

Notes on Exodus 13—26

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Chapters 13–14

Ch 13 Israel was on the way when God told him all first born belonged to him. It was the death of Pharaoh's (and Egypt's) firstborn that had finally moved Pharaoh to release them, and there were many grateful Israelites because of the sparing of their own. This was the time to tell them who they were—the 'my son' nation. Moses told the people to keep the festival of unleavened bread that commemorated this. Ownership of animals was expressed by sacrifice of the firstborn. Sacrifice of humans, from Abraham's time, was prohibited, and so God's ownership of Israel was expressed by redemption of the firstborn with an animal (and later, also, with the service of the Levites). As this was done, and explained to firstborn sons, they would begin to appreciate the power of blood spilt in their stead. Each generation would be tutored in the power of redemption by blood.

We are not told that Israel ever made up their mind to leave Egypt, however God was concerned that they may change their mind unless he led them in a manner that would further bind them to him. Israel was ready for battle but the battle would be God's. He was personally present with them in the fire and cloud so that they could travel night and day.

Ch 14 God again hardened Pharaoh's heart (mentioned three times) so that his name would be honoured in the world. Moses called the people not to be afraid. God called Moses not to cry out but move Israel forward and lift up his rod for the opening of the sea. God was clearly Commander in Chief, night watchman and lone soldier in this victory and Israel was obligated to confess that God was God and that Moses was his servant.

Prayer

Holy Father, may your saving deeds done for Israel, and the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which we have been redeemed, bind us forever to yourself. No other could enter into this awful contest between the powers of this world and your purpose to have a people of your own. Nothing less than the death of your Son could set us free from this world. Nothing less than his resurrection could demonstrate the renewal that has come to the world. Lord, when our hearts are tempted to seek solace in this world, remind us of your presence, of your power and your will to do us good. Show us again that, through Jesus Christ, we are included with all your people whom you call 'son'.

Chapters 15–16

Ch 15 The Lord's glorious triumph moved Moses and his people to song. God had become the strength of this people (the writer and his fathers), their salvation, their God whose name was 'the Lord' (or YHWH). Pharaoh, who had determined the life of this people before, had proved no match for the power of this Lord.

All this led Moses to ask if there was any god like the Lord. Israel knew that it was not their might or their initiative that had saved them but the God of holy love. Therefore their God would lead them to his holy abode—probably an anticipation of the temple in the promised land. Other enemies to come were envisaged trembling before the might of God and before his favouring of his beloved people.

God had wanted Egypt and the nations to know him, but making himself known to his own people in the way he wanted them to know him required testing. As often, God's response to Israel's complaining was a further gift to see how they would respond to this. Not only could he sweeten this water; he would preserve them from the diseases they had witnessed in Egypt (perhaps the plagues).

Ch 16 For a third time, Israel complained as though Moses was the source of their problem. God's response to the people through Moses and Aaron was that they would know it was the Lord who redeemed them and that they would see God's glory. In fact, the glory of the Lord appeared to them directly. Israel seemed to be wholly bogged down in culinary necessity and had no joy in being a people dependent on the living God. God had manifested his care for his people—his glory—and this was to be remembered throughout their history.

Prayer

Lord, you are our strength. We were altogether without the will or the power to be your people but you sent your Son to be our Leader and Saviour. We now know that your kindness has been to give him up for us all so that we are brought into your presence. Lord you are our life and our strength. Lord, when the testings of this life present themselves, may I remember that you want me to rely on you. It is in this way that you want to reveal yourself as my God—to the glory of your name in this world. Amen

Chapters 17–18

Ch 17 God was graciously present with Israel, as Paul later said, that Rock was Christ (I Cor. 10:4). The food they had was spiritual, perhaps in the sense that it was a gift of Fatherly love to them. Therefore, Israel complaining to Moses was a wilful ignorance of divine love. It was also an indulging of themselves, as Paul indicates, and, therefore a warning to us to beware of living as they did. As before, God's response to Israel's complaint was to send Moses on ahead to provide yet another evidence of his grace. The war with Amalek gave further opportunity for Israel to learn the immediacy of God's presence and provision to them and his determination that they would see all God's promise fulfilled.

Ch 18 Jethro had received back his daughter and two grandsons when Moses thought it wise to send them from Egypt, and now, Jethro brought them to Moses again. As priest of Midian, he acknowledged the greatness of Israel's God and communed with the elders of Israel, sharing table fellowship in God's presence. This was an early foretaste of eating together in the kingdom of Christ's Father and our

Father (Matt. 26:29). As one who now worshipped the same God as Moses, and with deference to the immediacy with which God made his will known to Moses, Jethro was able to suggest some delegation of authority.

Prayer

Father, the form of your presence among us is nothing less than your Son. You have, in the face of our constant wrangling and idolatry, required that he be struck to provide living water for us. Forgive us for all our ungratefulness and slowness to understand your presence among us. Let idols and flesh be put aside! Let these not intrude on the majesty and grace of your unfailing presence. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Chapters 19–20

Ch 19 God had now brought Israel to himself, as a priest nation on behalf of the whole earth, and they confessed their willingness to be this people. Moses was to be forever authenticated as their covenant head, so that faith in God could not be separated from faith in Moses. The fearsomeness of the occasion is linked to this. It is truly remarkable to see Moses ascending to God in this situation. God had chosen to be God to this people and the world, and to have his covenant head approach him without fear. Later on, Jesus would say, 'Believe in God. Believe also in me'. He has approached God on our behalf, stood in the place of judgment, and led us to God.

