

The God Who Saves

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

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Exodus 3:1–6; 19:1–6 (NRSV)

[God's people, the descendants of Abraham have been in Egypt for several hundred years and enslaved by the Egyptians. But God is riding to the rescue and begins this mission by coming to an Israelite named Moses, who has fled Egypt after murdering an Egyptian foreman.]

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

[After defeating Pharaoh and winning the freedom of his people, God has led them back to the mountain where God first revealed his name and his promise to Moses. Now, God has a message for them.]

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ²They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. ³Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."

1 Samuel 8:4–9 (NRSV)

[Long after fleeing Egypt, the Israelites have conquered the land of Canaan, which God promised to Abraham, and have settled there. It has not gone well, as the people have demonstrated their unfaithfulness time and again. Now, even though God has always been their king, they are insisting upon a human king. God's prophet, Samuel, warns them about the dangers of such kings.]

⁴Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, ⁵and said to him, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." ⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the Lord, ⁷and the Lord said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. ⁹Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."

Who is this God who makes such extravagant promises? Can he really be trusted?

God has chosen a people, but will he now remember them and save them?

Recap

We are looking at the entire biblical story as if it were a six-act play. Last week, we considered the opening chapters of Genesis which tell the story of the first two acts.

Act One *Act Two* *Act Three* *Act Four* *Act Five* *Act Six*
Creation → Fall → Israel → Jesus → The church → Renewal of creation

God creates everything, including humans in God's image. All is good until the humans rebel against God, seeking to be like gods themselves. This rebellion not only destroys the humans' relationship with God but even damages God's creation. Thus ends Acts 1 and 2.

So, at the beginning of Act 3, God launches a project of restoration and renewal, choosing one couple, Abraham and Sarah, through whom this work will proceed. God promises

them a land to call their own, descendants more numerous than the stars, and, most importantly, that all the families of the earth will be blessed through them.

Though Sarah is long past her child-bearing years, God gives them a son, Isaac. Isaac's sons are Esau and Jacob. Jacob has twelve sons who become the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. When a famine comes upon the land of Canaan, Jacob's sons are driven to Egypt. There they stay and are eventually enslaved by the Egyptians.

Covenants

The notion of covenant is one of the central themes of the Bible. It isn't a word we use much anymore, but it expresses the making and keeping of commitments and promises. An excellent example today is a marriage covenant.

Though there are several types of covenants in the Bible, they fall into two broad categories, (1) the covenant between God and his people and (2) the covenants among humans.

Covenants are used in the Bible to bind two persons legally and personally, as when Jonathan makes a covenant with David (1 Samuel 18:3-4), wherein their loving bond diminishes the legal aspects of the covenant. In other cases, such as the covenant between Laban and Jacob (Genesis 31:43-54), the legal power of the covenant is much more important because Laban and Jacob don't trust each other. In most biblical covenants between humans, God is called on as the witness and guarantor.

When God is a participant in the covenant, such as God's covenants with Noah (Genesis 9:8-17) or Abraham (12:1-3) or Moses (in Exodus and Deuteronomy) or David (see 2 Samuel 7), the covenant takes on all the theological significance of a commitment between God the creator and his creation, between God the king and his people.

God's people are in desperate need of rescue. So God chooses one man, Moses, who will be God's prophet, the one to lead God's people out of Egypt. This is the story of the Exodus.

The Exodus

When the book of Exodus opens, Abraham's descendants (through Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons) have been enslaved in Egypt for several hundred years. Sometime around 1500–1300 BC, Moses is born, raised in the Pharaoh's house, murders an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Hebrew, and disappears into the desert. There, he marries and tends to his flocks.

One day, he sees a bush that is burning but is not consumed by the fire. When he investigates, Moses is confronted by God who tells Moses that God is going to save the Hebrews. It is in this meeting that God reveals his name to Moses, YHWH, which means "I am" or "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:1-6).

Moses resists and offers up some reasons why he isn't the right guy, but God persists. Eventually, Moses, with the help of his brother, returns to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Hebrews. As you'd expect, the Pharaoh resists, so God sends plague after plague upon Egypt. In the end, Pharaoh relents only when God sends death to strike all the first-born of Egypt. However, the death passes over the homes of the Hebrews who have marked their doorways with the blood of a lamb.¹

After this final plague, Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go, but then changes his mind and chases after them. God parts the Red Sea (or "sea of reeds")

to let the Hebrews pass, but the Egyptian army is drowned when they follow the Hebrews into the parted waters.

God then leads the Hebrews into the desert and after a few months, they arrive at Mt. Sinai where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments and the instructions for building God's tabernacle, the place where God will dwell with his people. God also instructs the people on a system of priests and sacrifices that will mark them out as God's people.

