foreground. The nation is brought up against a desperate need – one that they cannot meet in their own strength. What will they do? Will they trust him?

The second thing God is looking for is obedience. This comes out especially in the matter of the manna. Let's read Exodus 16:4: *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not."*

This test of their obedience took two forms as we look more closely at God's instructions. First, they were to gather only enough for one day. They were not to keep any over for the next day. The second issue had to do with the Sabbath. This chapter includes the first introduction of the Sabbath, the setting apart of the seventh day as a day of rest for God's people. On the sixth day they were commanded to gather twice as much. The extra they gathered they were to prepare by boiling it or baking it and then set it aside for the seventh day. Once again, it was a very specific instruction to test their obedience.

So, God was testing his people to see if they would trust him and whether they would obey him. Did the Israelites pass or fail their tests? Do you remember your school days when the teacher would give out the completed and graded exams with the results? Admit it. After a quick look at your own paper, weren't you dying to know how the others in the class had scored? In the chapters before us today, we do not have to wonder about how the Israelites did on their exams. They failed and they failed miserably.

How do we know this? God was looking for trust. Instead of trusting God, the Israelites grumbled. KJV translates it "murmured." It describes a low toned grumbling, complaining or arguing. Nine times this same word, either in verb or noun form, occurs in these

three chapters. Not only that, but let's look at the actual words of the Israelites. A large amount of these chapters is direct speech, or quotation. If you read the total dialogue or speech attributed to the Israelites, it's rather sobering. Just read these quotes all at one time (quotes from NIV): *What are we to drink?... 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... Give us water to drink... Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?* Grumbling, in this context, is the antithesis of trusting in God. God tested the nation. He looked for trust. Instead, he heard grumbling.

What about the second attribute he was looking for; obedience? We see this so clearly in the matter of the manna. Remember, God told them to only collect enough for one day. So, what do you think happened? You guessed it: *But they did not listen to Moses. Some left part of it till morning, and it bred worms and stank. And Moses was angry with them.* (16:20)

Then when they were told to collect enough on the sixth day to set aside for the Sabbath, what did they do? God clearly told them, *"On the seventh day, which is a Sabbath, there will be none."* So, what does the next sentence say? *On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, but they found none. And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and my laws?"* They failed the test of obedience just like they failed the test of trust.

God tested Israel. He was looking for trust, and he was looking for obedience. I believe that when God tests us, he is looking for the same two traits he desired to see in the Israelites: trust and obedience.

Before we leave these chapters, we need to trace another thread of truth. This one is not about God testing the Israelites. This one is about the Israelites testing God and putting him to the test. The same Hebrew word is used in the text. We find this introduced in Exodus 17:1-2: *All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore, the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?"*

From the context and the words of Moses, we know that this act

of the Israelites in testing God was an act of rebellion. It is placed in the same sentence as quarreling or striving and being contentious. To put God to the test in this way is to question God's goodness, his wisdom and his power; to question his very presence. We see this in Exodus 17:7, in the final quote taken from the mouth of the Israelites: *And he called the name of the place Massah (which means quarreling) and Meribah, (which means testing) because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"* Despite all they had witnessed in the plagues of Egypt and the crossing the Sea, despite all that God had done for them, they had the gall to pose the question: *Does God really care about us? Is he among us, or not?*

This kind of questioning grows out of the soil of unbelief. Psalm 95:7b-11 recalls this second dimension of the story.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways." Therefore, I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest."

Such a challenge grows out of a heart hardened by doubt and unbelief. The contrast to such rebellion is found in the opening verses of this same psalm in Psalm 95:1-7a.

Oh come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

What a startling contrast between the two halves of this psalm! I cannot help but wonder. Which half of this psalm best describes my heart? Which half best describes your heart as you read these words?

I want to finish this chapter by looking at another note of contrast. That contrast is provided for us in the story in the person of Moses. Moses faced the same circumstances that the people did. If anything, for him they were magnified and intensified, because he

was their leader. He bore the human responsibility for their welfare. But his response is dramatically different. When they grumbled, he prayed. When they disobeyed, he obeyed. He cast the log into the water to make the water sweet. He called on the people to trust and obey in their collecting of the manna. When they doubted, he trusted. He stood in front of the people, and, against all the laws of nature and logic, he struck the rock with his rod and watched the water gush out.

My lasting image of Moses from these chapters is found in the final story of the battle against the Amalekites. He stood on the hill overlooking the battle. He held the rod of God in his hand, and, in a gesture symbolizing reliance upon God and his power, he held the rod high, stretched out over the battlefield. As long as he held it high, the Israelites prevailed in the fight. But as his arm drooped with fatigue, the Amalekites prevailed. So Aaron and a man named Hur rushed to his aid. They found a stone for him to sit on, and then they helped him hold up the rod. Trusting in the power of God, they overcame the enemy. After the battle was over, Moses built an altar and called it “Yahweh-nisi,” which means, “Yahweh is our banner.” It was the ultimate answer to the Israelites’ question: *Is Yahweh among us or not?* He is not only among us. He is our banner, our battlefield ensign around which we rally and to whom we look for victory.

Testing...testing...testing. Our lives are full of testing. We don’t choose our tests, but we do choose our responses. We can complain and disobey. We can angrily and rebelliously put God on trial. Or we can respond with trust and with obedience. We can, like Moses, hold high the rod of our confidence in the awesome power, wisdom and love of God. Yahweh-nisi. Let us rally to our banner.

AND THE PEOPLE TREMBLED

Exodus 19

Exodus 19 is a unique and fascinating text. I encourage you to read it in its entirety before reading this chapter.

After three months of travel the Israelites have now arrived at the foot of Mt. Sinai. This is the same mountain where God appeared to Moses in the burning bush in Exodus 3. In fact, their arrival at the foot of the mountain is a fulfillment of God's promise to Moses in Exodus 3:12: *He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."* We can imagine that Moses' heart was full of thanksgiving and praise at God's faithfulness to his word as the nation pitched their tents below the familiar slopes where he had so often herded his flocks.

The rest of the book of Exodus will take place right here at the foot of Mt. Sinai. It is a rich and eventful time. What is happening in this chapter is extremely important in terms of the structure of the book of Exodus and the whole Old Testament. What is taking place is nothing less than **the formalizing of a covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel.**

The idea of a covenant is less familiar to us in our cultures today, but it was a pattern that would have been very clear in Moses' time. The ancient world relied strongly on covenants or agreements between individuals, families, clans and nations. Probably the closest parallels we have today would be treaties and contracts:

There were various kinds of covenants, depending on the relationship, but the form that is followed in this section of Exodus is that of the suzerain/vassal covenant. It was the agreement between a powerful king or kingdom and a lesser ruler or nation or individual. In this covenant the various responsibilities and obligations of the two parties would be clearly spelled out. For example, the powerful

king might promise military protection, while the lesser king might promise in return to pay certain taxes or supply a set number of men for the army.

The format for such covenants was quite formal and the format is clearly followed in the text in front of us. A covenant usually began with a preamble which would describe the history of the relationship between the two kingdoms or individuals. This is given in Exodus 19:4: *You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.*

The second formal part of the covenant would include the conditions or obligations of the weaker nation. This is found in Exodus 19:5: *Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant...* We can clearly see that the benefits of the covenant are conditioned upon obedience to the sovereign's will. Most of the rest of the book of Exodus is given over to the details, the legal small print, of the covenant's conditions. But the broad stroke is clearly given here. Obedience is the key ingredient.

The third part of the covenant describes the benefits that the lesser nation or party will enjoy. This is found in the rest of Exodus 19:5-6: *...you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'*

This, then, represents the introduction of the covenant and its basic conditions. In terms of the formalizing of the covenant, God instructs Moses to speak these words to the people. When he does so, the people respond in verse 8: *All the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do."*

This is followed by the days of preparation as the people made themselves ready and sanctified themselves. Then God himself descended upon the mountain for the actual covenant ceremony. This chapter and the legal literature, the giving of the Law that follows in the rest of Exodus and Leviticus, set the legal framework or constitution by which the nation will be governed. That is why it is such a fundamentally important text of the Bible and governs how we interpret so much of what follows.

What I want to do, however, is step away from the structure of the text and focus on what God reveals of himself in these events. Covenants may come and go. In fact, the New Testament (by the way, "testament" is another word for "covenant") clearly states that the old

covenant has been made obsolete. That doesn't mean we shouldn't study it. It just means we are not governed by it. But God, in his essence and in his character, does not change. What can we learn about him from this chapter? I want to highlight three descriptive phrases that capture the theological truths of this text. We shall borrow two of them from the great song of praise that Moses wrote after God delivered them from the Egyptians in Exodus 15. But these magnificent phrases are wonderfully fleshed out in Exodus 19.

YAHWEH IS MAJESTIC IN HOLINESS.

The concept of God as a holy God is one that we are very familiar with if we have read much of the Bible. But in the progress of revelation, the concept of God's holiness is only beginning to emerge in this passage we are studying. When we studied Exodus 3, we observed that the first occurrence of the word "holy" in the Bible is found in Yahweh's words to Moses, when he told him, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." There are very few more uses of the word in the first 18 chapters of Exodus. We have God's instruction to "sanctify" the firstborn to him after the Passover. Then we have this magnificent phrase in Moses' song in Exodus 15:11: *Who is like you... majestic in holiness.*

This concept of holiness begins to take on a very vivid and defined meaning in the chapter before us. First, there is God's command to the people to "sanctify" themselves, which is the verb form of the word: to make themselves holy or ritually pure by washing their clothes and abstaining from sexual relations. So, the concept of cleansing or purity is introduced as an aspect of holiness.

The second aspect that is introduced is that of separation. God sets very distinct limits, borders or boundaries around the mountain. "Don't come near it, don't touch it. If you touch the mountain you will die." The concept of God as a holy being who is both pure and separated from his creatures is given concrete expression.

God does not want this to be missed. In fact, after God appears to the nation and Moses is once again ascending to speak with him, he sends Moses down to warn the people again, in verse 21: *And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to look and many of them perish.*

Moses protests at that point: "You already told them that. We've

already set the boundaries. They won't dare approach the mountain."

But God was not satisfied and sends Moses back down. "Go down and make sure," he says. This is no small or insignificant matter. As God makes himself known to his people, he makes himself known as the Holy One.

The second descriptive phrase is also borrowed from Exodus 15:11: **YAHWEH IS AWESOME IN GLORY**. The description of this scene as God appears to the nation is one of the most awe-inspiring in the Bible. First, there was thunder and lightning as a thick cloud covered the mountain. This was accompanied by a very loud blast on a trumpet. This was clearly no earthly trumpet and no human trumpeter, although the word for trumpet is that for a ram's horn trumpet. Personally, I think it is a simile to describe the sound that came from an invisible source. Then, in the middle of the thick cloud, Yahweh descended on the mountain in fire. As he did, the mountain billowed with smoke like a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled as in a mighty earthquake. Meanwhile, the sound of the trumpet, already described as "very loud," grew louder and louder. It was an awesome scene, involving their physical senses. They saw the lightning, the fire and the cloud. They smelled the smoke. They heard the thunder roar and the trumpet blast. They felt the mountain shake.

And then, remarkably, amid that awe-inspiring scene, we are told in verse 19, *Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder*. We can't be sure what he said. My understanding is that he spoke the Ten Commandments that are recorded in Exodus 20. Whatever God said, we do know what the effect was on the people. We find it in Exodus 20:18-19: *Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."*

God came down to meet with his people, and they were terrified. I would have been, too. Yahweh is awesome in glory. When his people saw his glory, they trembled with fear. I will confess that I find this part of the story unsettling. I'll tell you why it troubles me. It doesn't trouble me that the Israelites trembled with fear. I understand that. What troubles me is how seldom people today tremble with the same

fear. I include myself in that. My uneasiness is based on the suspicion that many of us today believe in a domesticated God; a politically correct deity who never offends anyone. God on a leash! We have hacked off all the inconvenient bits and fit God into our box. We keep him in that box until we need him. Then we get him out, let him do his bit, then we cram him back in the box and put him back on the shelf until the next time we need him.

But the God of Sinai won't be contained in any box! He will not be domesticated! He is dangerous! The thunder growled, the lightning flashed, the mountain trembled!! *If the people break through, I will break out against them.* He meant every word he said. We forget that to our peril! How often do we tremble before the God of the universe: majestic in holiness and awesome in glory?

But there is one other theme of truth that runs through this chapter that stands in splendid tension to what we have just been saying. We must keep the tension tight and the bow well bent if we would keep our theology thoroughly Biblical. The third truth about God revealed in this chapter is this: **YAHWEH IS TENDER IN LOVE.**

Here is the balance and the counterchord of Biblical truth. Look at the language in Exodus 19:4: *I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.* God had been waiting for this day! He had waited with anticipation to meet with his people at Sinai. He delivered them from Egypt for this very purpose; to carry them on eagles' wings and bring them to himself. Do you hear the love and the tenderness and the longing in that phrase? And what was his purpose? *That out of all the nations of the earth, you might be my treasured possession, my special treasure, my crown jewel, my unique property.* What love! What tenderness! *You will be for me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.* He redeemed them because of his unfailing love, and now he was entering into a special covenant relationship with them and putting his special seal and mark of identity upon them.

This may be my own overly active imagination, but as the chapter unfolds, I am reminded of a wedding. First there is God's own declaration in Exodus 19:4, that *I have brought you to myself.* Then there are the elaborate preparations spelled out in 19:10: *Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes, and be ready by the third day, because on that day Yahweh will*

come down... And finally, there is the vivid description in Exodus 19:17: *Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.* Somehow, the image of a wedding ceremony comes very clearly to my mind throughout this chapter. How easy it would be to adapt God's words into the form of wedding vows: *I have looked forward to this day. Out of all the women/ men in the world I have chosen you, to be my precious, treasured one.*

What a God we serve! Majestic in holiness! Awesome in glory! Tender in love!

How shall we respond? To answer that question, let us look to a New Testament passage found in Hebrews 12. In this text, the writer goes back and describes the events of God's appearance on Mt. Sinai to make his point. He draws a contrast: *For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.* (Hebrews 12:18-19) But he moves on to the same conclusion in Hebrews 12:28-29: *Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.*

How shall we respond? Let us be thankful. Why? In the context it is because we have escaped the judgment of this dangerous, powerful God whose voice shook the mountain. Then, let us *offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe.*

Our God is an awesome God!

“THOU SHALT NOT...”

Exodus 20

Having spent my growing up years in Kenya, I always enjoyed the chance to go back and reconnect with my roots. I have several brothers who remained in Kenya, so it gave us a good excuse to go back. For many years, my brother Shel lived in the same house that my father built in 1960 and where we all grew up. I always found it deeply satisfying to sit on the porch, looking out over the Rift Valley – to reminisce, to wander the familiar roads and trails of my boyhood. I found it good, from time to time, to reconnect with my roots, to look back at the old, familiar foundation stones of my life.

It struck me as supremely fitting, then, on one of those visits, as I sat on the porch one afternoon to begin thinking about an upcoming sermon I would preach from Exodus 20. Because here, in this familiar text of Scripture, I found I was reconnecting with the moral and ethical foundation stones upon which my life has been built. For it is in Exodus 20 that we find the account of the giving of the Ten Commandments: the ten moral imperatives that provide the compass points, the absolute boundaries for a righteous life, for a happy family and for a just society. Just as my visits to my boyhood home in Kenya put me in touch with my emotional, family roots, so my meditations and study on the Ten Commandments put me in touch with my moral roots.

As we turn to the passage together, we first want to recapture **the Setting**. The people of Israel are camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai. God has come to enter into a covenant with the nation. Moses has summoned them all from their tents to meet God, and so they all stood together before the mountain. Thunder rumbled, lighting flashed, and Yahweh himself descended in fire to the top of the mountain. As he came down upon the mountain, the whole mountain billowed with smoke and trembled violently, and there was

the sound of a great trumpet blast that grew louder and louder. Then Exodus 19:19 states that in the midst of this awesome display, *Moses spoke and God answered him.*

So, what did God say? It is my conclusion from my study of the text here, and the parallel passages in Deuteronomy, that the words from God's mouth that day constituted the Ten Commandments that are recorded in Exodus 20.

Let me briefly cite the evidence for my conclusions. First look at Exodus 20:1-2: *And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery..."* Then the passage continues to give the text of the Ten Commandments. I believe these were given in God's own voice. To further support this idea, let's also turn over to Deuteronomy. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses retells the story of the giving of the Ten Commandments.

Look at Deuteronomy 4:10-13: *...how on the day that you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, the LORD said to me, 'Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so. And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone.*

According to the order in the text, first God spoke them, then he wrote them.

From this passage and some other clues sprinkled in the text, I believe God orally and audibly spoke these commandments directly to the Israelites. Why is this setting important? It would be hard to imagine what more God could do to get our attention and to underline and emphasize his words than to speak them in his own voice. In fact, the reason for God's display of power is clearly explained by Moses in Exodus 20:18-20:

Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, "You speak

to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.”

As Moses explains, this is not a fear that should lead you into terror for your lives. God had not come down to strike them dead! But he had come down to create in them a righteous fear of sinning, so that they would understand the consequences of violating the decrees of such an awesome God! I think it is healthy for you and me to keep this setting in mind as we study Exodus 20. Let us imagine ourselves standing among the Israelites as the very voice of this invisible, yet majestic God speaks these words.

As we turn to God’s words, I am faced with a dilemma. I must make a choice between taking a detailed approach or a very broad stroke, summary approach. On the one hand, there is enough material here to fill a whole series of sermons and books. On the other hand, I set out to write a book on the narrative passages of the Pentateuch. So, for now, we will content ourselves with a quick summary. It will be like walking down a hallway with 10 doors opening off the corridor. Rather than enter each door and explore each room, we will simply walk down the corridor, stick our heads in each door, take a quick look around and move on.

Door # 1: *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.*

A moment’s thought shows this to be a most logical and fitting place for the Ten Commandments to begin considering the setting (the voice speaking out of the fire) and the occasion (the setting of the conditions of the covenant). God identifies himself as the principal party in the covenant; the sovereign, all powerful one who has delivered them from Egypt. He then declares that, foundational to the covenant is the understanding that it is an exclusive covenant. As the God who brought them out of Egypt, he demands exclusive worship and loyalty.

At the heart of this command are the words, “no other gods before me.” What does the phrase “before me” mean? Many interpreters and preachers seem to go in the direction of “ahead of me” or “above me.” They interpret “before” in the sense of priority. This is an important truth and a legitimate application. But it is

not the heart of what God is saying here. The actual Hebrew word “before” comes from the word for “face.” You shall have no other gods before my face or in my presence. There were many religious systems in that day that had many gods. Typically, they had a chief or most powerful god – a supreme deity – who was then surrounded by a pantheon of lesser deities. In this first commandment, God makes it clear that he will not settle for being a chief god, a first among many. He is the one and only God. *You shall have no other gods at all.*

This claim to exclusive worship and loyalty is also emphasized in Deuteronomy 4:35 (from NIV): *You were shown these things (the plagues of Egypt) so that you might know that Yahweh is God; besides him there is no other.* And in Deuteronomy 4:39: *Acknowledge and take to heart this day that Yahweh is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other.*

Door # 2: *You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:4-6)*

The second commandment follows closely on the heels of the first. In fact, so close is the connection that some ancient church traditions put them together and label them the first commandment and then divide the final commandment on coveting into two to keep the number of commandments at ten. They are closely related, but there is a distinction. While the first commandment lays the emphasis on exclusive worship, the second one emphasizes the mode of worship and rules out the use of idols or images as objects of reverence or worship, or even as aids in worship. Any attempt to reduce God to a shape, an image, or a visible form will always reduce him, make him less than he is and therefore lead to false worship; to worshipping as God that which is not God.

Door # 3: *You shall not misuse the name of Yahweh your God, for Yahweh will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. (Exodus 20:7) (NIV)*

God's name stands for and is synonymous with his reputation, his honor, his essence. God went to great lengths to reveal his name to Moses in Exodus 3 as "Yahweh" – "I AM", the eternally existent one. Now he says to his people, "do not misuse the name of Yahweh your God."