The smoke surging upwards from the top of the mountain, like a kiln ready to devour them, should have been sufficient to keep people at bay, and this proved to be the case. Israel did not even want God to speak to them. But God required that the people be sanctified, be present, and that they not break through to God. The repetition of this latter requirement suggests the wrongful proximity to God sought by arrogant humanity, as in Eden. Later, some would attempt to come unsummoned to God and would pay with their lives.

Ch 20 The commandments were addressed directly to the people and their content has to do with the immediacy and purity of their relationship to him, and then, to one another. (Note the emphasis on relationships: 'before me', 'a jealous God', 'the name of . . . your God', 'a Sabbath to the Lord your God', 'you shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbour'.) His relationship to them had been demonstrated beyond doubt; now, as his priestly people, they were to be holy as he was holy. Moses said the reason for God's immediate address in this manner was to test them. God wanted to know what was in their hearts (Deut. 8:2). In fact, the content of this law would reveal what was in Israel's heart. It would expose them, as it does the whole race, so that they would not be left with false illusions as to their greatness. It would lead them to wonder also, about a God who kept covenant with them when they did not keep covenant with God.

Prayer

Lord God, we have not come to a burning mountain, but we have come to your holy temple made up of your people, your own holy city, people made new. We have come to you as our Judge and to Jesus the Mediator of a new Covenant that he secured forever by his blood. Then, Lord, let us be in awe of you. Cause us to heed your gracious word so that we may not tremble on that day when the earth is removed. Your Son has said that we are not to fear but rather to believe. Lord, you know what is in our hearts. You know that we love you. So, we come, and call you Father, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapters 21–22

(Including from 20:18.) An uncomplicated altar suggests that Israel was not to devise an ornate worship that would lead their minds from the Lord's saving deeds. They were to make altars where God caused his name to be remembered. How Israel lived with one another was an integral part of their living before the Lord. Instructions were given to ensure that freedom rather than slavery would be the characteristic of their society. Limits were placed on violence where this was merely 'getting even' or venting their anger, but strict justice applied where ill will had been in evidence. The law would have made sense to people in Bronze Age culture, interpreting to the people in practical terms what it meant that they were now the people of God and living under his blessing.

Prayer

Father, keep us mindful of your covenant blessings and promises that we may give to one another, not what our passions demand, but what your covenant requires. Through your Son Jesus Christ, you have reconciled us to yourself and also to one another. Father, enable us to see through the heats of our own desires to the purpose you have, to bring us all to glory, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chapters 23–24

Ch 23 These practical instructions given by God to Moses continued to show Israel what the commands of God from the mountain meant (they preferred listening to it from Moses). But the essence of their faith was not just an ethic. Sabbaths for the land and for people affirmed to them that God was their Creator and Redeemer, festivals acknowledged that God was their keeper. They were on their way to the land God had for them and no other gods were to deter them—not then and not when they arrived there.

Ch 24 It was now time for the covenant to be enacted. The explained covenant was read out and agreed to, sacrifices offered and blood (signifying the penalty if either side broke covenant?) sprinkled on altar and people. But the goal of the covenant was the communion with God which now seventy elders shared with Moses on behalf of all the people. The description of what they saw shows that their seeing God was more a further seeing of his glory. God was willing to be known by his people, and known to be near. Then Moses ascended Sinai to actually receive the 'hard copy' of this covenant.

Prayer

Father, you have made us your people so that we may live in faith, hope and love and be kept in fellowship with you. We are grateful for your law that came through Moses, but we give thanks to you that the greater revelation of grace and truth has come through our covenant Head, Jesus Christ, and through his cross. In him we have fellowship with you, Father, by your Spirit. Keep us mindful of your Son that we may always live in this fellowship. In his name we pray. Amen.

Chapters 25–26

Ch 25 The purpose of God to live among his people was to be reflected in the willing offerings of his people. Given the grumbling that had already occurred, we might marvel at the certainty of God that it would rely on this. But God is able to have his people willing, as the narrative will show. Of first importance would be the ark containing the covenant documentation or law. The covering of this ark was a meeting place of God with his people, and a place where atonement would be made. ('Mercy seat' is derived from a translation by Luther and conveys something of what it must have meant to Israel.)

The table received a daily offering of bread—thanksgiving for 'our daily bread', and a lamp—a witness that God had given them light to worship the true God. Christ, the true High Priest, now tends the churches, which are a lamp (Revelation 1). This suggests that the churches are to acknowledge that God has given them light, and that, as they are tended by Christ, they are a light to the world.

Ch 26 The temple had to be transportable, but it was to be of one piece when put together. Each part was to be exactly like Moses was shown on the mountain, the heavenly temple where the eternal Son ministered, not just a plan (Heb. 8:1– 5). There can be no true worship which is not an acknowledgment of and participation in the worship established by Christ in his eternal love for the Father, a worship which culminated in the offering up of himself by the Spirit and the sprinkling of his blood (Heb. 9:14).

Prayer

Father, we bless you that we may both know you and approach you through our Lord, Jesus Christ. We come to the throne of grace to receive mercy and help for our time of need. Let it always be to us a thing of wonder that we have been brought to gratefulness through your mercy, and that we are now lights of yours that shine in the world. Amen.