¹Jews commemorate this "passing over" every spring. In the last week before his crucifixion, Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. The last supper of Jesus and his disciples was a Passover dinner; Jesus is the Passover lamb, essentially inaugurating a new Exodus. Jesus is the one whose sacrificial death makes our own salvation possible.

Though the plagues in the Exodus story capture people's imagination, the heart of the story is the encounter between God and his people at Mt. Sinai. There, Moses climbs the mountain to appear before God, who reminds the people of what God has done for them and then proposes a covenant with the Israelites: "If you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my special treasure" (see Exodus 19:1-6). When Moses returns from the mountain, the leaders of the people meet and agree to accept the covenant, "to do everything Yahweh asks of us." After everything God had done for them, the Israelites' willingness to accept God's covenant shouldn't surprise us. Sadly neither will their failure to keep it.

Jesus, the Law, & the Two Tablets

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai, he brought two tablets containing what we call the Ten Commandments. These commandments can be found in Exodus 20. The first four commandments speak to our relationship with God: do not worship any other God, don't make idols, don't abuse God's name, keep the Sabbath holy. The last six speak to our relationship with others: honor your parents, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't testify falsely against your neighbor, and don't covet other people's possessions. The Ten Commandments lie at the heart of the Old Testament law.

Many people mistakenly believe that Jesus came to abolish the Old Testament Law. On the contrary, Jesus came to fulfill the law. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples what God's Law is really all about. When tested by the young lawyer, Jesus said that all the Law can be summed in the commandments to love God (the first tablet!) and to love neighbor (the second tablet!). All of the do's and don'ts one finds in the Bible are simply concrete expressions of those two commandments.

After the people accept the covenant with God, the most amazing thing happens. God tells Moses that he will come to the people in a cloud of smoke so they can hear the audible voice of God! God is going to spell out clearly the terms of the covenant Israel has accepted so that all can hear. Thus, Moses assembles the people at the base of the mountain where God, in smoke and fire and announced by the blowing of a ram's horn, addresses his people.

Instruction in the covenant

In God's address to those who have embraced a covenant relationship with him, YHWH lays out a series of ten terse commandments. In these commandments, God begins to shape a people who will be holy, who will reflect God's own character. The Ten Commandments begin God's instruction on how to live in right relationship with God and with one another. This entire passage (Exodus 20-31) is foundational to the biblical narrative and there are at least two keys to understanding why this is so.

First, God's choosing and saving of Israel was never simply for their own sake but for the sake of the whole world. Looking back from Mt. Sinai, the Israelites can remember God's promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). More than a thousand years later, Jesus would remind his disciples that they were to be the light to the world and not hide their light under a bushel basket (Matthew 5:14-16). But to be the light to the world, to be the ones through whom God

would restore all creation, God's people had to grow in holiness. Their character had to reflect God's own character. The Ten Commandments begin to show the Israelites what it means to love God and to love neighbor. The abstract commandment to love is made concrete.

Second, God is going to dwell with his people. Just how does a holy God live with an unholy people who remain very much the children of Adam?² So, in Exodus 25, God gives them

²We are all children of Adam in the sense that we all sinful, failing to love fully God and our neighbor. It is the separation and estrangement created by "sin" that must be fixed.

instructions for building a tabernacle³, a moveable shrine in which God will dwell. The Israelites didn't imagine that God could be contained in a tent, but they knew that God's presence would be with them in a way that he was not with other peoples. God would dwell with *them!* Imagine that God came to you and told you that he would live upstairs in your home. What a privilege; what a responsibility.

Israel breaks the covenant

Even in the midst of the Exodus story we learn that the people will be unable to live up to their end of the bargain. While Moses is on the mountain with God, the people start whining, even wishing they were back in Egypt. And when they decide that Moses isn't coming back, they fashion a calf made of gold, an idol, and thank this figurine for saving them from Pharaoh. It boggles the mind, but this story would be repeated countless times in the pages of the Old Testament.

After leaving the mountain

After leaving Mt. Horeb/Sinai, God leads his people to the land God had promised to Abraham. They send spies into Canaan to check things out and, being terrified by what they see, the people turn back. Rather than trusting in God, they trust in their own judgment. As you might expect, God is angry with them and tells them that they will not enter the Promised Land until that entire generation dies.⁴ Even Moses will never enter Canaan. Thus, the Hebrews wander aimlessly in the wilderness for forty years.⁵ The book of Deuteronomy is largely Moses' final speech to the new generation of the Hebrews, who will soon begin their conquest of Canaan. Moses' death is recorded at the end of Deuteronomy.