We can expand on this commandment and apply it in various ways. One way to misuse Yahweh's name is to use his name in an oath; to swear by him, and then not keep the commitment you make in his name. Another way to misuse his name is to speak his name blasphemously or even frivolously and thoughtlessly. At the heart of the commandment, though, is a deep commitment to God's honor and reputation. It is no accident that we find this same commitment at the center of the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray: *Hallowed be thy name* – may your name be held in reverence.

Door # 4: *Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.* (Exodus 20:8-11)

In this commandment God declares himself Lord of our time, our schedule, and our priorities. He commanded the Israelites to set one day in seven aside for rest and worship. In a way, this commandment differs from the other nine in that there is a sense in which a complete observance of this commandment requires a community that is dedicated to such an observance, which is what God desired Israel to be – hence the emphasis on those who are "within your gates." But on another level, each individual and family can make a priority to set aside adequate time for both spiritual and physical replenishment.

Door # 5: *Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.* (Exodus 20:12)

In this commandment God demonstrates his commitment to families and establishes a proper order in the family. When properly followed, this commandment will also ensure the preservation of a

channel for true worship and for God's standards to be passed from generation to generation. Especially in Deuteronomy, an emphasis is placed on parents teaching the words of God to their children. When parents fulfill this responsibility, and the children honor their father and mother in obedience, the truth of God and his covenant is passed accurately from generation to generation.

The next four commandments we shall pass over even more quickly, because they are the most familiar. You will sometimes hear people say, "I live by the ten commandments." When they say this, they are most probably referring to these four.

Door # 6: *You shall not murder.* (Exodus 20:13)

This commandment declares and protects the value of human life, which ultimately derives from the fact that we are made in God's image.

Door # 7: *You shall not commit adultery.* (Exodus 20:14)

This commandment is given to protect the sanctity of marriage.

Door # 8: *You shall not steal.* (Exodus 20:15)

In this commandment we are required to respect the rights of others, including (but not limited to) their personal property rights.

Door # 9: *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

We are commanded to speak the truth, to be an honest witness when called upon. The adherence to this commandment is essential in any just society.

Finally, we come to the tenth commandment; one that at first glimpse may seem strangely out of place.

Door # 10: *You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.*

This commandment has several effects. First of all, it peers into our hearts in a way that the earlier ones may not. It measures us against a continuum between contentment and greed, and between a love that rejoices in the blessings of others and a selfishness that measures all things in terms of one's own needs and desires. This

tenth commandment also moves from the external commands to the internal motives and the evil desires which so often lead to the breaking of the other commandments. It reveals that God is concerned not only with external righteousness, but internal righteousness as well, a righteousness of the heart as well as the hands.

This, then, is our quick trip down the corridor. These are the words God spoke out of the fire of Sinai to his people. They formed the foundation of his covenant with Israel.

This promptly leads us to a key question. How do these Ten Commandments, that formed the basis and foundation for the Old Covenant with Israel, relate to us who live under the New Covenant? Are they binding on us today?

The simple answer to that question is, “Yes!” But maybe I should explain. As we study the legal literature of the Bible, the laws which are given in such detail here in Exodus and in the book of Leviticus and then reiterated in Deuteronomy, we find that the laws fall into three different categories. First, there is the moral law; the laws that reveal God’s moral absolutes, his standards of right and wrong. Then there are various civil laws. We must remember that Israel was a new nation, without any experience other than that of slavery in Egypt. They needed a legal code, a set of laws to govern their everyday lives, assessing legal standards and specified penalties for certain sins and crimes. The third category makes up the ceremonial laws which governed their worship, their sacrifices, the temple worship, the priests, and all the specific details of the Israelites’ approach to God.

Of these three categories of laws found in the Old Testament/ Covenant, the moral laws are the one category that carries over from the Old Covenant into the New Covenant. The Ten Commandments given in Exodus 20 are the heart of God’s moral law. These commandments represent God’s essential values. They are moral absolutes which govern our lives on both the vertical (God-ward) and horizontal (other people) planes of life. God has not changed. Neither have his values. If we would represent him before the world, we must reflect his values and his character. He is the designer of the moral and ethical order, just as he is the creator and designer of the physical order. We must live by his commandments, his moral law, if we would know life in its fullness.

But we do need to proceed with some considerable caution. The

Ten Commandments do not represent the path to salvation, to being right with God or to earning his approval. The New Testament is crystal clear on this point. Consider Romans 3:20-22:

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

We cannot be saved by the law, because we cannot keep it. Because of our sinful nature, we fall short of God's righteous standard, and we are therefore under his condemnation. But now he has provided a way for us to be right with him through faith in Jesus Christ.

But what happens after we have entered into this new relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ? Let's turn to Romans 8:1-4: *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*

First, God has set us free from the penalty of sin by sending his Son as the sin offering. But when we accept Christ's sacrifice, something else happens. Christ places his Spirit within us.

Now what does the Spirit within us do? According to the Scripture, he writes God's law on our hearts and helps us fulfill it. You see, the difference between the old and new covenant is not a different set of moral standards, but a new Resource in the person of the indwelling Spirit of God. As we, who have trusted in Christ as Savior, walk in the Spirit, we will find ourselves living according to the words God spoke to his people that day at Mt. Sinai. Christ did not come to make righteous living unnecessary. He came to make it possible!

QUICK TO TURN AWAY

Exodus 24 & 32

Do you remember how to play leapfrog? You know, the kids' game where all the kids form a line and bend over. Then the last one in line comes vaulting over all the other kids until he gets to the front of the line. I hope you remember how, because we are going to do a lot of leapfrogging in the second half of this book on the story of Moses and the Exodus. We are going to leapfrog through the text, following the thread of narrative, the story line which is found mixed in with the maze of all the legal literature.

In the previous chapter we looked at Exodus 20 and the account of the giving of the Ten Commandments. In this chapter we are going to leapfrog over Exodus 21-23, and land in Exodus 24, and then we will leap again and land in Exodus 32.

Exodus 24 is a very significant chapter, linked very closely with the account in Exodus 19. In Exodus 19, we pointed out that God came down to form a covenant, a kind of treaty, with the nation of Israel. The broad outline of the covenant is laid out in that chapter and in chapter 20. What is taking place in Exodus 24 is the actual ratification ceremony of the covenant. It is fascinating to see how this chapter closely parallels the human customs of covenant formation.

First, an invitation is issued to Israel's leaders in Exodus 24:1-2: *Then he said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. Moses alone shall come near to the LORD, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him."*

Before the leaders ascend the mountain, however, certain ceremonial rites must be completed as described in Exodus 24:3: *Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words*

that the LORD has spoken we will do.” The people first signal their willingness to enter into the covenant and to abide by its conditions.

Then Moses wrote down the details in verse 4: *And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD.* I believe this consisted of God’s words that are contained in our Bible in Exodus 20-23.

The narrative account continues through verse 7: *He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.”*

This is a busy time. An altar is constructed, memorial pillars are put up, young bulls are sacrificed, and the blood is sprinkled on the altar. The sacrifice of animals was a common part of covenant ratification. In fact, the terminology for forming a covenant spoke of “cutting a covenant.” The killing of the animals indicated the seriousness of the agreement and that failure to keep the covenant could result in the death of the one who breached the covenant’s conditions. Then Moses solemnly read the conditions of the covenant which he had written down. Once again, the people responded: *We will do everything Yahweh has said.*

The climax of the ceremony is recorded in verse 8: *And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”* It was a solemn moment, symbolizing the high degree of commitment they were making by entering into this covenant.

What follows is a fascinating glimpse into how far God went in conforming to human custom in forming the covenant. It was the custom for the parties to the covenant to sit down to a fellowship feast as the final event in the covenant procedure. Look at the description in Exodus 24:9-11: *Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.*

This passage presents us with a few questions. What does it mean, “they saw the God of Israel,” when just a few chapters later in Exodus 33:20, God says to Moses, “No one may see me and live?” We cannot be sure exactly what Moses and the nation’s leaders saw. Possibly it was some visible representation of God’s glory. The only descriptive detail we are given is of the pavement, like sapphire stone, beneath his feet. Maybe this indicates that was all they saw, because they were on their faces in worship before him. What I find fascinating, though, is the last phrase: *they beheld God and they ate and drank*. It was the fellowship meal that formed the culmination of the covenant ceremony.

God then summons Moses alone to the top of the mountain. *The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.”* (v. 12)

This, too, followed the ancient customs. The conditions of the covenant would be written on official documents. In this case, God says that he himself is going to write them on two tablets of stone. Stone signifies their permanence. Why two tablets? Some suggest that it took two to contain the whole of the Ten Commandments. Another suggestion is that the custom of the day was to write two copies of the covenant document: one for each party to the covenant. Because it was God’s intention to always remain with the Israelites, both tablets were given to Moses to keep in the Ark of the Covenant which would accompany the people. Whatever the case, Moses went up alone to the top of the mountain as described in verse 15-18.

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

Exodus 24 is truly a remarkable chapter. The God of the universe came down to establish his covenant with the nation of Israel. He adapted himself to the human customs of covenant making so that they could clearly comprehend what was taking place. It is a wonderful account, played out in scenes of high drama and solemn

significance. It is fascinating to let our eyes skim down through Exodus 25-31 and see the content of what God was revealing to Moses there on the mountain during those 40 days and nights. What we find is page after detailed page of instructions for the construction of the tabernacle; the portable temple which would be God's dwelling place in the midst of the nation. God is preparing to set up his tent in the midst of his people and to visibly dwell with them.

All of this makes the content of Exodus 32 even more jarring. While Moses was on the top of the mountain meeting with God, what was going on at the foot of the mountain? Consider the text in Exodus 32:1-6:

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD." And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

It would be impossible to imagine a starker contrast or a harsher discord. This is surely one of the saddest chapters in Israel's history. It is hard to even take it in. This is the God of Sinai; the God who is majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, and tender in love. This is God Almighty who has clearly declared his intention to his people. All the way back in Egypt, Moses declared God's desire over and over when he went before Pharaoh: *This is what Yahweh says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me.* Did you get that last part? *So that they may worship me!*

Then he declared his purpose in delivering them from Egypt again in Exodus 19:4: *You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.* Then

in his very own voice, speaking out of the fire on the mountain in Exodus 20:2: *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*

And the initial response of the people was exactly right! Listen again to their words in Exodus 24:3: *Everything Yahweh has said we will do.* They repeat their commitment in verse 7: *We will do everything Yahweh has said; we will obey.* (NIV)

And now what? After all they have seen and experienced, only 40 days later, listen to their words to Aaron in 32:1: *Up, make us gods who will go before us.* Then, when Aaron complied and shaped a gold calf before them, they bowed down before it and cried, *These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.*

It is almost more than the mind can comprehend. Scholars debate whether the Israelites were breaking the first or the second commandment. It is my conclusion that they were breaking both. This is syncretism at its worst. Some were worshiping multiple gods; others were declaring the calf-idol to be Yahweh. This is spiritual adultery of the worst kind, accompanied by wild revelry. This whole chapter is the spiritual equivalent of a bride running off with one of the waiters while the marriage festivities are still going on!

The rest of the chapter records the sad story. God was furious. He said to Moses: "Get out of my way. I am going to wipe them off the face of the earth, and then I will start over with you and make you into a great nation."

Moses pleaded with God to suspend his judgment and God relented. Then Moses went down to the people, where he reacted in righteous anger. He took the two stone tablets and flung them to the ground, shattering them at the base of the mountain.

The shattering of the stone tablets was not just an arbitrary act of temper. The destruction of the covenant documents symbolized the nullifying of the covenant! The deal is off! The special relationship has been suspended. He then burned the gold calf, ground it up and sprinkled it in water which he forced the people to drink. He confronted Aaron with his complicity in the people's sin. Then he issued a call for commitment: *Whoever is for Yahweh, come to me.* When the tribe of Levi rallied to him, he commissioned them to take swords and execute those who were still running wild in the camp. Moses then went back up the mountain where he spent the

next 40 days and nights face down before the Lord, pleading and interceding on behalf of the people. We will pick up the story in the next chapter.

What do we do with an account like this? What lessons should we take away from it? When we began this study, I stated that we would be focusing on the three main characters: the people of Israel, Moses and God himself. In applying this passage, we will focus particularly on the people of Israel. As I do so, I confess to feeling rather sick to my stomach; sick with disappointment, sick with anger, sick with disgust. How could they fall so far in such a short time?

The psalmist summarizes their tragic choice that day in Psalm 106:19-21: *They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a metal image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt,*

Isn't that a tragic verse? NIV translates, *They exchanged their Glory.* What glory? The glory of the God of Sinai; the glory of the God who led them out of Egypt; the glory of the God who revealed himself to them – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, tender in love; the glory of the God who had chosen them to be his special nation. They exchanged him. For what? *An image of a bull.* Not even a real bull. An image of a bull that eats grass. Deaf, dumb and utterly powerless. Why did they do that? Because *they forgot the God who saved them.* In less than 40 days, they forgot the God who brought them out of Egypt. As God says in Exodus 32:8: *They have turned aside quickly out of the way.*

God says something else about the Israelites in Exodus 32:9: He calls them *a stiff-necked people.* What does that figure of speech communicate? I believe it came from the farming world, and the act of placing a yoke on the neck of an ox. As the yoke was lowered on the neck, some stubborn oxen would throw back their heads and stiffen their necks, making it impossible to fit the yoke onto their neck and shoulders. The image of being “stiff-necked” then, symbolizes a refusal to submit and accept the authority of the master.

It is a tragic list of descriptive phrases, isn't it? Stiff-necked, quick to turn away, forgetting the God who saved them, leading to making the tragic exchange: the glory of the living God for a useless, powerless idol. Sadly, this is not an isolated incident in the history of the nation of Israel. Jeremiah uses the same image of a tragic exchange

in Jeremiah 2:11-12 as he summarizes the long history of Israel. *“Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols. Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror,” declares Yahweh. (NIV)*

As we look at this example in the history of Israel, what should our response be, beyond shuddering in horror at the darkness of their sin? There is another response we are called to make. **Be warned.** This is the application that the apostle Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 10. In this chapter, he summarizes the history of the Israelites, including a specific mention of our passage in verse 7: *Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.”* But notice the application he makes in verses 11-12: *Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.* The NIV clearly translates that they were written for our warning.

I think one of the reasons the account in Exodus 32 makes me feel sick to my stomach is the recognition of how susceptible I am to the same kind of tragic fall. How stiff-necked I am by nature, how quick to turn away, how quick to forget the God who saved me. And Paul reminds me that the minute I do not feel susceptible, that is precisely when the danger is the greatest. *Be careful that you don't fall!*

I am aware that as I write these words, there may be some who are reading them who would say to me: “The message of this chapter has come too late. I have already fallen to depths I never imagined possible. I have already sinned. I have done something I never thought I would do. I exchanged my fellowship with the eternal God for a moment of temporary pleasure or fame or peer acceptance or material gain.”

If that is your situation, let me introduce you to Moses, cast in this story in the role of a mediator and intercessor. Let's turn back to the divine commentary in Psalm 106:23. After referring to the Israelites' tragic sin in verses 19-21, we read: *So God said he would destroy them – had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to keep his wrath from destroying them.*

What does it mean when it says, “Moses stood in the breach?” What did Moses do for the people? It is a remarkable story. He literally pleaded with God to turn away from judgment.

Moses, in his retelling of this account in Deuteronomy 9, states: *I fell prostrate before Yahweh for forty days and forty nights...because of all the sin you had committed.* In that time, he made no effort to make excuses for the people. He admitted freely, *Oh, what a great sin these people have committed!* But then he made the ultimate plea and offer of the mediator and intercessor in Exodus 32:32: *But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.*

Now, I confess that I do not fully understand this passage. I am not sure what book Moses is talking about, or what blotting him out would signify. But one thing is clear. Moses is offering himself for the sins of his people. He is “standing in the breach.” That is what Moses did in Exodus 32. Psalm 106 makes it very clear. Moses was the only thing standing between the Israelites and utter destruction.

Now let me point out a prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:15, where Moses spoke to the people and said: *Yahweh your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your brothers. You must listen to him.* The New Testament tells us that this “prophet like Moses” is named Jesus.

As a “prophet like Moses” Jesus serves as both our mediator and our intercessor. He served as our mediator when he offered his own life as the sacrifice for our sins. He said to his heavenly Father, “Take my life, that these might be forgiven.” His blood, the blood of the New Covenant, was shed for our sins.

But what happens if we sin after we accept the sacrifice of his blood? What if we, like the Israelites, sin terribly and grievously, after the covenant has been established, even after we have sat down with him at the covenant supper? What then? Hebrews 7:25 gives us the good news. *Therefore he (Jesus) is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.* Just like Moses “stood in the breach” and interceded with God for the Israelites after their awful sin, so Jesus “always lives to intercede” for us when we sin. This should not lead us to become callous about sin. As John tells us in I John 2:1: *I write this to you so that you will not sin.* But it is written to give us hope. As John continues: *But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins...*

So, when we fall, stiffen our necks, quickly turned away and

forget the God who saved us – we have a Mediator, and Intercessor, and Advocate before the Father – one like Moses. He is interceding for us. We have only to seek his face and confess our sins and he will restore us: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* (1 John 1:9)

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“PLEASE GO WITH US!”

Exodus 33-34

Imagine that God came to you and made you a promise. He promised to give you your own special angel. This angel will go with you wherever you go, and he will guide you, and he will protect you, and he will fight for you against your enemies. If God came to you and made you such a promise, how would you respond? How would you feel? Chances are you would say, “Great! Fantastic!”

In the opening verses of Exodus 33, God made this exact promise to the nation of Israel. Do you know how they responded? They mourned and wept! They took off all their ornaments and jewelry and cried out before the Lord. What is more, the Bible makes it very clear that they were absolutely right to respond as they did.

Are you puzzled? Let's look at the passage in Exodus 33:1-6:

The LORD said to Moses, “Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your offspring I will give it.’ I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. For the LORD had said to Moses, “Say to the people of Israel, ‘You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.’” Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.

What's going on? What was God saying? Why did the Israelites respond in this way? As we pick up the story in chapter 33, the nation of Israel was in crisis. When we left them at the end of chapter 32,

Moses had just come down from the mountain after 40 days in the presence of God. He came down carrying the tablets of stone on which God had written the Ten Commandments with his own finger. When Moses arrived at the foot of the mountain he found the people in total chaos, dancing and worshipping around a gold calf. In fury, Moses threw down the stone tablets, shattering them into pieces, symbolizing the terminating of the covenant agreement between God and the people. After initial disciplinary actions, Moses promised to intercede for the people, but their future hung in the balance.

Before we look at the future, though, let us remind ourselves of the cause of the crisis. **The cause of the crisis was sin.** When Moses was on the mountain, the people became impatient. They came to Aaron, and they asked him to make them gods, visible idols they could see and follow. Aaron complied and taking the gold earrings from the people, he melted the gold and shaped it into a gold calf.

As we analyze what Aaron and the people did, we get a clear look at the nature of sin. First, **they broke God's Law.** When God spoke out of the fire from the top of Mt. Sinai, he revealed to the people his Ten Commandments, the heart of his moral law. The first commandment he gave them was to have no other gods besides, in front of, or in the presence of Yahweh, the one true God. His second commandment forbade them from making any carved image or idol for worship. The Israelites clearly broke both of those commandments with their actions. Sin is breaking God's Law.

The second way to describe what they did is **they violated God's covenant.** The whole purpose for which God brought the people to Mt. Sinai was to establish his covenant with them. It was a covenant of special relationship in which he declared himself to be their God and he declared them to be his special people. They were to be his nation to bear his name and reflect his glory in the world. At the heart of that covenant were the covenant conditions as summarized in the Ten Commandments. So, in worshipping the gold calf, they were not only breaking God's Law, but they were violating the covenant, their special treaty with God. In Jeremiah 31:32, God makes this clear declaration about the nation of Israel: *They broke my covenant.* Jeremiah makes this as a summary statement of the history of Israel, but the first act of violation was their worship of the gold calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

There is a third way to describe what Israel did. **They betrayed God's love.** God brought the people to Mt. Sinai and entered into a covenant with them there because he loved them. Remember his words in Exodus 19:4: *I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself...out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession.* Jeremiah also repeats this theme in Jeremiah 31:32. If we read the rest of that sentence: "*They broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them.*" declares Yahweh. Repeatedly the Old Testament refers to Israel's sin as a betrayal of God's love for his people.

