

Notes on Exodus 1—12

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Some notes about reading the book of Exodus

Exodus is the story of Israel's birth as a nation. It fulfilled promises made to Abraham that God would make of him a great nation. Here was a people in whom God would reveal his power, with a view to blessing all the nations. All peoples needed to observe and fear as they saw God speaking to and setting his people free. The blessing they needed for their own life was available to them as they blessed Israel and the God of Israel.

Every believer in Jesus Christ has been grafted into the people of God called Israel—to share in the promises made to them and to fulfil the vocation given to them. Jesus Christ came to fulfil the prophecies made to Israel. During his ministry, he was transfigured and talked with Moses and Elijah. Their subject was the 'exodus' (usually translated 'departure') Jesus would accomplish in Jerusalem. The national history of the people of God began with Moses and Israel but it was brought to fullness when Jesus died, and rose again, to set his people free—people from all nations.

In reading this book, we should be in awe at the majesty of God, humbled by the grace of God and comforted to see what God will do when he sets his love on his people.

Chapters 1–2

Ch 1 It pleased God that his people appear on the world stage in this way. His blessing (expressed in vigorous growth in numbers) was unstoppable, and caught the attention of those among whom Israel lived. On the other hand, the anxious nationalism of Egypt was expressed in repression and then genocide.

Ch 2 In this most improbable and threatening of circumstances, Moses was born and protected and brought up as a grandson of Pharaoh. His identity and the promises under which his own nation lived must have been conveyed to him in his infancy, and the Spirit of God must have stirred in his heart because he identified with the people of promise rather than with those who had power (see Heb. 11:23–26). But his early overture was unappreciated (Acts 7:23–29) and he himself seemed unprepared for opposition. It was not the time of God. Moses sank into a comfortable obscurity and it would seem that the opportunity for Israel to be saved had gone. But when God heard Israel's cry, and remembered his covenant, and looked and took notice, action began.

Prayer

Lord, this world is hot in anger against you, and we ourselves are slow to see the signs of your blessing and salvation. Forgive us that we are so slow to receive your Son Jesus Christ and to entrust ourselves to him. But you have heard our cry to you, Father. Your eye is on us, and you have remembered your covenant. You govern all things according to your own promise and faithfully bring us your people to their inheritance. Thank you, Father, in Jesus name. Amen.

Chapters 3–4

Ch 3 God revealed himself as very present—making a piece of desert sand holy. He was also the God of Moses' fathers. He also revealed himself as the 'I am' and proceeded to tell Moses what he would do as 'I am', and what Moses should do. God would keep his promise to the fathers, have pity on his people and effect signs in Egypt to arouse the faith of his people and loosen the grip of Pharaoh. Moreover, God would be with Moses. In the face of this favour and power, Moses remained abject, so much so that he aroused the anger of God.

Ch 4 None of this altered the purpose of God. Every complaint was met with a further resource. In contrast to this intense encounter, the parting with his in-laws, the greeting of his brother who would be his 'mouth', and the faith of Israel were peaceful fruits of God's gracious working. On the way, God revealed his relation to his people—they were his son. God's jealous love for his people would outdo any rival. God also revealed his insistence on the holiness of his people—they were his and must bear the mark of his covenant with them (Gen. 17:9–14).

Prayer

Father, thank you that your people are your own family, whose life and vocation you secure. We worship you for the gift of your Son, who, through his death and rising have taken us fully into your family as sons and daughters. Through him we have come to know you as 'I am'—the faithful and ever present God—and we worship together with all your church. Keep us mindful that our slowness to respond has not changed your purpose for us and that we may trust in your power to deliver us from all enemies. Amen.

Chapters 5–6

Ch 5 Pharaoh did not know the Lord, so he repressed these people blessed by God in order to establish his own kingdom. Israel had called on God but this may be the beginning of their awareness that they would never have a home in Egypt. Moses had encountered the insistence of God that he keep covenant in regard to the circumcision of his family and may well have feared that Israel would suffer pestilence if they did not worship God in the wilderness. But he grieved and complained to God for the bad effect his representations had had.

Ch 6 God's reply to his disheartened servant was to reveal more of himself and more of his purpose. While God was still the God who revealed himself to the patriarchs and he was remembering the covenant made with them, there was something new to be revealed and Moses should not be limited to what had been revealed already. The time for God's judgement on the Egyptians, and later, the Amorites, had come. The time for God revealing himself among his people on a

world stage had come. Although Moses was still unduly aware of his own limitations, Israel was being drawn on by the command and by the fear of God.

While the name Yahweh (LORD) had been used in the Genesis narrative, it now appears that this was transposing back what was known of God from this later time. The narrators thought this the appropriate name to use because it was Yahweh that created the earth and blessed Abraham—though the fullness of that name would not be known without the exodus.

Very soon, the tribe of Levi would distinguish themselves as zealous for God and would be set apart for priestly duty, but already, God had these two Levites, Moses and Aaron, ready for work.

Prayer

Father, the world is full of itself and struts arrogantly across the earth. I cannot hope to defeat it, or to compete with it, and long not to become like it. Save me by your word and by the fear of yourself. Let me grow bold in the knowledge of your saving deeds done in the earth through Jesus Christ, your Son, and our Lord. You have bonded yourself to us in covenant; may I confidently await your saving deeds. Amen.