Settling in Canaan – the time of the judges

After the Israelites conquered large portions of Canaan, they settled into a long period of consolidation. The book of Judges tells the story of this very difficult, indeed tragic, period in Israel's history.

Unlike the peoples around them, the Israelites did not have a human king, for God was to be their king. The leadership and administration of the twelve tribes was handled by men and women known as "judges." Generally, the judges of Israel were chosen from among the heads of the twelve tribes. They had the authority to settle disputes and promote justice. They also provided military leadership.

As we might expect, some of the judges were "minor" and of little note. But others were lauded by Israel as saviors who led the tribes in times of crisis when the existence of Israel was threatened. For example, Othniel was the first judge and is presented in the book of Judges as an ideal leader who rescued the Israelites from oppression. Other judges are better known, such as Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. Deborah was not only the legal and military leader of Israel, she was also a prophet.

Though God raised up many judges who led the people back to God, their faithfulness was inevitably short-lived. Succeeding generations would fall further and further away from God, until God raised up yet another judge. It could be described as descending cycles of faithlessness. In the end, the people abandoned God's way entirely, doing "what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

³The tabernacle was a moveable tent, suitable for a nomadic people. Inside was a place set apart from the rest that was called the Holy of Holies. In it was kept the Ark of the Covenant containing the stone tablets brought down the mountain by Moses. Centuries later, when the people were settled in the Promised Land, they would build a permanent temple in Jerusalem. It was patterned on the tabernacle described in the book of Exodus.

⁴Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, urge the people to trust in God's promises and enter the land, but they are ignored. Because of their faithfulness to God, Joshua and Caleb are allowed to lead the next generation into Canaan.

⁵This time in the wilderness becomes an important theme in the Bible. For example, where does Satan tempt Jesus after his baptism? In the wilderness.

No king but God?

The book of Samuel⁶ begins with the story of the man who would be the last of Israel's judges and the first of many writing prophets. The Israelites' clamor incessantly for a king, a human king, so that they can be like the nations around them. This is a rejection of God, for up until now, God has been their king.

Though God, speaking through Samuel, warns them that they are not going to happy with human kings, who are takers, the people insist and God relents. Samuel anoints a man named Saul as the first king of the united kingdom of Israel. David will be the second king and Solomon the third.

Looking ahead

Next week, we'll look at the story of Israel's kings and the unwillingness of the people to be faithful to God, leading to their exile in Babylonia. We'll examine their return to Jerusalem, such as it was, and the centuries they spent under foreign rule . . . right up to the time a baby is born to a virgin in Bethlehem.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Exodus 3:1 – 4:17 Moses meets God at the burning bush and is given his assignment.

Tuesday, Exodus 11-12 The warning of the final plague and the institution of the Passover meal

Wednesday, Exodus 20:1-18 The Ten commandments

Thursday, Numbers 14 The people refuse to enter the promised Land

Friday, Joshua 3 With God as their warrior king, the people cross the Jordan river and enter the Promised Land.

Saturday, Samuel 8-9 The people insist on a human king, and Saul is chosen.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The Ten Commandments is one portion of the story of the Exodus that everyone is familiar with. They embody the essence of God's teachings to his people. Read Exodus 20:1-18 and then consider the following:

1. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon remind us "that the [ten] commandments are so straightforward and terse suggests not that they are easy to know, but that they are not self-sufficient." After all, not all Christians agree on what "you shall not murder" means. Is this only referring to our modern legal definition of murder or does it speak more broadly about the sanctity of life? The meaning and application of these commandments are worked out in the life of God's people. How does this happen? How do we build a community that attempts to be faithful to God's will and way, yet stays humble? Surely, sometimes we get this wrong. Hauerwas and Willimon suggest that "we don't know what adultery is apart from a church that shows us what marriage is." Do you agree? How do we as individuals or as the church work through the meaning of these commandments? How does the church influence your own moral decisions?
2. Imagine that God came to you and proposed that he live in your house. How would this make you feel? Would it make a difference if God had done some good things for you? Suppose that God posted the Ten Commandments as new rules of the house. Do they make sense to you? Is there anything missing? Why these ten and not others? What would you like to see on the list that isn't there? As you look over the list, which ones make you the most anxious? The Jews found joy in the rules of their house (see Psalm 119). Why do you think this is so? Many of us find little joy in any rules. Even the word "obedience" can make us nervous. How can we find joy in being obedient to God's will for our lives?

⁶The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are one writing, as is 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles. They were too lengthy to fit on a single scroll, hence the tradition of dividing the books in two. This is not true of New Testament books like 1 and 2 Corinthians, which are two different letters from Paul.