The cause of the crisis is clear: they had broken God's Law, they had violated God's covenant, and they had betrayed God's love for them. Now their future hung in the balance. This is the true meaning of a crisis: a critical moment, a moment of judgment, a moment when all is at risk.

What is the precise **nature of their crisis**? First, there was the threat of immediate punishment; of God's judgment falling on the people then and there. This was God's first statement of intent back in Exodus 32:10 when he said to Moses: *"Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them."* Moses pleaded with God to suspend his judgment and God relented. There were still some immediate repercussions. Near the end of Exodus 32, Moses deputized the Levites to take their swords and strike down those who were still running wild in the camp. 3000 were killed. At the very end of the chapter, there is a brief mention of a plague that struck the people and caused more deaths. But that is now at an end. The immediate threat of judgment has been averted.

But as Exodus 33 begins, the crisis is not yet over. God says in Exodus 33:5: *"I will decide what to do with you."* What is at stake is God's relationship to his people. Will he go with them, or will he separate himself from them? Will the broken relationship be restored, or will it remain severed? What about the covenant they had sealed with sacrifices and a covenant meal in Exodus 24 and then broken? What about God's promise to go with them, to establish his residence among them, to visibly accompany them on their journey to the Promised Land? Is it all permanently lost because of their sin? This seems to be God's stated intention as the chapter opens. "I will keep my promise to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Because you are their descendants, I will give you the land. I will even send an angel before

you to drive out the inhabitants. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people, and I might destroy you on the way.” (paraphrase)

This was the announcement that caused such distress among the people. Despite all their grumbling and doubting the people had come to count on the presence of God with them. In fact, that is the point of the next paragraph in the text.

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door. Thus, the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent. (Exodus 33:7-11)

On a casual reading, this paragraph seems out of chronology, but the use of a change of tenses in the original text signals that the writer is giving us some background information and an explanation. This is what the translators are signaling in the way they render verse 7: *Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp...* This had been their norm. This is what they had come to expect. But this would no longer be so if God refused to go with them. God would send an angel, but he himself would not go with them. An accompanying angel is a poor substitute for the presence of Yahweh himself.

This was the crisis the nation faced. The immediate threat of punishment had been averted, but they faced the prospect of continuing on their journey without the accompanying presence of God.

I am glad to say that the story does not end with God's words in verse 3. In fact, the book of Exodus has a happy ending, despite the events of Exodus 32. The question we want to ask is: What turned the tide? Why did God “change his mind” so to speak? As I searched for

the answer in the text, I think there were three key factors. **First, the people repented.**

If we look at verses 4-6 again, their repentance in these verses is clear. First, they mourned. They cried, they wept, their sorrow found an outward expression, and apparently it was widespread, because we are told that, *When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments.* It was a collective act on the part of the nation. What is more, it found concrete expression in their actions. Three times it is repeated that they “removed their ornaments.”

Some commentators believe this was simply a symbolic act of mourning by removing any jewelry or cosmetic ornaments they wore. Others believe there is a deeper significance; that these ornaments may well have had religious significance and may have been some kind of occult articles or represented some form of superstition or pagan worship. In either case, their emotional repentance also brought a change in their behavior.

This response gives us a sense of hope for the Israelites. They are not weeping because of the threat of immediate punishment. It is clear that threat has passed. That cloud has receded. Rather it is the thought of losing the fellowship of God, of no longer having him in their midst, that leads them to this act of repentance. They have at least this much spiritual awareness and spiritual appetite. Even they are not willing to settle for an angel when they have known the presence of God.

As I consider the Israelites’ response, it prompts me to ponder a rather uncomfortable question. How many of us would have responded in the same way? Or would we have been willing to settle for the presence of the promised angel? How many of us would gladly settle for God’s material blessings of protection, prosperity and good health, and never even notice that his divine presence has departed? Because that’s what happens when we sin. God’s accompanying presence, his fellowship is withdrawn. John says it this way in 1 John 1:6: *If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.* How many of us are claiming to have fellowship with God, yet because of our sin, he has withdrawn himself from us? The first thing we must do is to acknowledge that fact, and then we must repent of the sin that caused the rift in our relationship.

The second key ingredient is the intercession of a mediator.

We saw Moses in his role as mediator in Exodus 32. In that chapter, Moses pleaded with God to turn aside from judgment and to withhold his punishment. But his intercession continues in this time of crisis. He pleads with God to remain with his people. Let's look at his words to God in Exodus 33:12-13.

Moses said to the LORD, "See, you say to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people."

Moses continues in verses 15-16: *And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?"*

Moses' intercession continues in Exodus 34: 8-9: *And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. And he said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."*

This is Moses at his best. This is Moses in full flower as a leader, interceding for his people. There is so much going on here between Moses and God that we are going to come back to this passage in the next chapter and look at it from the perspective of their relationship. But for now, we want to focus on Moses' role as mediator pleading for his people, pleading for God's presence to continue to go with them, pleading for God's forgiveness and for the restoration of the nation to its privileged position.

In this chapter we continue to see strong parallels between Moses and Jesus Christ, the "prophet like Moses" who has come into the world. First Jesus is the mediator who pleads with the Father for the threat of judgment and punishment to be turned away. To do that, he presents his own blood as the payment for the sins of the world. And so, God accepts the sacrifice, and turns from his wrath. By the shed blood of Christ, a new covenant is established with God's people.

But what happens when we, who have been forgiven by the

blood of Christ, fall again into sin? Will God withdraw his presence from us? It is here that Christ's continued intercession for us is such an important doctrine of the church. Hebrews 7:24-25 says, *Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.* (NIV)

The importance of the mediator cannot be overemphasized. Look at what God said to Moses in Exodus 33:17: *And the LORD said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you (singular) have found favor in my sight, and I know you (singular) by name."* This is powerful! God forgave the people because he was pleased with Moses. We have an even greater mediator and intercessor than Moses, don't we? Do you remember what the voice from heaven said at Jesus' baptism? *This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.* If God forgave the Israelites because he was pleased with Moses, do you think he will forgive and restore us when Jesus intercedes for us?

The third key factor in the story is the character of God. In a passage that we will focus on in the next chapter, God revealed himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7. *The LORD (Yahweh) passed before him and proclaimed, "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."*

This text became a central theme in the rest of the Old Testament. On numerous other occasions, the prophets and other leaders of Israel would come back and quote this revelation of God's character. Without compromising his holiness and righteousness, our God is, by nature, a compassionate and forgiving God.

God always acts consistently with his character and his nature. He is a forgiving God. And so, in the chapter in front of us, he moved to restore his people to their privileged position and to establish his presence in their midst.

The first thing he did was to reinstate the covenant in Exodus 34:1: *The LORD said to Moses, "Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first*

tablets, which you broke. The covenant conditions are being repeated and the covenant documents are being prepared once again.

Then look at Exodus 34:10: *Then Yahweh said: "I am making a covenant with you..."* We see this being worked out in the rest of the book of Exodus. If you recall, one of the things God was giving to Moses when he went up on the mountain the first time was the blueprint for the tabernacle; the portable temple that would accompany the people as a visible sign of God's presence. This is to be distinguished from the temporary "tent of meeting" describe in chapter 33. This was all put at risk in the incident of the gold calf. Will God even allow this place of worship (this visible sign of his presence with the people) to be built? The answer is "Yes!" In the rest of Exodus 35-40 we have the account of the actual constructing and setting up of the tabernacle.

I love the way the book of Exodus ends in chapter 40:34-38:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.

By grace and despite their sin, God reestablished his covenant with the Israelites. He pitched his tent among them, and his visible presence accompanied them on their journeys. God went up with them.

SHOW ME YOUR GLORY!

Exodus 33-34 (a second look)

In Exodus 33:18, Moses makes an incredibly audacious request: *Moses said, "Please show me your glory."*

Exodus 33 and 34 is an intriguing and mysterious passage. In the previous chapter, we looked at it from the perspective of the nation of Israel. We saw how they repented after their sin of worshiping the gold calf, and how, through Moses' intercession and the grace and compassion of God, they were restored to their place as God's special covenant people.

In this chapter we will look at the same two chapters of Exodus again, this time exploring the events from Moses' perspective and his interactions with God. We looked at him in his role of mediator and intercessor in the previous chapter. But during his intercessory prayers for the nation, Moses slips in this remarkable request: "Please show me your glory!"

This was the man who had spoken with God in the burning bush. He had seen and experienced the power of God through the plagues in Egypt and in the parting of the Sea. He had stood at the foot of the mountain and watched the lightning flash and the fire of God's presence descend upon the mountain. Not only that, but this is the man who had boldly gone up on the mountain and into the cloud to meet with God when all the rest of the nation had been told to stand back. This was the man, the Scripture tells us, to whom God spoke intimately as a man speaks to his friend. Yet the more he experienced God, the more he hungered for him. In Exodus 33:13, he prayed, *"If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you."* Now he adds this bold request: *"Show me your glory."*

Moses knew God and had experienced him in ways no other human being had. In fact, the summary of the Old Testament is that

between Moses and the coming of Christ, there was no one “like Moses” who knew God the way Moses did. Yet he still asked for more. I think it is a principle of spiritual life that those who know God best have the greatest appetite for him.

I enjoy reading the books of A.W. Tozer, a preacher and writer of a previous generation. I wrote this quotation in my journal (sadly, without noting the book or page number). “Oh, how I wish I could adequately set forth the glory of the One who is worthy to be the object of our worship. I do believe that if we could be made to see His thousand attributes and even partially comprehend His being, we would become faint with a yearning desire to worship and honor and acknowledge Him, now and forever.” This was Tozer’s longing. It was Moses’ heart cry as well. To know God is to want to know him more. “Show me your glory!”

How did God respond to Moses’ request? What did Moses see? As we read the passage in Exodus 33:19-23, we find that it is more a case of what Moses did not see.

And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” And the LORD said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.”

In other words, God told Moses that if he were to look directly at the glory of God, at “God’s face,” he would die. It was more than Moses, as a finite and sinful human being, could possibly take in without being destroyed.

I remember as a boy there was a solar eclipse over the area of Africa where we lived. We were all excited to see this rare event. But we were clearly and sternly warned not to look directly at the sun – or we could become blind from the brightness of the sun’s rays. Just as the human eye cannot bear the brightness of the sun without damage, so the human eye is incapable of directly seeing the glory of God.

But God does promise to give Moses a closer, more intimate glimpse of himself. He will be permitted to see God’s glory from

behind, like seeing the train of the bride's gown without seeing the bride herself. So, Moses went up on the mountain to the place where God had instructed him to stand.

Let's continue to read the story in Exodus 34:4-8.

So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first. And he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone. The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped.

Two things stand out from the text. First, Moses asked to see, but there is not one word of visual description in these verses. They are all words of speaking and hearing. There is no description of color or shape or light or dark or any other visual perception. There is only a record of a voice speaking.

The second thing that stands out to me is that Moses asked to see God's glory, but what God did was to describe his character and his attributes. That seemed a bit of a puzzle to me. But then the truth dawned: **God's character is his glory!** Let me say that again. God's character is his glory. To see God in his glory is to perceive him in his glorious attributes. I believe Moses' request, "Show me your glory," is parallel to his earlier request in 33:13, "so I may know you." To know God is to know his attributes and to know his attributes is to see his glory, because his character is his glory. And it is all summed up in his name. That is why God said, "I will proclaim my name, Yahweh, in your presence." And so, in answer to Moses' request to see God's glory, God declares his name twice: *The LORD, the LORD (Yahweh, Yahweh)*, and then lists his attributes.

What wonderful attributes they are! He is **compassionate**. This is a quality that is called out of the strong by the weak and vulnerable. It is what stirs in a father's heart when he stoops to pick up his sobbing child.

He is **gracious**, extending favor and kindness to the undeserving.

He is **slow to anger**. In other words, he is patient. He does not say he will never become angry, for that would deny his holiness and justice. But he is patient, giving ample time for repentance and a change of heart.

He is **abounding in love and faithfulness**. This word for “love” is the strongest of the Old Testament words for love. It is translated differently in different contexts and by different translations. My favorite is the one I learned in seminary from Dr. Ronald Allen, my Hebrew professor: “loyal love.” This is the unconditional love of God for his covenant people. And it is linked with his faithfulness.

The phrase “**maintaining love**” in verse 7 is a repetition of this same word. In the Hebrew idiom, God is said to actually “guard” or “protect so as to keep safe and strong” his love for his people.

Out of his love and compassion and grace, he **forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin**. In those three words, we have spelled out the three most common words in the Old Testament for sin – our disobedience and failure and rebellion which breaches our relationship with God. God is willing to forgive them all.

Yet, he does all of this without abandoning his **justice and righteousness** and his commitment to punish the guilty.

This is not a complete list of God’s attributes. There is no mention here of his wisdom or his omnipotence, or his omnipresence, or even his holiness. But it is a great list to start with as we get to know God. These are the attributes that are most in the foreground as we consider God as a relational God; God as he relates to his people. Over and over in the Old Testament, as the people of God came to him in prayer and in need, they started by quoting this passage. These are the attributes that caused them to feel that there was hope in praying to God. “O God, we come to you because we know that you are compassionate and gracious and slow to anger and abounding in love...”

Moses asked God, “Show me your glory.” God showed him his character and declared his attributes. God’s glory is his character. These two cannot be separated. We are not told what Moses saw, but we know what he heard. When he heard God’s voice, he bowed to the ground and worshiped. It was enough for him, and more than enough, to be in the presence of such a God! Visual pyrotechnics could wait for another time and place. It was enough to know and be

close to the heart of God, to know his nature and his character, and to worship at his feet.

There followed an extended time on the mountain, during which God rewrote the Ten Commandments and spelled out many other details of the covenant. But as we continue to follow the theme of Moses in his relationship with God, I want to fast forward to the end, when he came down from the mountain. We find it in Exodus 34:29-35:

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

When Moses came down from the mountain his face was radiant. It was shining. Beams of light shone out from his face, like a mirror reflecting the bright rays of the sun.

When we lived in Abu Dhabi, every morning in our apartment we would get the bright light of the sun in our front windows. We would get this bright light, although our windows faced west and north. How did we get the morning sun, if our apartment did not face east? We would get it because at just the right time and the right angle, the sun reflected off the glass of the building across the street from us, and our apartment was filled with reflected light. That is what Moses' face was like as he came down from the mountain.

He was not aware of it, but it was so dazzling that Aaron and the people were afraid to approach him. He had to call them back and reassure them before they would approach. After he talked to them and related what God had said on the mountain, he then put a veil

over his face. For many weeks after that, this was the pattern. When Moses was in the presence of God, he took the veil off. When he came out of God's presence, his face was shining. He would relate to the people what God had said, then he would put the veil over his face until the next time he went into God's presence.

In these events, I think we are given a natural progression, a natural rhythm of the spiritual life with three cycles. We might summarize them this way: **Behold the glory. Worship the glory.** And finally, **reflect the glory.** While this is clearly an Old Testament/Covenant story, I believe the same progression, the same rhythm of the spiritual life, applies to us under the New Covenant.

Behold the Glory! Moses went up on the mountain to see the glory of God. Where shall we go to see his glory? I changed my thinking as I meditated on this truth. When I first read through this account in Exodus and thought about it, my first thought was to ask a challenging question: How many of us are brave enough to ask what Moses asked? How many of us are bold enough to say to God, "Show me your glory?" Then I was going to challenge us all to seek deeper and more intimate experiences with God. I still think that would make a good sermon!

But the Holy Spirit brought me up short in my thinking. He directed my thoughts to a passage in the New Testament, when one of Jesus' disciples made what must have seemed to him a very bold and "Moses-like" request. His name was Philip and in John 14:8 he said, "*Lord, show us the Father and it is enough for us.*"

How did Jesus answer him? *Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.* "Don't you get it yet, Philip? I and the Father are one. If you have seen me, you have seen him!"

But what about the glory? Look at John 1:14: *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

John goes on in verse 16-18: *For from his fullness, we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.*

If we would behold the glory of God, we need only to look at Jesus. Paul says it this way in 2 Corinthians 4:6: *For God, who said,*

“Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The first step in the cycle: **Behold the glory!** Today, we can find that glory, the glory of God himself, revealed in Jesus Christ who has come to make the Father and his glory known on earth. A great place to start your quest, or to refresh it if it has grown stale, is to read and reread the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ earthly life. You will find God’s character there displayed on a human stage. And remember, God’s glory is his character. His character is his glory. Behold the glory!

The second step: **Worship the glory!** When God passed by, Moses bowed down in worship. It is interesting to read the New Testament and see how this light dawned on the disciples in the closing chapters of the Gospels. They believed he was the Messiah, but as he appeared to them in his resurrected body, and the implications of it all dawned on them, one after the other bowed in worship. When Thomas, the doubter finally believed that it was the resurrected Jesus who stood before him, he said it so simply: “My Lord and my God.”

If we understand and believe that Jesus is God in the flesh, the only logical response is to bow in worship. The glory of God calls us to worship just as it did Moses. That glory is revealed in Jesus. Worship the glory! The New Testament calls upon us to express that worship with a sacrifice: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.* (Romans 12:1)

There is one final phase in the cycle. **Reflect the glory.** When Moses came out from the presence of God, his face beamed with light. To see this truth in its New Testament context, turn to 2 Corinthians 3:7-11.

Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses’ face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

Paul first pays tribute to the glory of the Old Covenant, but then

states strongly that the glory of the New Covenant is far superior. His emphasis is that the Old Covenant had a glory that faded, but the glory of the New Covenant lasts forever.

To make his point he goes on to talk about the veil that Moses wore. The question is this: "Why did Moses put on a veil?" The first and most obvious answer was that the glory of God reflected in Moses' face was so bright that the Israelites could not look at it. That was part of it. If we only had the Exodus account, we might conclude that was the whole reason. But Paul points out another reason for the veil in verse 12-13: *Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end.*

Moses wore a veil, so that the Israelites could not watch the glory fade! It is clear when we look back at the Exodus account with this in mind. He would go into God's presence without the veil. There was nothing between him and God. He would come out of God's presence unveiled and relate to the people the words of God which he had received in the presence of God. When he was done speaking, he would put on the veil, so the people would not see the glory of God reflected in his face fading away. That is the fading glory of the Old Covenant.

But what about the glory of the New Covenant? Look at 2 Corinthians 3:17-18: *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

As Jesus followers, we too, are called to reflect the glory of the Lord before the world. But here is the exciting truth. While the glory on Moses' face would fade away, we now have the Spirit of the Lord living within us. There is no need for a veil over our faces, because the glory of the Lord in the believer's life is not fading. It is growing brighter, day after day, from glory to every-increasing glory as we are transformed into Christ's likeness by the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit. That is our calling: to reflect the glory of the Lord by being transformed into his likeness and becoming like him in character. And remember, his character is his glory. His glory is his character. As we become like him in character, we reflect his glory in ever increasing measure.

I mentioned a few paragraphs ago, the sunshine that flooded our apartment in the morning – even though our apartment faced away from the rising sun. You and I live in a world that faces away from the rising sun of God's glory. If they would see the light of the glory of God, it will be through the reflected glory of your life and mine, as our lives are transformed by the Spirit of God.

Behold the glory of God in the face of Christ. Worship the glory by bowing before him and giving your life as a living sacrifice. Reflect the glory by being transformed into his image.

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MEDITATING ON CHRISTMAS FROM THE FOOT OF MT. SINAI

It was time to prepare my annual Christmas message for our church. But I was faced with a dilemma. I was immersed in a series of messages on Moses and the Israelites. For weeks we had been camped out with the Israelites at the foot of Mt. Sinai. I was reluctant to leave it. Then it struck me. I didn't have to. I decided to take the opportunity to meditate on Christmas from the foot of Mt. Sinai.

The scenes and images, particularly from Exodus 19, continued to echo and reverberate in my heart and mind and they formed the backdrop, the context, the frame of reference for my thoughts on Christmas. That scene remained vividly in my mind: the nation of Israel standing in awe at the foot of the mountain as the thunder roared and the lightning flashed and the mountain shook and smoked and the sound of the trumpet blast grew louder and louder. And God came down in fire to the top of the mountain. The God of Sinai: majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, tender in love. What a God!