Chapters 7–8

Ch 7 Perhaps Moses had an undue expectation of the power of his own eloquence—to be so persistently aware of his limitations. But deliverance was to come by God's mighty works. God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but Pharaoh acted with a hard heart and would be judged for so doing. No attempt is made in Scripture—here or elsewhere—to say where the will of God ends and the will of man begins. There is no will of man—good or evil—which is not encompassed by the greater will of God, and this remains one of the mysteries of our humanity.

The sign God had given Moses in the wilderness, and which had been persuasive for Israel, was magically replicated by those appointed to authenticate Pharaoh's rule with an air of mystique ('spin doctors?'). The first plague met with no better response, but the terrible denuding of the country had begun.

Ch 8 With the second plague, magicians could replicate the problem but not the solution and Pharaoh was obligated to negotiate with Moses; then, hardened his heart again. The question for Moses was not just that his people be freed but that Egypt would know the living God. With the third plague, magicians could not fake gnats and told Pharaoh they were dealing with God. That Pharaoh hardened his heart each time shows us that this was not a settled state but a dynamic action. With the fourth plague, God miraculously spared his people, but Egypt was ruined. Pharaoh now had no reason to doubt the action of God but still tried to negotiate for Israel not to leave the land. The question for Egypt was their autonomous power; the question for Israel all the time was their liberty to worship God without hindrance. This, God would secure.

Prayer

Father, in setting us free to love and to praise you, you have also put us in mortal combat with the powers of this world. May we not fear them, or think that our freedom is for ourselves. You alone are our God. We entrust ourselves to you and your Son, Jesus Christ, who is our Leader and Saviour, and in whose name we pray. Amen.

Chapters 9–10

Ch 9 The next two plagues did not change Pharaoh at all. Although he made enquiry and discovered that Israel was unaffected by stock loss, and although his magicians could not present themselves because of boils, his heart remained hard—or the Lord made him unable to change. In later times, God gave hardness of heart to his own people. This was to prevent their arrogance and to open up the possibility of faith in God's mercy (Rom. 11:8, 17–24).

With the coming of hail, God's plagues hit Pharaoh more personally (v. 14). God could have finished him straight away but he desired to make his name known through this patient enduring of his rival (Rom. 9:22–23). Although the severity of the trial brought Pharaoh to say he acknowledged God, Moses could see that while one crop remained, Pharaoh would not relent.

Ch 10 Threat of locusts made Pharaoh's officials plead with him to relent, and they marvelled that he could not already see the ruin of their country. They did not understand the power of God hardening someone's heart. Again, he would do anything to preserve himself and his reign. Then, darkness on the land meant that nothing could be done about repairing the disaster. This brought Pharaoh to what he thought was a concession, but he still held the reins. So his opposition to Moses and God was total. The way of negotiation was closed.

Prayer

You have said, Lord, that no flesh may glory in your presence. You have chosen that we should know you through mercy. Keep us in awe of your holy presence and great deeds in the earth lest we lift up our hearts and attempt to secure our own lives. We are grateful that your purpose in all things is that the world may know you as Father, through the reigning grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Chapters 11–12

Ch 11 So the contest of man against God came to the finale God had outlined at the beginning—my 'son' Israel freed, or your son dead. Egypt's populace and bureaucracy now saw Moses as having executive authority in the country, and the Hebrews as people to be served rather than treat as slaves. God had established the greatness of his name in the blessing of his people. Now God made an ultimate distinction between his people and those who were not his people.

Ch 12 A lamb killed, its blood sprinkled around the house's door, its flesh eaten, were signs of something to come but sufficed for that time to keep the angel of death at bay. The distinction between the world and God's people was not their doing but his. It was his offering that prevented wrath falling on the homes of his people. That reality was to be the beginning of their new history, and a perpetual remembrance through their years. On that night, they did not have opportunity to put yeast in their bread, and, to recall this fact (perhaps the sudden and final nature of the event), their annual festival was to include no yeast. This was later interpreted as a sign of separation from evil (Matt. 16:6; I Cor. 5:6–8). Such a feast was for those marked with another sign—that of circumcision. So, the congregation of Israel was formed. They were a people created by God's saving deed, clearly distinguished by their reliance on the sacrifice provided by God, and separated from dependence on the powers of this world.

In this ancient event, God prepared his people for the exodus to be effected by his Son at the cross (Luke 9:31). He foreshadowed the sprinkling of Christ's blood which would save us from the wrath to come (Rom. 5:9), and anticipated his enthronement as Lord over all our enemies. He prepared us for our radical separation from this world and its sin—so that we would have no hope or sustenance other than the living God and his grace (Phil. 3:3).

Prayer

Lord, your opposition to this world in its arrogance is awesome. But the provision of an offering for sin, when that offering is your Son, is even more awesome. Keep me mindful of your great gift. Let me exalt each day in the freedom you have announced—freedom from wrath and freedom to worship you. Lord Jesus Christ, you will come on the last day to separate those who live by your grace from those who seek to establish themselves. Then, let me flee from all faith in this present world that I may rather inherit the world you are making, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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