It is against that backdrop that I then turned my mind to think about Christmas; a young Jewish virgin; her fiancé, a carpenter with work-roughened hands; a newborn baby lying on a simple bed of hay in a manger; an audience of shepherds from the nearby hills.

Now this is what I tried to soak in, to comprehend, to wrap my head around. Are you ready for this? The clear declaration of Scripture is this: **The God of Sinai is the Baby of Bethlehem.** Or we can say it the other way round: **The Baby of Bethlehem is the God of Sinai.** That little baby we sing about, "asleep on the hay," is the God of Sinai in human flesh. Friends, if we miss this truth, we have missed not only the true meaning of Christmas. We have missed the true meaning of the Bible, of human history and of life itself.

Is the Scripture really so clear that we can make that connection? I believe it is. Let us consider first a prophetic Scripture from Isaiah

7:14: “Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” The name Immanuel means, literally “im” – “with”, “manu” – “us”, “el” – “God.” We are told in the New Testament that this prophecy was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. In Matthew 1:22-23 it says, “*All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.*” (which means, “God with us”).

But what does this phrase mean? “God with us.” Isn’t God always with us? After all, God is omnipresent! But this is something more. Much more. The Apostle John says it this way in John 1:14: “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*” In the Exodus account God spoke, and his voice was so terrifying the Israelites pleaded for him to stop speaking. Now this Word has become flesh and pitched his tent among us.

The writer of Hebrews adds this: “*He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.*” (Hebrews 1:3)

The Apostle Paul states confidently, “*He is the image of the invisible God...*” (Colossians 1:15) and “*...in him (Christ) the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily...*” (Colossians 2:9)

God in a body, God in human flesh, God (all of God!!!) wrapped up in a baby! **The God of Sinai is the Baby of Bethlehem! The Baby of Bethlehem is the God of Sinai!**

I don’t know about you, but that blows me away! I stand at the foot of Mt. Sinai, and I can scarcely take it in. How do we reconcile the blast of the trumpet from the heights of Sinai with the vulnerable cry of the baby in the manger? Yet it is in making that link that we discover not only the magic of Christmas but the essence and the uniqueness of the Christian faith.

As I meditated on this reality, it struck me very forcibly that the truths we learned about God, at the foot of Mt. Sinai, are also apparent in the Christmas story. Let us retrace our steps and see the links.

First, we learned at the foot of Mt. Sinai that **the God of Sinai is majestic in holiness**. He ordered the Israelites to wash their clothes in preparation for his coming. Then he commanded Moses to set boundary lines around the mountain, so that there could be no mixing of that which is unholy with that which is holy.

As I thought about the Christmas story with that theme in mind, it struck me how carefully God protected his holiness as he slipped into human flesh. Let's look at the account in Luke 1. He sent an angel to a young Jewish virgin to tell her that she would conceive and bear a child who would be the Messiah. This girl asked an obvious question in Luke 1:34: *"And Mary said to the angel, how will this be, since I am a virgin?"* Pay close attention to the angel's answer in verse 35: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God."*

Do you see the emphasis on the holiness of God? Do you see how carefully God worked to ensure that there would be no breach of that holiness? He even sent an angel to Joseph, Mary's fiancé, to explain it all to him, so that he would take Mary as his wife; to give her protection from society's wagging tongues, and yet keep her a virgin until after the special child was born. This is why the doctrine of the virgin birth is so important to us as Christians. (Some modern church scholars may tell us that this doesn't matter, but it does!) This is God, majestic in holiness, maintaining his holiness while still becoming human.

The emphasis on the righteousness and holiness of Jesus continues beyond his conception and birth. In his first epistle, John the Apostle makes this summary of the life and message of Jesus after spending three years in his presence. In 1 John 1:5: *"This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all."* That is a wonderful, descriptive way to declare the holiness of God. That is John's summary of the message of Jesus' earthly message and ministry. And in 1 John 2:1, he refers to Jesus as *"Jesus Christ, the Righteous One."*

The God of Sinai is the Baby of Bethlehem, and he is majestic in holiness. He came down, put on flesh and dwelt among us without sacrificing or compromising one iota of his holiness. He was *"tempted in every way, just as we are – yet without sin."* (Hebrews 4:15)

What about the next truth we discovered at the foot of Mt. Sinai?

The God of Sinai is awesome in glory.

Here we do detect an immediate difference. It is this stark contrast between the thunder and lightning of Sinai and the quiet, humble birth of this baby that makes it so difficult for us to

comprehend the link. But the Bible does explain this contrast. In Philippians 2:6-7, we read: “...*who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men...*” Theologians have long debated what it was that Christ emptied himself of. There are different opinions, but almost all would agree that at the very least he emptied himself of the outward manifestation of his glory.

That reality is apparent in the humble circumstances of Jesus’ birth. But on another level, as I read the Christmas story, it is also apparent that the glory is just below the surface, just looking for an opportunity to break forth.

Did you ever watch a young child who has been asked to keep an exciting secret? He knows he isn’t supposed to say anything – but it is written all over his face; the big grins, the sparkling eyes, the almost unbearable compulsion to tell someone, anyone, the exciting news he bears. That’s the impression I get from the whole Christmas story. The glory is being concealed, but it’s like that secret that just has to come out. And the glory does break forth in certain brief flashes in the account of his birth. Nameless shepherds are watching their flocks in the field, and in Luke 2:9 “*an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were filled with great fear.*” Does that remind you of Sinai? It does me. And after the angel delivered his message, what happened? “*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying...*” What? “*Glory to God in the highest!*”

It is as though a cloud has temporarily come across the bright sun of God’s glory, but the glory is there just waiting for an opportunity to burst forth. And it does, before an audience of simple shepherds on the hillside. It breaks forth at other times during Jesus’ earthly life. Remember when Jesus went up on the mountain, and took Peter, James and John with him. *And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.* (Matthew 17:2) The word “transfigured” means that he was changed from the inside out so that what he was on the inside came through on the outside. For that brief moment, the cloud moved, and his glory became visible.

He emptied himself of the outward manifestation of his glory.

But it was only for a temporary time period. In Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17, he prayed this in verses 4- 5: "*I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.*"

Jesus is saying, "I have finished my task here on earth. Now restore the glory."

The entire earthly ministry of Jesus is about the glory of God. We read a few minutes ago from Philippians 2 which talked of Jesus "emptying himself" when he became a man. That emptying was not complete at his humble birth. It continued through his life of service:

"...taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." But watch where this is all headed! *Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father".* (Philippians 2:7-11)

Awesome in glory! Yes, for a time that glory was veiled, but only for a time until he finished his earthly mission. Then he was restored to glory. **The God of Sinai is the Baby of Bethlehem. The Baby of Bethlehem is the God of Sinai.** He is awesome in glory!! And when you and I see him, it will not be as a baby. It will be as the Lord of glory, and we will bow in worship at his feet.

We learned a third truth about God at the foot of Mt. Sinai. We learned that **the God of Sinai is tender in love.** Sadly, many people miss that reality in Exodus 19. There is a common tendency to think of the God of Sinai as an angry God, a God of harsh judgment. Yes, the God of Sinai is scary. He is not safe! He is not a tame or domesticated God. But he is also a God who is tender in love. Those who think of him only as harsh and angry have missed a key dimension of the story in Exodus 19. The whole message of that chapter is that God came down to enter into a covenant with his people; to declare to the world that he was their God and that they were his special people, his treasured possession.

It is at this point that the Christmas story really comes into its own, in the revelation of the God of Sinai, the God of the Bible as a

God of love. Yes, at Sinai God was revealing his love and commitment to his people. But at Bethlehem he did it in a different way.

I am reminded of the old story of a little girl who was afraid of the dark. Her mother had tucked her into bed, but she kept coming out, complaining of all the awful, scary things under the bed that were frightening her. Again and again, her mother gently took her back to bed and tucked her in. Each time she reassured her little daughter that she was not alone – that God was with her. As the mother tried to slip away for the umpteenth time, the little girl wailed, “Mom, I know God is with me. But I want someone with skin on!”

At Sinai, God came down to the top of the mountain. In Bethlehem, God came down to the bottom of the mountain and stood with his people. He put on skin! He became one of us! The writer of Hebrews says this in Hebrews 2:14: “*Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things.*” He then adds in Hebrews 2:17: *Therefore, he had to be made like his brothers in every respect.*

His act of identifying with us, becoming one of us, was an act of incredible love and devotion. I am reminded of the words of the song, “Love Was When,” authored by John Walvoord: “Love was when God became a man, locked in time and space without rank or place. Love was God, born of Jewish kin, just a carpenter with some fishermen.”

Tender in love! Oh, how the love of God shone through in the simple details of that humble birth! And how the love of God continued to shine through the life of that Jewish carpenter! When he reached out and laid his hand on the shriveled, ulcerated flesh of the leper - that was the God of Sinai, tender in love. When he opened his arms and welcomed the children to climb into his lap - that was the God of Sinai, tender in love. When he sat by the well in Samaria and struck up a conversation with a woman who was an outcast from her society for her immoral lifestyle, and he offered her living water - that was the God of Sinai, tender in love.

We could go on and on. And it doesn't end there, does it? In the ultimate expression of love, Jesus, God in the flesh, went to the cross. As the song continues, “*Love was God, nailed to bleed and die, to reach and love one such as I.*” The God of Sinai is the Baby of Bethlehem. That means that the God of Sinai is the Christ of Calvary. *God, nailed to bleed and die*, to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Whether we stand at the foot of Mt. Sinai, or beside the manger, or at the foot of the cross, this is the same God, who changes not! He always acts in total harmony with his character. Majestic in holiness! Awesome in glory! Tender in love! What a God!

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STRANGE FIRE

Leviticus 10

So far, we have spent 16 chapters studying the book of Exodus. We are going to spend a grand total of one chapter in the book of Leviticus. The reason for that is not because Leviticus is not an important book of the Bible. Rather it is because of the nature of our study. Our goal is to examine the narrative sections of the Pentateuch; to follow the story line of the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land. The book of Leviticus contains only one section of narrative. That story is found in Leviticus 10.

Let me summarize the account. Aaron and his sons have been designated as the priests of Israel. They are the designated ones to offer the required sacrifices on the part of the people. But one day, something happened. Aaron's two older sons offered something the King James Version calls "strange fire" before the Lord. Without warning, fire flashed out from God's presence in the Holy of Holies! The two men died on the spot! Their corpses lay smoldering beside the altar. It is a scene right out of an Indiana Jones movie.

Let me ask you a question. Does that story bother you? Do you find it disturbing? Does it make you squirm? Of all the stories that could have been included in the book of Leviticus, why this one? How do we make sense of it?

We need to start by placing the story in its context in the book of which it is a key part. It is the book of Leviticus, the third book in our Bibles and the third of the five books of Moses. The name by which we know it, "Leviticus" comes from Latin and is derived from the word Levite, because much of the book is given over to instructions for the Levites and the priests and their role in the worship of God.

If we were to contrast the themes of the book of Exodus and the book of Leviticus, the emphasis of the book of Exodus is on the glory

of God, while the focus of the book of Leviticus is on the holiness of God. In Exodus, God declares his purpose in Exodus 14:4: *and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD*. So, the plagues of Egypt were for the glory of God, to declare his identity on the world stage. Then at Mt. Sinai we saw the glory of God descend upon the mountain in the view of the Israelites. We heard Moses pray, “Yahweh, show me your glory!” Finally, the book of Exodus closes with the account of Yahweh descending in a cloud upon the tabernacle and his glory filling the tabernacle.

The book of Leviticus only refers three times to the glory of Yahweh, but it is full of references to his holiness. In an earlier chapter we discovered that the word holiness does not occur in the book of Genesis. The first use of the word is in Exodus 3 when God tells Moses to take off his sandals because he is standing on holy ground. Then there is very little further reference to God’s holiness in the rest of the first half of Exodus. Once the Israelites get to Mt. Sinai all that changes. The references to God’s holiness become frequent in the descriptions of God’s moral and ceremonial law. And if you think they are frequent in the last chapters of Exodus, they are everywhere in the book of Leviticus.

One statement stands out as central to the book of Leviticus. It is repeated three times in the text. (Remember, repetition is one of the primary ways of emphasizing something in Hebrew writing.) The first is in Leviticus 11:44 *For I am the LORD (Yahweh) your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy*. This is repeated in 11:45: *For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy*. Then it is stated yet again in Leviticus 19:1-2: *And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, you shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy*.

This theme predominates throughout the two broad sections of the book. The first major section of the book, Leviticus 1-16, contains instructions on how the people were to approach this holy God by carefully fulfilling his Laws of Sacrifice. Leviticus 17- 27 continues by describing how the people were to walk in fellowship with this holy God by fulfilling his Laws of Separation from all that is sinful and all that contaminates (the word “unclean” is used repeatedly).

In all this description of the holiness of God and demands for the people to respond in holy living, a key role is entrusted to Aaron and his sons. They are God's priests. Great detail is given in the text to their being chosen by God. Their garments are described in minute detail. They are anointed and set apart for this special service. The priests and Levites had a dual role. They are to represent the people before God by offering the sacrifices on behalf of the people. And they are to represent God before the people by declaring his laws and holy standards to them.

All of this begins to give us a sense of why the events recorded in Leviticus 10 are so jarring. It is as though we are listening to a long, soothing piece of music. Suddenly the pianist brings his hands down on the keyboard in a tremendous, loud, horrible discord. We are shaken from our seats and sit up to see what has happened.

The controversy is caused by Aaron's two elder sons. Their names are Nadab and Abihu. What exactly did they do? The NIV translation says that they "offered unauthorized fire before Yahweh." As previously noted, the King James Version translates it "strange fire." Bible students debate exactly what this means. Some feel it is a reference to the fact that the fire on the altar was never to be allowed to go out before Yahweh, and that all the other sacrifices were to be lit from the coals of this altar. The strange fire meant that they brought coals from some other source to light their censers. Others suggest that they departed from God's instructions as to the ingredients that were to make up the incense that was to be offered before the Lord. Still others believe that they offered the sacrifice at some unauthorized time, outside of God's clear timetable for worship. Another, even more sinister suggestion is that they were introducing some form of idolatrous or heathen worship practice to the tabernacle.

One other speculation about the nature of their sin is that they were drunk as they participated in their official functions. This comes from the fact that in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy in Leviticus 10:8-9 God gives these specific instructions to Aaron: *And the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying, "Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations"*.

Any of these interpretations are possible. The bottom line is found in the phrase in verse 2: *which he had not commanded them*. It

doesn't say it was something that God had commanded them not to do. It simply says that it was not something he had commanded them to do. Whatever they did, they were outside the boundaries of God's clear instructions for their role. It was not something he had told them to do.

The consequences of their actions were severe, drastic and immediate. *And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. (v. 2)* One minute they were alive, clothed in all their priestly finery, carrying the official symbols of their role. The next minute they lay dead, their lifeless bodies still smoldering.

What lesson or truth should we take away from this shocking and tragic incident? Maybe it sounds simple and rather obvious, but I think it is the heart of the issue. In that one flare of deadly fire from God's presence, a very important reality was seared into the minds and consciences of God's people. **God is serious about holiness.** Holiness matters to God. *Be holy because I am holy* is not an option or an afterthought in God's unfolding plan. God is utterly and totally holy and without sin. "He is light and in him there is no darkness at all." And in his holiness, he will not tolerate sin or anything unholy in his presence.

In a way, that truth might be lost or muted in all the minutiae of legal and ritual detail in the book of Leviticus. But this incident grabs our attention in a way that the rest of the book might not. **God is serious about holiness.** That is the first lesson to be drawn from this tragic incident. Look at Moses' words in verse 3: *Moses then said to Aaron, "This is what Yahweh spoke of when he said: 'Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.'"* (NIV)

God is serious about holiness. In fact, he is so serious about it that in his hierarchy of values, his holiness matters more than human life. Let me say that again. **In God's hierarchy of values, his holiness matters more than human life.**

I believe this is the source of our sense of horror and conflict when we read this story. In today's world, we are almost blindly and totally man centered in our world view. Everything begins and ends with man. Therefore, the loss of a human life is the ultimate tragedy – especially over something as trivial as "holiness," the breaching of

a seemingly trivial technicality of worship. From that starting point (that human life and the preservation of human life is the ultimate value) this is a horrible story. Two men in the prime of life, men who probably had wives and children, were struck down. Why? Because they violated the holiness of God. Do we have a problem with that? We will if our world view is humanistic and man centered. But the Bible is clearly and unapologetically God centered. The universe revolves around God, not around man. Man is placed on earth to serve God, not the other way around. And in this God centered universe, God's holiness, God's glory, God's righteousness all take precedence over the value of human life.

Now, don't get me wrong. Human life is valuable. It is incredibly valuable in God's sight. That is clear from the Scripture. Human life is valuable because we are made in God's image. Human life is to be valued and protected. Human life matters to God. But there are some things that matter more. God's holiness is one of them. God's glory is another. There are numerous passages of Scripture that will continue to shock and horrify us until we come to grips with this Biblical reality.

God is serious about holiness. This is the message of the entire book of Leviticus. This tragic incident of the death of Aaron's two sons grabs us by the throat and makes sure we don't miss this truth. What we have in this chapter is an object lesson, clear and unfiltered, of how God's holiness responds to sin. It gives perspective and visual impact to such Biblical texts as:

The soul who sins is the one who will die. (Ezekiel 18:4)

Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment. (Hebrews 9:27)

It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:31)

Without holiness no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14)

Our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:29) (All quotes from NIV)

This is our dilemma. **God is serious about holiness.** Every one of us must face up to that reality of the universe in which we live. It is God's universe. He created it. He makes the rules. And holiness matters to him. Whether we experience it in a flash of deadly fire like Nadab and Abihu, or we face it when the standards of his holiness are applied to our lives at the Final Judgment, be aware. **God is serious about holiness. And we are not holy!**

This brings us face to face with a paradox. In Exodus 34, we found a list of God's attributes that he revealed to Moses: *Yahweh is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love.* Now, in Leviticus 10, we find ourselves staring at the smoking bodies of two of his priests, slain by God himself. This God is frightening! He is scary!

How do we reconcile these two faces of God? It is here that the broad sweep of the Book of Leviticus comes to our rescue. The theme of the book is the holiness of God and the demand that those who approach him must also be holy. But the book opens by presenting the Israelites with a very detailed set of blood sacrifices, by which they could atone for their sin and approach God. The holiness of God was protected and emphasized, while at the same time there was a way for sinful human beings to approach God through blood sacrifices. The writer of Hebrews says it this way in summarizing the book of Leviticus: *Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.* (Hebrews 9:22)

The truth of the book of Leviticus is that there is a way to God through sacrifice. Yes, God is holy. Yes, God is serious about holiness. And truly, we are not holy. But if we approach him in the prescribed manner, by the blood sacrifices he has commanded, sins can be forgiven. The blood sacrifices of animals commanded in the Book of Leviticus have now been fulfilled and superceded by another sacrifice. It is the sacrifice of Jesus, the Son of God. Do you remember how John the Baptist introduced him on the banks of the Jordan River? *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.* (John 1:29)

This is what the writer of Hebrews is referring to in Hebrews 10:10: *...we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.* (NIV)

This brings us to a final lesson from the tragic deaths of Nadab and Abihu. **We must approach God on his terms, not ours.** I believe that this was at the heart of the sin of Nadab and Abihu. They thought they could approach God in any way or at any time of their choosing. We live in a world that embraces the principle that “anything goes.” We have the idea that God ought to be so impressed by our “spirituality” in thinking about him at all that he ought to embrace us no matter how we approach him. The idea that there is a “right way” to approach God and a “wrong way” to approach him is alien to many in our world. When we add to that the fact that choosing the “wrong way” could result in death, or worse yet, eternal separation from God, then people are ready to brand us as intolerant religious bigots. But the reality is that Nadab and Abihu approached God the wrong way and they died!

We must approach God on his terms, not ours. And what are his terms? Because God is holy and he is serious about holiness, and because we are not holy, then we must approach him by the way of sacrifice. That prescribed sacrifice is the death of Christ. His sacrifice, his death on the cross, makes us holy when we receive it by faith. Those are God’s terms. There is no other way. That is why the Apostle Peter spelled it out so clearly in Acts 4:12: Picking up from verse 10: *It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth...Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.* (NIV)

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Numbers 10-12

In 1958, my family arrived in New York from Africa for a year of home assignment. At the time, our family consisted of my mother and father and four of us boys ranging in age from 3 to 13. The first thing my father did when we arrived was to buy a car. It was a 1957 Plymouth sedan. We fit all our luggage and our family of six into that car and proceeded to drive right across the United States from New York to Washington State.

That was a very long trip! My youngest brother sat in the front with my mom and dad, which left the other three of us sharing the back seat. Because I was the youngest of the three, I was normally stuck in the middle. You can imagine the scene: “Are we there yet? When are we going to stop? I’m thirsty! I’m hungry! I have to go to the bathroom! Mom, Jonny pinched me! It’s my turn to sit by the window! Lanny is on my side of the line! Make him share his comic book! Are we there yet? Jonny pinched me again!” Everyone’s nerves were frayed before we reached our destination.

Traveling together is stressful. It is hard work. It rarely brings out the best in us. If traveling as a family by automobile is difficult, I think we can only guess at how difficult it must have been for the Israelites to travel as an entire nation across the desert. As we pick up the story of the Israelites in the Book of Numbers, they are on the road again. After spending approximately a year camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai, the day finally came when the cloud of God’s presence over the tabernacle lifted, the trumpets sounded, and the people began to march again toward the Promised Land.

We are leapfrogging in earnest through the text now. We spent just one chapter in the Book of Leviticus, concentrating on Leviticus 10. For the next few chapters, we will be in the Book of Numbers. Numbers is called that for the simple reason that it is full of numbers.

It includes the record of two separate censuses. The first is a census taken before the people left Sinai. The second, toward the end of the book, is a census taken just before they entered the Promised Land almost 40 years later. Between these two censuses, though, there is a section of historical narrative in the middle of the book. That is where we will be focusing our attention.

In this chapter we are looking at Numbers 10 to 12. If you haven't already done so, you may want to take the time to read the entire section in your Bible. In this text the Israelites, at God's instructions, have resumed their journey. It is not a happy section of Scripture. In fact, in these chapters we are told four times that "the anger of Yahweh was kindled."

If you were to make a list of things that make God angry, what kinds of things would you write down? Don't take the easy way out and just say, "Sin!" I mean, what kinds of specific behavior would you put in your list of things that make God angry? I suspect if most of us were asked that question, we would probably list things like murder and other kinds of violence, various kinds of sexual immorality, or possibly sins of oppression against the helpless and vulnerable. And our lists would certainly be true. These kinds of things do make God angry. What is rather surprising about this section of Scripture is that the people did not engage in any of these kinds of sins. And yet four times we are told that God's anger burned against them. What kinds of things did they do to make God angry? All the sins mentioned in these chapters are sins of the heart and mind and of the tongue. They are sins of attitude and word, not overt action. Yet these attitudes and words made God angry!

There are three different incidents recorded in these chapters. The first one is rather short and condensed, without a lot of detail. It is found in Numbers 11:1-3.

And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire died down. So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the LORD burned among them.

The sin is clearly identified. The people "complained about their misfortunes." Their "hardships." There isn't much detail. What were

the hardships? What did they say? It is useless to speculate. All we know is that it made God angry, and fire came out from the presence of Yahweh and burned among them, especially among the outskirts of the camp. It may be because that was where the complainers and malingerers gathered.

Do you think of complaining as sin? Is it something you would have put on a list of things that make God angry? It is something to think about. Maybe that's why we are not given more detail. We might be inclined to look at what the Israelites did and say, "Well, I haven't complained like that!" and let ourselves off the hook. But with an open-ended, rather cryptic story like this, we are forced to look at our attitudes and take them to the Lord and ask him to weigh them. Is this complaining? Is this the kind of complaining that makes you angry? The people complained about their hardships and God became angry.

The second incident takes up the rest of Numbers 11. There is more detail to get our teeth into. First, we are told in verse 4 that this complaining started with "the rabble." Who were the rabble? The KJV translates it "mixed multitude." We are told that when the Israelites left Egypt, there was a mixed multitude that came along with them. They may have been individuals who had intermarried with the Israelites, or they were the offspring of mixed marriages, or possibly they were just people who were curious or attracted to what God was doing among the Israelites. While there were, no doubt, some true seekers and believers among them, it is clear that others had come along for their own reasons. In any case, it was among this group that a strong spirit of discontent arose. Their complaining particularly focused on their diet. We are told that they began to crave the foods of Egypt. And it didn't take long for this craving to spread.

Group dynamics and mob psychology are both fascinating areas of study. What is most dramatic is how much more quickly a negative attitude will spread than a positive one. Within a very short period, the Israelites themselves started wailing: *And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."*

I must admit that for many years when I read that description of

the foods of Egypt, my instinctive reaction was, “Yuck! Who would miss foods like cucumbers and leeks, onions and garlic?” But after living in the Middle East for over 25 years, I have a much greater sympathy for their cravings! But I digress.

This complaining spread like wildfire throughout the camp. Verse 10 describes it this way: *Moses heard the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent. And the anger of the LORD blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased.* It was everywhere, and it made God angry! The NIV translates that he was *exceedingly angry!*

What exactly was their sin this time? Once again it was complaining, but this time we can focus a little more specifically. The heart of their sin this time was the sin of ingratitude. They went beyond simply craving their favorite foods to disparaging the food which God had provided for them so faithfully. In fact, the text pauses and spends a whole paragraph (verses 7-9) describing the manna with which God fed the people every day. This was God’s provision for their need. It could be prepared in a variety of ways. It was the bread that God sent down from heaven for them. But the people became so preoccupied with their craving that they despised God’s provision. They longed to return to Egypt. Look at the end of verse 20: *...you have rejected the LORD who is among you and have wept before him, saying, “Why did we come out of Egypt?”* Ingratitude is a sin that makes God angry. They were ready to turn their backs on all that God had done for them and go back to Egypt, (back to slavery!) just for a change in diet! How quickly sin spreads and makes fools of us!

God’s response to this sin was once again to discipline them sharply. He did so with a form of poetic justice. He caused a second migration of quails to fall on the camp. This is the second time God used quails. The first time was in the book of Exodus, shortly after the Israelites left Egypt. Now he did so again, but the results are not to the people’s liking. The quails were blown over the camp, and they were so numerous that the people gathered huge quantities and spread them out to dry and preserve them. But while they were still eating, the text says that God struck them with a plague. Whether this was a naturally occurring case of widespread food poisoning, or a divine act of God, in either case it was clearly God’s hand of judgment against them. Many of the Israelites died.

Are you ever guilty of the sin of ingratitude? Have you ever wanted something you didn't have and want it so badly that you were guilty of ignoring or, even worse, despising the gifts and provision that God has given you? It is truly dangerous ground to stand on. God may give you what you ask for. You may get what you want. But if you ask in the wrong way or with the wrong attitude, even if you get what you want, you won't want what you get! In reflecting on this incident, the psalmist writes in Psalm 106:14-15: *But they had a wanton craving in the wilderness, and put God to the test in the desert; he gave them what they asked, but sent a wasting disease among them.* That is an accurate translation of the intent of the Hebrew text, but I must confess to a preference for the more literal rendering of the King James Version: "He gave them their request but sent leanness into their soul." Beware the cravings of the soul which lead to the sin of ingratitude.

The third incident in the text is the story found in Numbers 12. It is the story of Miriam and Aaron and their challenge to Moses' leadership. The story starts a little strangely in Numbers 12:1: *Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman.* That raises some questions. Is this referring to Zipporah, the wife that Moses had taken when he first came to Midian from Egypt? If so, why is she referred to as a Cushite, an area usually identified with the upper (southern) stretches of the Nile, probably in what is now the Nubian area of Sudan? And why bring this up now when Moses has been married to her for almost 40 years? It is possible that she had only recently joined the camp. But it is more likely that Moses had taken a new wife, possibly following the death of Zipporah. Was this a case of racial discrimination? Or was it simply the jealousy that sometimes occurs in the blending of families?

All such speculation must remain just that. But in fact, Moses' wife is just the lightning rod for what is the key issue. The root sin is one of jealousy and envy. This is made clear in verse 2: *And they said, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it.* What brought this to the surface after all this time? We may never know. But this was the real core issue. Miriam and Aaron felt they were getting short-changed of their share of the spotlight and public adulation. They were envious

of Moses and his position as leader. They wanted more credit, more attention, more opportunity to shine.

This brings us to a rather puzzling verse, verse 3: *Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.* The NIV translates the word, “humble.” What makes this verse puzzling is that Moses is credited with being the author of all 5 books of the Pentateuch, and therefore of this verse. It seems a very strange verse for a truly humble man to write concerning himself. It is like the mythical man who wrote a book and titled it: Humility and How I Achieved It.

There are several possible ways to resolve this difficulty. One possibility is that this parenthesis was added by an editor or the person who assembled the books of Moses in their final form. This is not difficult to accept in view of the fact that the final chapter of Deuteronomy describes Moses’ death, and therefore it is obvious that Moses himself did not write that chapter. So, the same writer, (many suggest Joshua), might have also penned and inserted this testimonial to his leader and mentor. Another possibility is that Moses did write it, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and that the Spirit’s clear prompting overrode his own natural reluctance to write such a statement. A third rather intriguing interpretation gives a different cast or flavor to the word. It goes back to some of the connotations of the root word such as “depressed” or “downcast.” Thus, the verse is not describing Moses’ humility but rather his distress and depression at being criticized by his own brother and sister. Truly there are few things so painful to a leader as being challenged or criticized by those close to him.

Whatever our interpretation of this verse, what is truly remarkable is how quickly and vigorously God himself comes to Moses’ defense. He immediately summoned all three of them to the Tabernacle. He then came down in the cloud to the entrance of the Tabernacle and specifically spoke to just Aaron and Miriam. He paid highest tribute to Moses and his relationship with Moses. “All other prophets I speak to in visions and dreams and through riddles and metaphors. But with Moses I speak plainly, face to face. He is my faithful servant. How dare you speak against him?” And for the fourth time in these chapters, we read the words, *the anger of the LORD was kindled.*

When God withdrew his presence, Miriam was revealed before

the Israelites with her skin white and disfigured with advanced leprosy! When Aaron saw this, he pleaded with Moses for mercy. Moses in turn prayed to God. God relented and healed her but stipulated that she must remain outside the camp for the normal period of cleansing before she can rejoin the camp. We might wonder why only Miriam was struck with leprosy. The simplest answer is that she was the driving force and leader behind this criticism of Moses, as indicated by the fact that her name comes first in verse 1. In any case, God did heal and restore her, but only after having the whole camp of Israel remain in place for a week to ponder the lessons of what they had seen.

As we join them in pondering the lessons of these chapters, what do we learn? Why were these events recorded in Scripture? We are not left to our own speculations on this subject as the New Testament answers the question clearly in 1 Corinthians 10. In recounting some of the events of Israel's history, Paul writes in verse 6: *Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.* And then in verse 11: *Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.*

The Christian life is often compared to a race. We are called upon to run the race that is put before us and to finish our course. The Christian life is also frequently described as a walk. And there is nothing in the Bible that should cause us to conclude that it is an easy journey or a simple race. We are told that we will need endurance, and that we will experience hardship, and that we will need patience and to make sacrifices to finish the race.

As we run our race, it is helpful for us to have these accounts written down as warnings for us, so that we will know what to avoid on the journey and what it is that displeases God. As Christians, we are quick to condemn the "sins of the flesh," as well we should. But we are too quick to excuse or overlook the sins of attitude, of wrong thoughts and hurtful words which can so quickly mar our testimony and our fellowship in the Body of Christ.

Paul puts these matters into a New Testament context in Philippians 2:14-16: *Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as*

lights in the world. Does that passage bring the story in Numbers to mind?

When our two boys were growing up, we sometimes reprimanded them for having a DRA. It was an acronym for a Dirty Rotten Attitude. Unfortunately, all of us as Christians are still susceptible to the sins that make up a DRA. So let us be warned and let us examine ourselves. Do we have a DRA? Are we complainers, constantly whining at every hardship along the way? Are we guilty of the sin of ingratitude, so filled with cravings for what we do not have that we despise the many blessings that God has poured out upon us? Are we consumed with envy, jealous of the compliments others receive and the applause that is showered on them? All of these are sins of the heart or the mind or the tongue. Because of that they may seem less harmful than other sins. But don't be fooled. They will break our fellowship with other believers more quickly than many other kinds of sin. They will destroy our fellowship with God as well. Because make no mistake about it. These sins still make God angry.

COMEDY OR TRAGEDY?

Numbers 13-14

In the world of classic Greek literature and drama, all plays fell into one of two broad categories. They were either comedies or tragedies. The meaning of the word comedy has changed significantly in modern usage. Today, we use it to refer to something that makes us laugh (or is supposed to make us laugh). This was not the case in the classic use of the term. A comedy simply referred to a play or a story that had a happy ending. This was in contrast to a tragedy which was a play or a story that had a sad ending, usually concluding with the death of the main character or hero.

We might chart the progress of a comedy by comparing it to a letter U. The story introduces the characters and then quickly descends into problems, crises and chaos. But as the character journeys through these difficulties, he ultimately overcomes them and rises to a happy or victorious conclusion. If we were to chart the progress of tragedy, however, we would use an inverted “U”. The story begins with the hero facing challenges and often opportunities for triumph and glory. We may even accompany him as he ascends to great achievements. But at some point in the story a decision is made, or a course of action chosen which leads eventually to disaster and often death.

According to these classic categories of literature, if we were to write a play based on the story in Numbers 13-14 it would clearly belong to the category of tragedy. The story opens with the nation of Israel camped on the very borders of the Promised Land. All the promises of God to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob lie within their grasp. All the opportunities for a land of their own lie just beyond the next range of hills. The 400 years of slavery in Egypt are now a fading memory. The hardships of over a year of desert living and travel are now behind them. It was time to enter the Promised Land!

From their vantage point on the edge of the land, twelve men were sent to scout the land. The scouts were chosen, one from each tribe from among the leaders of the people. They completed a wide sweep of the land, taking 40 days in doing so. They returned to the Israelite camp, bearing some of the produce of the land including a single cluster of grapes so large they had to carry it suspended on a staff between two men. In the opening words of their report, we come to the high point of the story.

And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh. They brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. And they told him, "We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit."

It is all there, just within their grasp, and it is theirs by the promise of God himself. But it is right at that point that the crisis emerges. Remember, a crisis is the moment of decision, the fulcrum moment in a story, when all can swing one way or another. And as the crisis comes into focus, we find that at the heart of it all is the battle between faith and fear. After describing the abundance of the land, the scouts continued with their report in verse 28: *However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large.*

They introduced the element of fear. "Yes, it is a good land, an abundant land. But it is a land full of people; fearsome people, big people, powerful people, giant people...and big, fortified cities."

Faith or fear? The contrast is laid down very clearly in the text, because two of the scouts speak up to give their opinion. The spokesman for the two is Caleb from the tribe of Judah. Look at his words in verse 30: *Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.* At this point, we need to understand that Caleb has God on his side. God had already clearly said, "I am giving you the land. I will drive out the inhabitants before you." Caleb's response was one of faith, based on the clear promises of God.

The other ten scouts, however, have a take on the situation that is dramatically different from Caleb's. It is given in verse 31: *We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.* They continue in verse 33: *...we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.*

Caleb's report was based on faith. Their report was based on fear. "We are like grasshoppers compared to them!"

Caleb said, "We can..."

The other scouts said, "We can't..."

It is a classic spiritual battle between faith and fear. The future of the nation hangs in the balance. What will the people choose? It is exactly at this point that the tragedy begins to unfold. The next four verses must surely be among the saddest verses in Scripture.

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt." (Numbers 14:1-4)

Instead of pressing on into the promises of God, they wanted to turn back out of fear. The moment of crisis is drawn out, and the sense of drama is heightened in the story as the people are given an opportunity to change their minds. Another model, another choice is laid out passionately before them in the words of Joshua and Caleb in verses 7-9.

And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, "The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them."

Joshua and Caleb stake out the high ground of faith. "If Yahweh is pleased with us, he will bring us into that land...Do not be afraid...Yahweh is with us."

This is the climax of the story. One final opportunity is given to make a different choice, a right choice. Godly leaders stand before them and plead with them to choose the path of faith. The history of a generation is at stake, all condensed into this one climactic moment. It is with a sense of doom and deep tragedy that we read the

next verse: *But the whole assembly talked about stoning them.* (verse 10, NIV) They not only reject Yahweh's rule over them. They are ready to stone the human leaders he has placed in front of them!

It is a turning point, an irrevocable moment, an opportunity forever lost. The consequences of their choice became instantly apparent. In the same verse we read, *then the glory of Yahweh appeared at the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites.* And the tragedy unfolds from there. A now familiar scenario is played out in front of us as God threatens to destroy the nation instantly and begin again by making a great nation out of Moses and his descendants.

In God's response, we capture some sense of how God views fear and a lack of faith. In verse 11: *How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?* I think sometimes we tend to view our failures of faith as excusable timidity, something we have no control over. "I was afraid," we say, as though we think that will cover a multitude of sins. But God saw it as an act of contempt for his truthfulness or his power. He had promised to give them the land. When they turned back, they were either calling him a liar, or calling into question his ability to do what he said he would do. This contempt was even more stunning in view of the many acts of divine power the people had already witnessed. When we respond out of fear rather than out of faith, we treat God with contempt. Joshua and Caleb used another word for it in verse 9. "*Only do not rebel against Yahweh.*" Their act, even though prompted by fear, constituted an act of rebellion and of revolt against God.

As the story continues, we see Moses once again in his now familiar role of intercessor. It is interesting to note the line of reasoning he uses to persuade God to turn from his judgment. He argues on the basis of God's own reputation. "If you destroy this nation here, word will get back to Egypt. They will conclude that you destroyed the nation here because you lacked the power to take them into the land you promised them."

He then pleads based on God's own character in verses 17-19:

But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared, "The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third

and the fourth generations.” Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.

Did you recognize the words and attributes? They are the ones by which God had revealed himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Let us take the time to read God’s response.

Then the LORD said, I have pardoned, according to your word. But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD, none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it. (verses 20-23)

...your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and of all your number, listed in the census from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against me... (verse 29)

According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, a year for each day, you shall bear your iniquity forty years, and you shall know my displeasure. I, the LORD, have spoken. Surely this will I do to all this wicked congregation who are gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die. (verses 34-35)

It was a sobering moment. It was a moment of tragedy. There is an ironic twist at the very end of the chapter. After the people heard God’s judgment pronounced, they had a change of heart. They say, “Oops! We got that wrong! We don’t want to spend 40 years in the desert. We’ve changed our mind. Let’s go into the land now, just like God said.”

But the opportune moment had passed. The judicial sentence had already been recorded. Moses pleaded with them not to go, because God would no longer go with them. But once again they ignored his words. They went up in their own strength, and they were utterly routed by the enemy.

And so, this chapter of the story ends. What could have been a glorious, classic “comedy,” ending in joy and in triumph, became a dark tragedy, resulting in forty years of fruitless and unnecessary desert wandering until an entire generation of Israelites had died in the desert. Why? Because of the choice they made between fear

and faith. Their fear led to rebellion rather than obedience. And their rebellion resulted in defeat and tragedy rather than victory and triumph.

Once they made that choice of fear over faith, the chain of events was inevitable. But it doesn't have to be that way for us. There is another choice available to us, just as there was another choice available to the Israelites. We know that, because running through the text is another story. It is the story of a man who made that different choice. It is the story of Caleb. In the language of literary analysis, he plays the role of a "foil," a character who provides a contrast to the main character of the story. In this case the main character is the nation. Look at the choice Caleb made in Numbers 14:24: *But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it.*

Caleb had a "different spirit." He followed the Lord wholeheartedly. What does that mean? In contrast to the Israelites in the story, he chose faith over fear. "With God's help we can conquer the land," he said confidently. Because he chose faith over fear, his faith led to obedience, and ultimately produced a very different result. To read the "rest of the story" we need to look at Joshua 14:10-14. The story starts with Caleb speaking:

"And now, behold, the LORD has kept me alive, just as he said, these forty-five years since the time that the LORD spoke this word to Moses, while Israel walked in the wilderness. And now, behold, I am this day eighty-five years old. I am still as strong today as I was in the day that Moses sent me; my strength now is as my strength was then, for war and for going and coming. So now give me this hill country of which the LORD spoke on that day, for you heard on that day how the Anakim were there, with great fortified cities. It may be that the LORD will be with me, and I shall drive them out just as the LORD said." Then Joshua blessed him, and he gave Hebron to Caleb the son of Jephunneh for an inheritance. Therefore, Hebron became the inheritance of Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite to this day, because he wholly followed the LORD, the God of Israel.

Caleb's life reads like a "comedy." His story ended in victory and triumph and celebration, rather than death and defeat, and at 85 years of age he led the troops against the inhabitants of one of the

biggest and strongest cities and overcame them and inherited the land according to God's promise.

We all face the same basic choice as the Israelites did on the borders of the Promised Land. We face the choice sometimes in large, life-altering decisions that determine the whole direction of our lives. We face the choice frequently in the smaller, daily decisions we confront week after week. And often the multitudes of smaller, daily decisions we make add up to determine the ultimate direction of our lives. Again and again, whether in large decisions or small ones, life confronts us with a very basic question: Can God be trusted? When we are faced with that question, we have a choice to make. Will we choose fear or faith? Fear leads to rebellion and ultimately to tragedy and defeat. Faith leads to obedience and ultimately to triumph.

The choices we make will determine, when all is said and done, whether our lives are recorded in eternity's records as a tragedy or a triumph.

DANGER...STAND BACK!

Numbers 16-17

Numbers 16 and 17 contain one of the most horrifying stories in the Old Testament. Like the story of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10, it is a story that doesn't make it into many children's Bible story books. The story is stark and possibly even more dramatic because of the sparseness of descriptive detail. What occurs is, in effect, an organized rebellion against Moses and Aaron and their leadership led by three men: A Levite named Korah and two men from the tribe of Reuben named Dathan and Abiram. They are joined in their rebellion by 250 well-known community leaders.

The opening of the crisis is described in Numbers 16: 3: *They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?"*

Jealousy over leadership roles and recognition is not a new thing, is it? Here it is in plain view. It is one of the most common sources of conflict today, whether on a national stage, or in churches or even in homes.

In response, Moses proposed a test to let Yahweh himself judge the matter. All the leaders of the conspiracy were invited to meet at the tabernacle, each carrying a priest's censer for offering incense. "We will see who Yahweh accepts and who he doesn't," Moses stated.

A striking exchange of speeches is then recorded that reveals the depths of the scorn and anger these leaders are carrying against Moses. Some even refused to come to the assembly that Moses sought to convene. This had been brewing for a while!

And Moses said to Korah, "Hear now, you sons of Levi: is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself, to do service in the

tabernacle of the LORD and to stand before the congregation to minister to them, and that he has brought you near him, and all your brothers the sons of Levi with you? And would you seek the priesthood also? Therefore it is against the LORD that you and all your company have gathered together. What is Aaron that you grumble against him?" And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and they said, "We will not come up. Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also make yourself a prince over us? Moreover, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up." (Numbers 16:8-14)

On the next day, with the men assembled, the glory of Yahweh appeared. Yahweh ordered Moses and Aaron to separate themselves from the assembly so that he can destroy the entire congregation. Moses and Aaron pleaded with God to spare the nation and to limit his judgment to the rebel leaders. Yahweh agreed and then ordered the people to stand back from the tents of the men involved. The assembly even went purposefully to the tents of the men who refused to come. As the people pulled back in fear, in a scene straight out of a science fiction horror movie, the ground itself opened and swallowed the men with their tents and households. Then the earth closed over them, and they were gone, leaving the people around fleeing in all directions in panic. At the same time, the fire of the Lord shot out from the tabernacle and struck down the 250 men who stood preparing to offer their censers of incense. It was a moment of instantaneous and awful judgment.

It would seem, at that point, that the story cannot get any worse. Surely by now the people must have learned their lesson! But no! The very next day, the congregation gathered against Moses and accused him of killing God's people! Once more, the cloud of God's presence appeared over the tabernacle. In judgment, God struck the people with a plague which began to move rapidly through the camp, killing people on the spot. Quickly, Moses instructed Aaron to take his censer with the holy incense and hurry out among the people. Aaron did so and stood with his censer between the living and the dead until the plague died out. The plague stopped, but not before over 14,000 people lay dead.

In chapter 17, the intensity of the narrative calms considerably. To put an end to the bickering over leadership and priestly selection, Yahweh instructed the head of each tribe to bring a staff to the tabernacle. The name of the staff's owner was written on the staff. For the tribe of Levi, Aaron's staff was chosen, and his name was written on it. These twelve staffs were then placed before Yahweh in the tabernacle. "I will cause the staff of the man I have chosen as my priest to sprout," Yahweh said. The next morning Moses entered the tabernacle. Eleven staffs lay before the Lord as barren and lifeless as they were when Moses placed them there. But the staff that bore Aaron's name had not only sprouted. The sprouts had blossomed and even born almonds overnight! By this clear miracle God confirmed his choice of Aaron and his descendants to be his priests.

It is a story full of drama. And the "what" of the story is very clear and straightforward. If anything, it is too clear. Men question God and his appointed leaders, and God destroys them on the spot. But if the "what" of the story is clear, the "why" of the story may leave us puzzled and troubled. Why did it happen? Why did God respond so fiercely? What was the sin of Korah and his followers? And how should we apply this to our lives today? I know some pastors use this story to warn their congregations against questioning or criticizing them! Some days, I must confess that was tempting! But that is not the real lesson of this text.

So, what do we make of this passage and its place in Scripture? I struggled a long time with this question. I came close to giving up several times and just declaring defeat and moving on to the next events in Israel's history. But I finally found a clue, and with that clue, the light began to dawn. The clue is tucked away in the New Testament. It is found in the second to last book of the Bible in the little epistle of Jude. It is the only reference to Korah in the whole New Testament.

In Jude 11 we read: *Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error and perished in Korah's rebellion.*

Here is the clue. What do the way of Cain, Balaam's error, and Korah's rebellion have in common? If we can answer that question, I think we will understand what Korah's sin was, and why God judged

it so harshly. As I puzzled over it, the truth finally hit me. They were all guilty of “do-it-yourself” religion.

Do you remember the story of Cain? We all immediately remember him as the first murderer. But that is not what this is talking about. Before he committed murder, Cain and Abel both brought sacrifices to God. Cain brought his sacrifice from the fruit of the ground while Abel brought a sacrifice from his flock. We are told that Yahweh accepted Abel’s sacrifice, but he was not pleased with Cain’s sacrifice. To make sense of what happened, we must conclude that God had told the two brothers what sacrifice to bring. Abel obeyed, but Cain ignored God. He had a better plan. As a tiller of the soil, he decided to offer God his own “do-it-yourself” sacrifice. God was not pleased.

What about Balaam? We haven’t come to his story yet. It comes up later in the book of Numbers. But as a preview, when you think about Balaam, think of him as having a sign outside his door which read: “Prophet for Hire.” Or if you will permit a little play on words, Balaam was a “prophet for profit.” He was a “do-it-yourself” religionist, renting out his services and prophetic powers to the highest bidder.

And that brings us to Korah. At first glance we tend to think of Korah’s rebellion as being against Moses. It was to a degree. But it wasn’t Moses’ role he wanted. It was Aaron’s. This is clear in Numbers 16:8-11. Let’s look at it again: *And Moses said to Korah, “Hear now, you sons of Levi: Is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself, to do service in the tabernacle of the LORD and to stand before the congregation to minister to them, and that he has brought you near him, and all your brothers the sons of Levi with you? And would you seek the priesthood also? Therefore it is against the LORD that you and all your company have gathered together. What is Aaron that you grumble against him?”*

We don’t know if Korah was driven by a profit motive or a pride motive. But he clearly thought he could appoint himself as God’s priest and take this role upon himself by his own self-anointing. He wanted to be priest, and he found 250 others to join him in this desire. This is clear in the symbolism of the divine test that God proposed. All 250 of them brought censers. Only priests were

permitted to use censers to offer sacred incense before the Lord. By taking censers, they clearly thought themselves qualified to serve as priests before God. The Levites did have special privileges in the tabernacle services. But only Aaron and his sons were to serve as priests. That was the crux of the test in verse 5. *In the morning the LORD will show who is his, and who is holy, and will bring him near to him. The one whom he chooses he will bring near to him.* When the earth opened to swallow Korah and Dathan and Abiram, and when the fire of God's wrath flashed out from the tabernacle and consumed those 250 men, God was pronouncing his judgment on "do-it-yourself" religion and self-appointed prophets and priests.

God wanted to be sure that his people never forgot this lesson. There is a part of the story I didn't narrate earlier. After the 250 would-be priests lay smoldering before the tabernacle, God told Moses to send Eleazar, Aaron's son, to gather up all 250 censers. He was then told to hammer these censers into flat metal sheets and use these sheets to overlay the altar. The reason for this was clearly stated in Numbers 16:40: *...to be a reminder to the people of Israel, so that no outsider, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, should draw near to burn incense before the LORD, lest he become like Korah and his company—as the LORD said to him through Moses.* God had appointed his priests, and they, and only they, were permitted to approach him to offer sacrifices and to burn incense. No one else would be accepted. They would die! Once again, God was demonstrating that he is serious about holiness. We learned this lesson in an earlier chapter when God's fire consumed Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, for offering "strange fire" before the altar. "I will be treated as holy!" God said at that time.

The issue of God's divine appointment for the priests is hammered home in Numbers 17 with the miraculous budding of Aaron's rod. God is making something absolutely clear in these chapters. There are prescribed sacrifices, and only a priest appointed and anointed by God can offer those sacrifices. Any other "do-it-yourself" approach to his presence will be rejected.

Here is the bottom line of Korah's "do-it-yourself" approach. In rejecting God's divinely appointed priest, he was rejecting God himself and God's appointed means of atonement for sin. That is what Moses says in Numbers 16:11: *It is against Yahweh that you and*

all your followers have banded together. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him? (NIV) And he adds to that in Numbers 16:30: *Then you will know that these men have treated Yahweh with contempt.* When Korah and his followers turned from the divinely prescribed sacrifices and the divinely appointed priest to do their own thing, they were turning away from God's merciful offer of a remedy for their sin. And they were arrogantly offering their efforts and man-made system instead.

Korah's mind set and philosophy have been with us, as we have seen, from the time of Cain. It will be with us until the end of human history. If we were to go back and read the rest of the epistle of Jude, we would find that it is essentially a treatise and a polemic against false teachers: Do it yourself religionists, self appointed prophets and priests, speaking the word of God. Only God has not sent them! In fact, they take their sin a step further. In wanting to be priests, Korah and his followers were denying the unique role of Aaron as God's priest. But in Jude 4 we are told that these false teachers, "deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord."

You see, under the Old Covenant, Aaron and his sons were the only ones designated as priests. Only Aaron's descendants were qualified to offer the prescribed sacrifices in the temple. And only the high priest was permitted to enter the Holiest Place to offer the sacrifice for sin on the Day of Atonement. This was God's provision, his only provision, for atonement and forgiveness. As we turn to the New Covenant, especially to the Book of Hebrews, we are told that a new Priest has been appointed. He is greater than Moses. He is greater than Aaron. His name is Jesus. He did not appoint himself. In fact, Hebrews 5:4-6 says: *And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also, Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."*

This divinely appointed Priest offered the divinely ordained sacrifice of his own body for the sins of the world. That sacrifice was accepted by God as the sufficient sacrifice, once for all. Any "do-it-yourself" religion or religious teacher that offers a way to God apart from the priestly ministry of Jesus is committing the sin of Korah. The only difference between the judgment these false teachers and

their followers will experience and the judgment which fell on Korah and his followers in that awful moment in the wilderness, is the length of the fuse.

Why is this passage and this teaching important to us today? The New Testament, especially the books of 2 Peter and Jude, make it clear that rather than going away, false teachers will actually multiply and become more numerous as the end of this age of grace draws near. Jude 17-19: *But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions." It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.*

Considering this fact, how should we respond? How do we protect ourselves against this spreading danger? We cannot put it any more clearly than Jude does himself in Jude 20-21: *But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.*

This is what we must do for ourselves. And what must we do for those around us? Look at the words of Jude 22-23 and see how the imagery in these verses recalls the story of Korah. *And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.*

Beware the sin of Korah! Reach out in mercy to those at risk of falling under the same judgment! In the last days, the danger to Christ's followers will become increasingly great, and the task of rescue entrusted to us will become increasingly urgent. I believe that is the lesson we should take from the story of Korah's rebellion.

I would like to share a grace note to end what has been a rather dark chapter. From the account in Numbers 16, we might naturally conclude that this was the end of Korah's family and descendants. But we would be wrong. Look at Numbers 26:10-11: *The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them along with Korah, whose followers died when the fire devoured the 250 men. And they served as a warning sign. The line of Korah, however, did not die out.* (NIV)

We are not sure how they escaped. Maybe some of Korah's family refused to endorse his defiant stand and fled away from his tent before the divine wrath fell. We only know that all his descendants did not die in the judgment. Do you know something else? If you look in

your Bible at Psalm 42 you will find this inscription. (*To the Choir Master. A maskil of the Sons of Korah.*) In all, 11 psalms are ascribed to the descendants of Korah! Our God is a God of grace as well as of judgment. But his grace is available only to those who will come by the prescribed sacrifice, offered by the divinely appointed High Priest. His name is Jesus.

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THAT'S NOT FAIR!

Numbers 20

Funerals punctuate our lives. The deaths of significant people become milestone markers in families, communities and nations. Numbers 20 opens by telling us about the death of Miriam, Moses' sister. It concludes by narrating the death of Aaron, Moses' brother and the high priest of Israel. From parallel passages in Deuteronomy, we know that we are now in the 40th year of wilderness wandering. The funerals are accumulating. The members of the older generation who left Egypt have now almost all passed from the scene.

In between these two death announcements however, the chapter records a significant story. The account starts with an all too familiar scene: the people were gathered to complain to Moses and Aaron because they had no water. As they had done so many times before, the two leaders went face down in petition before Yahweh and his tabernacle. As they did so, the glory of Yahweh appeared to them. God's instructions were very clear.

Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink. (Numbers 20:8, NIV)

So, Moses and Aaron took the staff, and they gathered the people together in front of the rock. But something happened inside of Moses. Something snapped. All the years of complaining and arguing and questioning by the people – it was just too much. Moses opened his mouth and out rushed the angry, proud words. He would show them just how angry he was, even while he provided them with the water they were begging for. *"Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?"* Then he lifted the staff in his hand and struck the rock hard. He struck it not just once but twice! And in

another divine miracle of God, the water gushed forth to quench the thirst of the people and their flocks.

It sounds like another wonderful miracle of God's provision; another triumph to add to the resume of Moses and Aaron, these remarkable leaders. But the story doesn't end there. God said, "Speak to the rock." Instead, Moses struck the rock. Big deal? It was to God. Look at his response in verse 12: *And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them."*

Are you like me? When you read that story, are you tempted to cry out, "God, that's not fair!"? After all that Moses has put up with; after all the trials and then the triumphs of Egypt; after the glorious days on the mountain top with God; after 40 years leading and putting up with the people in the desert; after bearing the burden of these stubborn people for all those long years. Now, for one momentary failure, it is all taken away from him? For what? For failing to follow some rather obscure instructions? Just for striking the rock instead of speaking to it? God that is not fair! There must be more going on in this story than first meets the eye.

Yes, there is more going on in this passage than may be apparent at a first reading. To capture that significance, we need to look at a New Testament passage. In Luke 24:25-27, Jesus is speaking to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: *And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*

A little later in that chapter, Jesus appears to all the disciples in the upper room. In verse 44, *Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."*

When we read these verses, it is fair to ask, "Where are the references to the Messiah and his sufferings to be found in the writings of Moses?" The prophets and the psalms I can grasp, with passages like Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22. But in Moses and the Law?

To understand what Scriptures Jesus might have turned to,

we need to explore the use of types and typology in the Old Testament. Remember, a type is an event or object or person in the Old Testament that is divinely intended as a symbol or picture to foreshadow or foretell some New Testament event or person or reality. The study of types is a fairly specialized one, and an area of Biblical interpretation that is sometimes controversial. As we have worked our way through the story of Moses and Exodus, I have tried to point to some of the clearer, more obvious types of Christ in the text. The Passover Lamb, Moses in his role as intercessor, the functions of Aaron as the high priest are all examples of types we have mentioned. There is a rich supply of types in the Tabernacle and the whole sacrificial system of Israel as well that we have not explored in this study.

We have witnessed something else as well and that is God's swift and harsh judgment against those whose actions have threatened to mar or distort the types or pictures that God was so carefully laying down. For example, recall the sudden flaring of divine fire when Nadab and Abihu offered "strange fire" before the Lord. Or consider the fierce judgment of God against Korah and his fellow rebels when they dared to appoint themselves as "priests" before God and challenge the divinely appointed priesthood.

So, what is at stake in this passage? Is there a picture or type of Christ that is being laid out before us? Is that why God responds so strictly and firmly? I believe there are not just one but two pictures or foreshadowings of Christ that are threatened by Moses' disobedience.

The first is the rock itself. This type is not as clear as some of the others in the Old Testament. In fact, we would probably not pick it up as a type at all if it were not for a New Testament reference. In 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 we read: *For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.*

There it is in verse 4. *The Rock was Christ!* The image of spiritual drink and "drinking from a rock" can only refer to these two stories from Exodus and Numbers in which water gushed forth from the

rock. Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, identifies the rock as a type or foreshadowing of Christ.

Pay close attention now. There are two different stories of water coming from the rock. In the first story, God specifically told Moses to “strike the rock.” I believe this is a picture of Christ’s first coming, and a foreshadowing of his death. He was “stricken, smitten by God and afflicted” according to Isaiah 53:4. Now turn over to Hebrews 9:28; *So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.* Two comings or “appearings” of Christ are described. The first time he came to be sacrificed and to bear our sin. The second time he will come to “bring salvation” to those who are waiting. These two comings were to be foreshadowed by the two appearances of the “rock” in the Old Testament record. The first time the rock was struck. But the second time, the rock did not require striking. It only required a word, a command. That was the picture that God was constructing of the two comings of Christ. But Moses made a mess of it! In a fit of temper and pride, he disobeyed God and he struck the rock again, just like he had the first time. The divine picture was marred!

What is the second picture of Christ in this passage? I think it is Moses himself. He is the “first Moses.” The Scripture foretells the coming of another prophet “like Moses” who will be the “Messiah” or “anointed One.” In many facets of his life and ministry, Moses foreshadowed the coming Christ. But one particular characteristic stands out. That is in his faithful and implicit obedience to the will of God. This is the point made by the writer of Hebrews in Hebrews 3:1-5.

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God’s house. For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later.

Moses fulfilled a vital role, both in foreshadowing Christ’s character and foretelling, in his words and actions, the life and ministry of Jesus

the Messiah. But that role depended on specific and explicit faithfulness to God's commands. And he was faithful, and he was obedient "in all God's house" and in all the careful details of the tabernacle and the giving of the Law. But on this one occasion he stood before the entire nation of Israel. As the angry words spilled from his lips his hand brought the staff down against the rock in defiance of God's command. The picture of the obedient servant was spoiled.

So, yes, there is more going on in this passage than first meets the eye. There are matters of great impact and eternal consequence being played out, and Moses' failure had consequences far beyond anything he could foresee or imagine. The instructions God gave to Moses on this occasion were anything but an arbitrary detail.

Maybe at this point you are willing to concede some of what I've been saying about the big picture and its significance. But possibly there is still a part of you that is saying, deep down, "But I still think God was unfair to Moses." I confess that I wrestle with those same feelings. So, I tried to analyze them. I found my feelings of unfairness could be articulated and attributed to four lines of thought.

First, Moses was provoked. He did not just blow up one day for no reason. He was provoked, and this incident came on top of over 40 years of similar incidents of complaining and quarreling and arguing. No wonder Moses became angry! Who could blame him?

Second, it was just a small disobedience or deviation from God's instructions. Striking the rock versus speaking to it? It was just a small discrepancy.

Third, Moses has done so much so right for so long, surely, he might be excused this one failure.

Fourth, where is God's grace in this story? After all, he has forgiven the Israelites again and again. Why doesn't he extend the same grace to his faithful servant Moses on this occasion?

As I thought about those four roots to my feelings that God was unfair to Moses, it struck me how commonly I use these four lines of reasoning to attempt to excuse my own failures. Listen to them and see if they are not part of your thought processes as well.

"I was provoked."

"It was just a small disobedience."

"I have been so good for so long, surely I have earned the right to let down my guard for a little while."

“God is a God of grace. Surely he will overlook this.”

Do you ever think that way? I do! And I think that is why God’s response to Moses in this chapter shocks me and makes me uncomfortable. But as I thought through these matters in the light of this chapter and other Scriptures, I came to see that God has a different perspective on these things. He doesn’t see them the same way I do. Let’s take our thoughts and compare them with God’s thoughts.

Objection # 1

Human perspective: He was provoked.

God’s perspective: Being provoked may be a reason for sin. It may even be the cause of our sin. But it is never an excuse for sin. Yes, Moses was angry. We can even empathize with his anger. But the word of God is clear on this subject. Ephesians 4:26 says; *In your anger do not sin.* The Bible teaches us that we are responsible for our reactions. No matter what the provocation may be, we are the ones who choose how we will respond. We are especially prone to sin when we are angry. As the book of Proverb says, “An angry man does foolish things.” But that truth should lead us to being extra vigilant at those times, rather than using our anger as an excuse for our sin.

Objection # 2

Human perspective: It was just a small disobedience.

God’s perspective: To see God’s perspective, let’s refer to Numbers 20:12. *Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.* (NIV)

That puts a different slant on things, doesn’t it? Because obedience is an issue of trust and disobedience is a violation of God’s holiness, there is no such thing as a “small disobedience.” Any act of disobedience is a challenge to God and his wisdom and his character and his holiness. Moses thought he had a better plan, a better way to conduct himself that would produce a better outcome than God’s way. Look at the language God used to describe his actions in Numbers 20:24: *because you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah.* Moses’ “small disobedience” was an act of rebellion.

Objection # 3

Human perspective: Moses did so much right for so long. He should be excused this momentary lapse based on past good behavior. We expect God to operate on some kind of credit system in which our good deeds should somehow offset our failures.

God's perspective: With great faithfulness and obedience comes both greater privilege and greater responsibility. Yes, Moses had been very faithful over a very long period of time. As a result of that great faithfulness, he has enjoyed great privileges. He has talked face to face with God. He has seen the glory of God. He has experienced the power of God flowing through him. These are huge privileges, but with those privileges also comes greater responsibility. If anyone should have known the importance of obedience to God's commands, it should have been Moses. If Moses, the lawgiver, does not obey the commands of God, who will? If God excuses Moses for his disobedience, what is he saying to the rest of the nation about the importance of obedience?

Objection # 4

Human perspective: Where is God's grace in this story? Shouldn't God show his grace to Moses after all that has happened between them?

God's perspective: God's grace is not incompatible with his discipline. There is no shortage of God's grace in this story. After all, the water still gushed forth from the rock to quench the thirst of the people. Moses continued to lead the people and provide them spiritual guidance in their final days in the desert. God continued to honor Moses as his leader and pay tribute to him almost every time his name appears in subsequent Scriptures. Moses was one of two Old Testament saints to appear with Christ on the Mt. of Transfiguration. Moses is in the Lord's presence today and will be for all eternity. Yes, there is grace here aplenty.

But there is also discipline. For his act of disobedience, God took this one privilege away – he never entered the Promised Land. And that hurt! Discipline does hurt. But it is not a denial of God's grace. Rather it is an evidence of God's love. The writer of Hebrews says it clearly in Hebrews 12:5-11.

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Not only did Moses' discipline have the effect of producing righteousness in him. He also used it as an object lesson to teach the Israelites. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses preaches his final messages to the Israelites before they enter the Promised Land, and his constant refrain is, "Obey all God's commands." Guess where he goes for one of his object lessons? That's right! We read it in Deuteronomy 4:21-24.

Furthermore, the LORD was angry with me because of you, and he swore that I should not cross the Jordan, and that I should not enter the good land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance. For I must die in this land; I must not go over the Jordan. But you shall go over and take possession of that good land. Take care, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the LORD your God has forbidden you. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

Moses had an opportunity to stand forth as a type of Christ. For much of his life and ministry he did just that. But on this one occasion he failed. He became, instead, an object lesson for the people of God of the importance of obedience and the price of disobedience.

Let's do a quick wrap up. What's at stake in your life and mine as Christ's followers? We looked at the "big picture" in Moses' life and his calling to be a type of Christ. What is the "big picture" in our lives? In some ways it is not that different, although on a somewhat

smaller scale and a smaller stage. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, we read, *And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

Do you see it? God is creating a picture, an image in your life. An image or likeness of whom? It is the image of Christ. We are called to be a picture of Christ to those around us. That image will be produced in our lives as we respond in obedience to the leading of the Spirit who indwells us. The accuracy of that image will depend on our specific and explicit obedience to the Spirit. That is our calling. And it is no small or insignificant one. Our lives may be the only image of Christ that some people will ever see. Will it be an accurate one? Will we be a picture of Christ to our world, just as Moses was for the Israelites throughout so much of his long and faithful life? Or will we become an object lesson of the cost of disobedience, as Moses did on this one sad occasion?

LOOK AND LIVE!

Numbers 21:4-9

The people of Israel were approaching the end of their forty years of desert wandering. The older generation had almost died out. Once again, the nation was approaching the borders of the Promised Land. The shortest route for them lay through the nation of Edom. But Numbers 20 tells us that when the Israelites requested permission to pass through Edom, it was denied, and they were threatened with armed attack if they attempted to cross their territory. So instead of fighting, they turned aside and went the long way around.

What this meant in practical terms was that they had to turn around and go back into the wilderness. No one likes a detour; especially if it means retracing our steps, and even more so if the conditions of travel are difficult. So, the people become discouraged and impatient. A familiar scene ensued. *And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food."* (Numbers 21:5) It was the strongest complaint yet against the manna that God provided for them day after day.

In response, God sent a plague of poisonous snakes among the people. People have often puzzled over the KJV reference to "fiery serpents." The adjective used does, in fact, describe something that is burning or fiery, but most commentators believe that it is a reference to the burning effect of the poison when the people were bitten. In any case, many people were bitten by the snakes, and those who were bitten were dying in agony.

The people rushed to Moses with a prayer of sincere repentance: *And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us."* (Verse 7).

Moses prayed and God answered by giving him some rather

peculiar instructions. He told Moses to make a snake out of bronze and put it on a pole and hold it in the air. Whenever someone was bitten by one of the snakes, if he looked at the snake on the pole, he would live and not die. So, Moses made the snake, put it on a pole and held it up in the midst of the people. And just as God promised, everyone who looked at the bronze snake recovered.

It is a rather short story, taking only 6 verses in the text. It is simply told, without a lot of embellishing details. It contains some familiar themes. If we were to put the story to music, the composition would have two movements. The people sin and God sends judgment. The people repent and God shows mercy. If these six verses were all we had, we would be likely to put this story on a shelf along with many other similar stories in Israel's history. But when we turn to the New Testament, we find that Jesus himself takes this short story and uses it in very unexpected ways. In fact, Jesus refers to these events not once, but three times.

How many of you can quote John 3:16? It's one of the most familiar and frequently memorized verses in the Bible. Did you know that you can't fully understand John 3:16 without knowing about Numbers 21 and the story of Moses and the bronze serpent? Look at John 3:14-15: *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.* This is the context for the following verse we know so well: *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

In the story of the bronze serpent, we discover another Old Testament type. In the previous chapter we defined a type as an event, object or person in the Old Testament that is divinely intended as a symbol or picture to foreshadow a New Testament event, person or reality. One of the challenges in interpreting a type is to find the point or points of comparison intended by the Holy Spirit, and not allow our imaginations to run away with us. The way to do that is to stay as close as possible to the points of comparison made in the New Testament references. To do that, let's compare what we have just read in John 3 with the other two references to the bronze serpent as a type.

John 8:28: *So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my*

own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me." Once again, these are Jesus' own words.

The third reference is in John 12:32-34: *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. So the crowd answered him, "We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?"*

If you were paying close attention as you read those references, you might have picked up on the fact that in the second and third references there is no mention of Moses or the bronze snake. But there are several reasons for concluding that they are in fact linked with the story in Numbers 21.

First, there is the familiar vocabulary. The words "lifted up" occur in all three references. The original Greek word that is being translated here is not a common one in John's writings. In fact, these are the only occurrences in his Gospel.

Secondly, there is the common reference to Jesus as the Son of Man. All three passages use this title for him.

Thirdly, there is the common emphasis in all three references on faith and believing. We are very familiar with it in John 3:16: *Whoever believes in him should not perish.* It is also there in John 8:30: *As he was saying these things, many believed in him.* It is also there in the follow-up in John 12:36: *While you have the light, believe in the light.*

So, it is my conclusion that all three of these references are linked together and are linked back through John 3:14 with the events in Numbers 21. In fact, it is difficult to make any sense of the second and third references without this link.

With that in mind, as we compare these three references in Jesus' own words, how does it help us to interpret the type? As we compare the three, I find that there are two common elements in all three references. First there is the use of the word "lifted up" which is taken from the story of the bronze snake and then used as a means of portraying and foretelling Christ's death. It foretells not just the fact of his death, but the kind of death he would die.

When the snake was lifted up on the pole, it was a picture of Christ being lifted up on the cross. *When I am lifted up from the earth...* Jesus said this, *to show the kind of death he was going to die.* And Jesus made it clear in his words to Nicodemus, that this death,

this kind of death, was necessary. *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.* There is a Greek verb of necessity and requirement in that sentence. “It is required.” Just as there would have been no salvation from the snakes’ venom unless the snake was “lifted up” so there could be no salvation from the venom of sin until the Son of Man was lifted up from the earth. The Savior had to be lifted up. The Savior had to die. The Savior had to die on a cross, suspended above the earth.

The second point of connection in the type is captured in the Old Testament story in the words “look and live.” The Israelite who lay dying from the poison of the snake had to lift his eyes and look at the bronze snake held up on a pole. When he did, the healing power of God was extended to him, and the poison’s effects were neutralized. He was healed. He lived.

When we come into the New Testament fulfillment, looking has been interpreted as faith. It is looking with spiritual eyes rather than physical eyes. This is the clear application in all three of the references in John; the emphasis on believing, having faith, and trusting in the One who hung on the cross.

Let’s focus on the passage in John 3:14-18: *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert so the Son of Man must be lifted, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. (NIV)*

Look down to verse 36: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.” (NIV)

These verses take on new vividness and meaning when we think of an Israelite, lying in the hot desert sun, bitten by one of the snakes, the burning poison spreading rapidly through his body. “Look and live!” Moses cried. “Whoever looks shall not perish but live.”

Now Jesus speaks. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake, so I must be lifted up. Everyone who looks at me there on the cross and believes in me shall not perish but live forever. Whoever rejects me and refuses to

look at me with eyes of faith shall not live. The poison of sin and the wrath of God's judgment shall run to their inevitable conclusion."

Look! Trust! Believe! Have faith! They are all different ways of communicating the same spiritual truth.

These, then, are the two spiritual truths of our salvation which were foreshadowed in the desert so many years ago:

The Savior had to be lifted up. Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man had to go to the cross.

The sinner must look in order to live. There is no other remedy for the serpent's poison than this. Look and live!

Let's go back to the image of the text of Numbers 21 as a piece of music. It is still a piece in two movements. The people sin and God sends judgment. The people repent and God extends his mercy. There is a beautiful melody, full of the holiness of God. There are the thundering bass notes of judgment, the haunting lament of the dying people, the powerful notes of God's sure mercy. It is truly a magnificent composition in its own right. But when we add the New Testament notes from John, it is as though the Composer has taken us to a whole new level of beauty. A lovely descant is added that floats over and above the original composition, heart breaking on one level, yet piercing in the sweetness of this new melody. And as we listen and watch with our spiritual eyes, the pole on which the serpent was raised is transformed into a wooden cross. The figure upon it becomes a man, the Son of God, sent to die for our sin. But the message of the music remains the same. **Look and live!**

Many who hear the Gospel message and the message of faith object and say, "It's too simple! There must be more required of me than that!"

I wonder if there were some among the Israelites that day who had the same thought. "It's too simple!" When Moses' cry rang out over the people, "Look and live!" they turned their eyes away and refused to look. "After all, what good could it possibly do?" they thought. And so, they died in their suffering and in their pain. I wouldn't want that to happen to anyone reading these words. "Look and live!"

AND THE DONKEY SAID...

Numbers 22-25

The story found in Numbers 22-25 is one of the oddest, one of the most intriguing and most puzzling stories in the Bible.

To summarize: As Israel approached the borders of the Promised Land from the east, the surrounding nations became increasingly frightened. This fear was heightened by some dramatic military victories described in the second half of Numbers 21. Two of the threatened nations, Moab and Midian, decided to act. But the action they took was not military but spiritual. They sent messengers to hire a famous “holy man” by the name of Balaam to place a curse on the Israelites.

The story unfolds from there. On the first visit of the messengers, Balaam asks God if he should go, and God tells him “No!” So, Balaam refuses to go. The messengers come again and offer an even bigger fee. This time when Balaam asks God, he is apparently given permission to go. But on the journey, we are told that God is angry with Balaam. The angel of the Lord appears on the path in front of Balaam, brandishing a sword. Balaam can’t see the angel, but the donkey he’s riding can. The donkey shies away in fright and runs into a field. Balaam beats her until she returns to the path. The angel next stands in their way between two vineyard walls. This time when the donkey spooks, she crushes Balaam’s foot against one of the walls. Furious, Balaam beats her again. The next time the angel appears in a narrow part of the path. There is no room to turn right or left. So, the donkey simply lies down in the path. Balaam takes his staff and starts to beat her again.

That is when the story takes a completely unexpected turn. We are told that the Lord gives the donkey the ability to speak. She turns to Balaam and asks, “What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?” Oddly enough, Balaam doesn’t seem too startled to hear his

donkey speak! He says, “You have made a fool of me. You’re lucky I only have a staff to beat you with. If I had a sword, I’d kill you right now!”

The donkey then protests further. “I am your own donkey. You have always ridden me. Have I ever behaved this way before?” Balaam admits that she has not. At that moment, God opens Balaam’s eyes, and he sees what the donkey has seen all along; the angel of the Lord standing in front of him with his sword drawn. The angel rebukes Balaam for his cruelty to his donkey, pointing out that she has actually saved his life. He then warns Balaam that he is on a dangerous path but allows him to continue with the stern injunction that he is only to speak the words that God gives him to speak.

When Balaam arrives at his destination, elaborate measures are prepared for him to pronounce the words of cursing over the nation of Israel that he has been hired to deliver. Sacrifices are offered and divining rituals are carried out. Balaam opens his mouth to speak. To his own and to King Balak’s horror, what comes out of his mouth are words of blessing!

Then Balaam uttered his oracle:

*“Balak brought me from Aram,
the king of Moab from the eastern mountains.*

*‘Come,’ he said, ‘curse Jacob for me;
come, denounce Israel.’*

*⁸ How can I curse
those whom God has not cursed?*

*How can I denounce
those whom the LORD has not denounced?*

*⁹ From the rocky peaks I see them,
from the heights I view them.*

*I see a people who live apart
and do not consider themselves one of the nations.*

*¹⁰ Who can count the dust of Jacob
or number the fourth part of Israel?
Let me die the death of the righteous,
and may my end be like theirs!”*

*¹¹ Balak said to Balaam, “What have you done to me? I brought you
to curse my enemies, but you have done nothing but bless them.”*
(Numbers 23:7-11)

(Note: All Biblical quotations in this chapter are from the NIV version and kept in their original layout to highlight the fact that the words are recorded in poetic verse.)

It continues this way over the next two chapters. Repeatedly, Balak tells him to curse the Israelites. And whenever Balaam opens his mouth to do so, out come words of beautiful prophecy – prophecies of blessing on Israel and cursing on her enemies! When Balak asks Balaam, “What are you doing?” Balaam responds, “I can’t help it! I can only speak what Yahweh, the God of Israel allows me to speak!”

This is a puzzling story on several levels. The first and most puzzling question is, “Who is Balaam?” He is a hard character to get a handle on, and the text itself seems to give conflicting clues. As a result, he provokes a considerable amount of debate among Bible scholars. One thing is very clear. Balaam is mentioned by name 10 times in subsequent Scriptures, including three references in the New Testament. Every one of those references is negative and casts him in a bad light as an enemy of Israel and as a prototypical false prophet and false teacher. So, what do we make of his role in these chapters? There are several possible answers to that question.

The first possibility is that Balaam was a good prophet gone bad. According to this viewpoint, Balaam was a prophet of the true God. We don’t know his spiritual pedigree or how he was appointed by God, but somehow, he knows the true God and is accustomed to being his spokesman. Several verses in the text seem to lead us in this direction. In Numbers 22:18 he says to the king’s servants, *Even if Balak gives me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of Yahweh my God.* That last phrase especially (*Yahweh my God*) would seem to indicate that Balaam was a sincere prophet. He knows God by his special name. He identifies him as his own God. What is more, Numbers 24:2 clearly states that *the Spirit of God came upon him.* So, maybe he was a sincere prophet of the true God. But over time he became corrupted by the profit motive. He rented his services out to the highest bidder. And by the time we meet him, he is a badly conflicted and confused character.

The second possibility is that Balaam is a pagan prophet and occult practitioner who encountered Yahweh, the true God and even flirted with the possibility of following him. This would explain his

statements of “speaking only what Yahweh puts in my mouth,” and even the reference to “Yahweh my God.” But when the story is fully told, he turns back to his pagan roots and continues on his corrupt and evil path.

The third option is that Balaam is a pagan soothsayer or medium with occult powers whose motives are sinister and whose intentions are corrupt from beginning to end. There was a category of soothsayers or mediums in the ancient world who made their living by virtue of their ability to contact the spiritual forces of the universe and provide information about the future. They were even able to influence the future by means of spiritual curses or blessings that activated the forces of the spiritual world either for or against their clients. One particular type of soothsayer even relied on animals. They would slaughter them and examine their liver and entrails for divining purposes.

These soothsayers or prophets were extremely syncretistic. They did not serve any particular god or gods, but simply attempted to use and influence any and all spiritual forces for their own advantage. According to this viewpoint, then, Balaam had no personal loyalty to Yahweh. He only knew of him as Israel’s tribal god and sought to contact and manipulate him against his own people. But he got more than he bargained for! His desire and ability to cast spells and pronounce curses against Israel is simply overwhelmed by God’s sovereign power. When he says to Balak, “I can only speak the words that Yahweh places in my mouth,” he is speaking as one who has been coerced against his will. He wants to say one thing, but he is not permitted to. He has fallen unwillingly under the influence of the Spirit of God. He is captured by a spiritual force more powerful than anything he has ever felt. He has no choice but to speak the words God wants him to speak.

This final viewpoint is the one proposed in a series of chapel lectures I attended in seminary by my Hebrew professor, Dr. Ronald Allen. His arguments are strong. Of the three possibilities listed, it seems the best. But I must admit that Numbers 22:18, where Balaam refers to *the command of Yahweh my God*, still sits rather uneasily in the back of my mind.

That leads me to propose a fourth possibility; Balaam is an enigma. The dictionary defines an enigma as “an inscrutable or

mysterious person.” After all my study, I must admit that remains about the best description I have for Balaam.

That leads me to the second question posed by the story. Why the donkey? This is only one of two instances in the Bible in which animals are recorded as speaking. The other is the serpent in the Garden of Eden. But why the donkey in this story? The role of the donkey adds a great deal to the story on several levels. The first is humor. This is a very memorable and funny story, primarily because of the donkey. The story goes into great detail about each of the incidents in which the donkey sees the angel with sword drawn, and veers aside. We can easily picture the exasperated Balaam beating on the poor animal. Then comes the surprise factor when the longsuffering beast turns and speaks to him: *What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?*

This is great comedy. But even more than that, it is humor laced heavily with irony. Think about it. Balaam is a man who prides himself on two things. He prides himself on being able to see and understand matters in the spiritual realm that others cannot see. One of the names for such a man is “seer,” literally, one who sees into the mysteries of the unseen world. The other thing he prides himself in is his ability to speak and reveal these mysteries to others, to be a spokesperson for the gods. But in the story, guess what! The donkey, an animal universally reviled for its foolishness, sees the angel while Balaam remains oblivious to his presence. The donkey sees! Balaam is blind! And when God finally decides to get Balaam’s attention, he does so by giving the donkey, not Balaam, the ability to speak! Talk about a humiliating lesson for Balaam! It is as if God were saying to this proud prophet, “Listen, Balaam. If I want to reveal myself to someone, I can do it to this dumb animal more easily than I can to you. When I need someone to speak for me, if I choose, I can speak through this donkey. This story clearly puts Balaam and all his company firmly in their place, and we can almost hear the gales of laughter sweeping out of heaven.

Another thing the incident of the donkey provides to the story is the clear truth that **God has the power to speak through anyone or anything he chooses.** His power is not limited. He is not bound by human limitations or human categories or expectations. When this story is done, we end up marveling that God has spoken so clearly

and powerfully through this man Balaam. But by this incident of the donkey, God says to us, “Listen, I could have used a donkey if I’d wanted to. When I choose to speak, I will speak, and no one can stop me.”

That brings us to the most important question I want us to consider. What is the point of this whole story of Balaam? Why is it recorded in our Scriptures?

There is a very serious and important spiritual point to this account and some important spiritual lessons for the nation of Israel. As they prepared to enter the Promised Land, they would face many physical challenges and threats; walled cities, giants, large armies. But they were also entering new territory spiritually. Each of these cities and nations had gods; deities that they depended on to protect them and to fight for them. In the Balaam oracles and the whole Balaam story, God clearly declares to Israel that they have nothing to fear from the spiritual forces that inhabited the land if they put their trust in him.

We will not take the time to read or analyze each of the seven different oracles of Balaam that are recorded in these pages. But I want to pick out three lines of truth, each related to

Israel’s security.

First, **Israel’s protection rested in the sovereign blessing of God.**

We see it in the passage we read above. It is repeated in 23:20-23:

*²⁰ I have received a command to bless;
he has blessed, and I cannot change it.*

*²¹ No misfortune is seen in Jacob,
no misery observed in Israel.
The LORD their God is with them;
the shout of the King is among them.*

*²² God brought them out of Egypt;
they have the strength of a wild ox.*

*²³ There is no sorcery against Jacob,
no divination against Israel.
It will now be said of Jacob
and of Israel, ‘See what God has done!’*

What God has ordained will come to pass. No man and no other

spiritual powers can change what he has decreed. There was no curse that could be effective against Israel because God had determined to bless them. The nation was secure in God's sovereign power and in his protection. They had nothing to fear from the peoples of the land or from their gods.

Secondly, **Israel's security rested in the changeless character of God.** This is the point made in Numbers 23: 18-19.

¹⁸ Then he uttered his oracle:

Arise, Balak, and listen;

hear me, son of Zippor.

¹⁹ God is not a man, that he should lie,

nor a son of man, that he should change his mind.

Does he speak and then not act?

Does he promise and not fulfill?

The previous point affirms that there is no power outside of God that can deter his sovereign purpose. This point states that there is no changeableness within God to cause him to turn from his purpose or break his promise. He does not change his mind. He has promised to bring his people into the land. And he will keep his promise.

The third line of truth in Balaam's prophecies is that **Israel's true hope rested in the coming of a Promised Redeemer from God.**

Look at the words of the prophecy found in Numbers 24:17-19:

¹⁷ I see him, but not now;

I behold him, but not near.

A star will come out of Jacob;

a scepter will rise out of Israel.

He will crush the foreheads of Moab,

the skulls of all the sons of Sheth.

¹⁸ Edom will be conquered;

Seir, his enemy, will be conquered,

but Israel will grow strong.

¹⁹ A ruler will come out of Jacob

and destroy the survivors of the city.

Isn't this an amazing thing? The clearest promise of the coming

Messiah so far recorded in Scripture comes from the mouth of this pagan prophet. I am not sure why God chose to deliver his message in this way. But regardless of the mouthpiece, God's promise is perfectly clear, and it is a promise of great hope. A great king is coming; a star, a scepter, a ruler will come out of Jacob. Not now, not near. But when the time is ripe he will come. Wait for him. And when he comes, trust in him. He will deliver you from all your enemies. It is one of the many promises of Messiah that are sprinkled throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. This one is found in the most unlikely of places, but it sparkles all the more brightly because of that.

The fourth line of truth in these chapters is one we all need to hear. **Israel's greatest threat and greatest vulnerability was not from without but from within.**

Sadly, we have not quite finished with the story of Balaam. Numbers 25 goes on to record another sad chapter in Israel's history. While they are camped on the edge of the Promised Land, the men of Israel began to strike up liaisons with some of the Moabite women. Verse 1 tells us: *the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women*. But there was more involved than sexual immorality. Verse 2 tells us these women *invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor*.

The worship of Baal involved acts of immorality as part of their worship to the bull god of fertility. The story goes on to tell how God's wrath broke out against the Israelites in a plague which was only stopped by a dramatic act on the part of Phinehas the priest. When a particularly brazen couple brought their pagan revelry right into the vicinity of the temple itself, Phinehas speared the couple through with a single thrust of a spear. His act of righteous indignation brought an end to the people's sin and to the plague.

But what does this have to do with the story of Balaam? It is not mentioned in Numbers 25, but if we turn over to Numbers 31:7-8 we find the connection. *They fought against Midian as the Lord commanded Moses and killed every man. Among their victims were Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba – the five kings of Midian. They also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword.*

But even more significant than that, look at verse 16: *These were (the women) who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of*

turning the Israelites away from the Lord in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the Lord's people. The book of Revelation spells it out even more clearly in Revelation 2:14: *You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.*

Balaam may have been dumber than a donkey, but he was also as shrewd as a serpent! What he could not accomplish by direct, frontal attack, he accomplished by deceit. He tried as hard as he could to curse the Israelites. But when God thwarted him, he gave Balak an alternative strategy. Entice them! Seduce them! Turn their hearts away from Yahweh, the true God. Sadly, this strategy found willing collaborators within the camp of Israel. Truly Israel's greatest threat lay not from outside, from opposing armies or even the "power" of opposing deities, but from within; the sin that lay in their own hearts and which was so easily aroused.

These lessons explain why this story is important, and why it was recorded in the sacred record of Israel's history. These same lessons are relevant for us today.

Our protection rests in the sovereign blessing of God. There is no power greater than his power. There is no curse, no spell, no evil spiritual forces which can penetrate the protection that God has placed around us as his children. Listen to the words of the pagan prophet: *God has blessed and I cannot change it... The Lord their God is with them... There is no sorcery against Jacob, no divination against Jacob.* We rest secure in God's protection and his sovereign blessing no matter what spiritual forces may be arrayed against us. As Paul says in Romans 8:31: *If God is for us, who can be against us?*

Our security rests in the changeless character of God. He does not change his mind. *Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?*

Our hope rests in the Promised Redeemer. What the Israelites looked forward to in expectation, we now look back on. The Redeemer has come. His name is Jesus, the Christ. He came to set us free from our sin and from death. And he is coming again, to reign and rule over all creation. Our hope is in him.

Finally, we must be alert. Like the Israelites, **our greatest vulnerability is not from without but from within.** This is true

individually. It is our own sinful impulses and fleshly desires that the evil one will most often exploit to lead our hearts away from the Lord. But it is also true corporately. What the evil one cannot accomplish by attacking God's people directly, he will often accomplish by infiltrating our ranks and causing sin to spread insidiously, member to member; sins of pride, of compromise, of dissension. Let us guard our own hearts for that is where our greatest danger lies!

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THE END OF THE JOURNEY

Deuteronomy 34

We will begin this chapter by taking a quick look at the Book of Deuteronomy. If you want a one-word clue to remember what Deuteronomy is all about, the word “review” would serve very well. The name of the book itself comes from a compound Greek word, from “deuteros,” meaning “second” and “nomos” meaning “law.” It is a second giving or review of the law. The people of Israel are camped on the plains of Moab, across the Jordan River from the city of Jericho. That’s where they are when the book starts, and that’s where they are when the book ends. There is no movement in the book. There is no advance in the plot and no new events recorded except the death of Moses in the final chapter. It is a time of review.

But while the Book of Deuteronomy is a book of review, it is more than that. Its purpose, in terms of Israel, was to reestablish the covenant between God and his people in the presence of the new generation. You will recall that in Exodus God established a covenant between himself and the nation of Israel. A covenant is like a treaty, an agreement between parties. In this case it is a suzerainty/vassal treaty; a treaty between a king and his subjects. This covenant was sealed between God and Israel at Mt. Sinai. But the generation that participated in that covenant ceremony has now died off. It is the next generation that is poised to enter and take possession of the Promised Land. It is necessary to review and solemnize the covenant with the new generation.

Just like in Exodus, the Biblical text closely follows the covenant format which was used in that time period. Such covenants began with a review of the history of the relationship between the king and his subjects. The book of Deuteronomy opens with such a review. This is followed by the covenant conditions and stipulations. These are the laws that are detailed in the main section of Deuteronomy,

including a complete repetition of the Ten Commandments which make up the heart of the Covenant. The consequences of covenant violation are then spelled out along with the rewards for covenant obedience. This is found in Deuteronomy with the long sections of “Blessings and Cursings.” The blessings are what the Israelites will experience if they are faithful to obey the conditions of the covenant, and the cursings are the consequences they can expect if they violate the covenant. All of this is interspersed with liberal exhortations to the people to heed, listen, teach and obey all the conditions of the covenant.

The book of Deuteronomy is foundational to the rest of the Old Testament. It serves as the basis for much of the prophets’ preaching. When the prophets stood to address the nation in later years, they inevitably went back to Deuteronomy and the conditions of the covenant to explain what was happening to the nation. Their tragedies were because of their disobedience to God’s covenant. If they wanted to experience God’s blessing, they needed to repent and obey the covenant and its conditions. All of Israel’s subsequent history only makes sense when it is understood in light of the covenant God made with his people in Exodus and then reconfirmed with them in Deuteronomy before they entered the Promised Land.

So that is a quick overview and summary of Deuteronomy and its place in our Bible. We can clearly see why “review” makes a good summary of the contents of the book. But this chapter is also about review because this is the conclusion to our own journey. So, for us it is also a good time for review. Our goal in this book was to trace the narrative sections of the Pentateuch from Exodus to Deuteronomy, following the story of Israel from bondage in Egypt up to the borders of the Promised Land. This is the 24th and final chapter. It is time to summarize and look at the “take away” from our study. Permit me to be very personal in this final chapter. These are the lessons I want to remember and take with me. Look over my shoulder and listen in. Maybe you will identify with me, or maybe you will have your own lessons to learn and apply.

In the very first chapter, we pointed out that there are three main characters in the narrative who would draw our attention as we moved through the text. The first one was Moses. The second was Israel as a nation: the people of God. The third and the true main

character of the story was God himself. So, what I want to do in this final chapter is to reflect on what I have learned about or learned from the three main characters.

We will start with **Moses**. Deuteronomy 34 records the account of Moses' death on Mount Nebo. It is a bittersweet ending to his life story. The end of the journey. He climbs to the top of Mount Nebo, opposite the Promised Land and God allows him the privilege to look out over the land God had promised to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and which he was about to give to their descendants. But Moses would not be allowed to enter it himself because of his disobedience when he struck the rock at the Waters of Meribah. I feel for Moses and his obvious disappointment, but there is still something oddly moving about the story. Moses is once again with God on a mountain. They are conversing. God himself is pointing out the features of the land. And when the moment of his death comes, only God is with him, and the text says that "God buried him." I am not sure exactly what to make of that, but it strikes me as both a great honor and an act of moving intimacy between God and his servant.

I am also moved by the final testimonial to Moses that is recorded in the final verses of the chapter, probably by Joshua:

And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, none like him for all the signs and the wonders that the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, and for all the mighty power and all the great deeds of terror that Moses did in the sight of all Israel. (Deuteronomy 34:10-12)

What a powerful testimony to this most humble of all men, this faithful servant of the Lord. As I reflect on the life of Moses, there are several things that rise to the top for me. The first is the fundamental life choice that Moses made as a young man. This was the choice that is recorded for us in Hebrews 11:24-26: *By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.*

That choice set the direction for the rest of his life. He made the most important choice of his life based on eternal values. That explains more about Moses than any other single fact. Every one of us

faces a similar choice. Will we live this life for temporary pleasure, or will we cast our lot with the people of God and the cause of Christ, looking ahead to an eternal reward?

The second trait of Moses that stands out to me was his faithfulness. He is the model, the prototype of the faithful servant. Hebrews 3:2 states that *Moses also was faithful in all God's house*. That example of faithfulness beckons me and inspires me to be faithful and obedient as well.

The third trait of Moses that I am taking away may sound like a paradox and contradiction to the first two. It is his humanness. Moses is not portrayed as some Plaster of Paris saint. He was a man of passion. He badly botched his first attempts to assist the Israelites. He had a deep inferiority complex about his ability to speak. He became discouraged. He complained to God. And in a fit of temper, he struck the rock, and lost the privilege of leading the people into the Promised Land. Somehow, I find all of that deeply reassuring! It is not that I take pleasure in his failures. But I do find hope and encouragement that if God could use Moses so mightily despite his humanness and his failures, then there is still hope for me.

The fourth lesson I am taking away from Moses is a little more abstract. I understand intercession and the importance of an intercessor because of Moses' example. As I have relived these stories of Israel's history, I have been left with the deep and lasting impression that if it had not been for Moses going face down before the Lord to intercede for the people of Israel, God would indeed have destroyed them on more than one occasion. Now I realize that raises some knotty theological questions. But I am convinced that this was no mere "play acting" but a real interaction between Moses and God with real consequences in terms of Israel's survival.

That takes me in two directions. It first points me in the direction of the Second Moses, who now lives and intercedes for us. I take great security in knowing that Jesus is at the right hand of the Father making intercession for me. But the second challenge is to examine my role as an intercessor. Am I making a difference in the lives of others by interceding for them as Moses did for the Israelites?

As I look back on the big picture of Moses life, I am left with one abiding thought. **I want to be like Moses.** He is a great role model,

as a servant of God, as a leader, as a man. I want to be *a servant who was faithful*.

That brings us to the second leading character in this history. **The People of Israel**. What can I say about them? There are three phrases that capture my memories of the people. The first is: **Complaining rather than contentment**. We saw it over and over again, didn't we? *The people murmured against Moses and against God*.

A mother was reading the stories of Israel to her little daughter for the first time. As the little girl listened intently to another story that started off with "And the people complained against God," she gave a big sigh, rolled her eyes and said, "Not again!" We feel that way as we read the stories, don't we?

The second phrase is **fear rather than faith**. It was their fear that led them to rebel on the borders of the Promised Land and caused them to spend 40 years in the wilderness. They did not trust God to keep his promises, and they allowed their fear to overwhelm them and lead them into disobedience.

The final phrase is **fickle hearts rather than faithful hearts**. On numerous occasions they vowed their complete faithfulness and desire to fulfill all of God's commands. Yet usually within hours or days their hearts wandered off after other gods and other forms of worship.

As I think back on the Israelites, two thoughts compete in my mind. The first one is: **I don't want to be like them!** I don't want to follow in their footsteps. But the second thought, which follows quickly on the heels of the first, is the realization: **I am like them!** In my heart of hearts, if I am honest with myself, I find these same traits. I am so quick to complain, rather than be content with my circumstances. I am so often overwhelmed by fear when I should exercise faith and trust in God. My heart is so often fickle and runs so quickly after other things. But here is the bottom line. The tendencies of my heart are just like theirs. But I don't have to live there. By trusting in the Spirit of Christ who lives in me, I can live on a different level. I don't have to live like them.

The final character in the story is the true main character: **God himself**. He is the God who revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush as Yahweh, the great I AM. It struck me as I was thinking back, how much of my theology and my understanding of God has been shaped by the events and stories we have been studying. There are

propositional statements of theology and of God's attributes in the Scriptures that reduce themselves to neat sentences in books. I am thankful for them. But the truths of God's holiness and glory and his love and faithfulness take on texture and fiber and substance for me because I have seen those attributes lived out on the stage of Israel's history. For example, I have a feeling for holiness that is colored by Mt. Sinai and God's command to set limits around the mountain so that no one could come near it or even touch the foot of it. I realize that my understanding of God has been shaped by these stories from the time I first heard them as a child. And that understanding has been strengthened by the opportunity I have had to live and relive these stories again through these chapters.

In the events of the Exodus, God was writing his character into the pages of human history by doing something that had never been done before. He was doing it to demonstrate that he is the one and only true God. Deuteronomy 4:32-39 summarizes it so well.

Ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of. Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him. Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, that he might discipline you. And on earth he let you see his great fire, and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire. And because he loved your fathers and chose their offspring after them and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, driving out before you, nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in, to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is this day, know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.

As I look for a way to capture what we learn about God's character in these accounts, I am taking away three phrases. **Yahweh is awesome in glory.** Deuteronomy 4:35 says it so clearly: *You were*

shown these things so that you might know that Yahweh is God; besides him there is no other. The theme of the book of Exodus is the glory of God. On several occasions in that book, God says that he is doing all the signs and wonders in Egypt, so that first Israel, then the Egyptians and finally the whole world will know that he is God. Exodus 14:4 says it well: *I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh.* Then when he had brought the Israelites out of Egypt, he met them at Sinai, and there he visibly displayed his glory to them on the mountain, with the clouds of smoke and the thunder and the lightning and the trumpet blasts and God's fire coming down upon the mountain. There is no God like Yahweh, **awesome in glory.**

Yahweh is majestic in holiness. I have already talked about the clear visual aid of his holiness with the limits set around the holy mountain. This holiness is clearly displayed in the book of Leviticus as God announces in Leviticus 11:44: *I am Yahweh your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.* God's passion for his own holiness is displayed when his holy fire blazes out against the sons of Aaron in the incident of strange fire, and God says clearly: *Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.*

But there is another theme of God's character that is also clearly displayed in these stories. **Yahweh is tender in love.** This is restated in Deuteronomy in explaining the reason behind the covenant that God was forming with the Israelites. There is one driving force behind it as find in Deuteronomy 7:6-9.

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.

This is a restatement of his desire for a covenant relationship

which was described in Exodus 19:4: *You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.* Note the tenderness in that final phrase: "I brought you to myself." They are the words of a bridegroom to his bride. "Out of all the nations of the world I have chosen you to be my treasured possession."

What an awesome God we serve! Awesome in glory, majestic in holiness, tender in love. As I reflect on these attributes of his character which are so clearly displayed in the great events of the Exodus, I am struck by this realization: He is the same God today as he was then. He has not changed, not even so much as the shifting of a shadow. This God is our God. I want to know this God! I want to walk with him. I want to love him. As Moses challenged the Israelites in Deuteronomy 6:4-5: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*

Our review would be incomplete without highlighting one more character that we have met in the pages of this text. We have met him in some surprising places and in some unexpected ways. He is the **Christ, the promised Redeemer** of Israel. We have seen him in the types that foreshadowed and foretold his coming. We have seen him in the Passover Lamb that has been slain for us. We have met him as the Great High Priest. He has been there in the Rock which followed Israel and from whom the living waters flowed. We have seen him on the cross when Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. He is the star who comes out of Jacob and the ruler who comes out of Israel. And we have seen him in Moses: Moses the intercessor and Moses the faithful servant. It is in the book of Deuteronomy in chapter 18:15 that Moses himself said, *Yahweh your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers.* And now that Prophet has come who is greater than Moses. His name is Jesus. He is the God of Sinai, awesome in glory, majestic in holiness, and tender in love, come to earth, come in human flesh, come to give his life as the ransom for our sins. Old Testament and New Testament come together in the person of Jesus, the Christ.

We have meditated on our great God, revealed in history through the story of Moses and the Exodus. He revealed himself even more clearly when he put on human flesh in the person of Christ and

pitched his tent among us. Always remember. The God of Sinai is the Baby of Bethlehem, the Savior on the cross, the risen Christ. He is Lord of lords, King of kings, Almighty God. To him belongs the glory forever and ever. Amen

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