



WEEK OF JANUARY 21, 2024
(COVERS READINGS FROM JANUARY 21-27)

Overview

The following information is provided as a basic orientation to reading the Bible. Feel free to add to it and use it in any way that is helpful for your group. Also, feel free to make copies of these pages for members of your group!

In Exodus 7-11 God instructs Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Israelites. Through them God performs signs and wonders in Egypt, sending 10 plagues of varying intensity upon the land and its inhabitants.

In Exodus 12, as the last and final plague is approaching, the Lord instructs the people of Israel to mark the day as a new beginning for them – the “passover of the Lord,” when the Lord “passed over” them, sparing the Israelites from death and securing their freedom from Egypt.

In Exodus 13, the Lord gives further instructions to Moses regarding the remembrance of the great Passover, and then leads the people into the wilderness by way of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. In Exodus 14, we see that the battle between God and Pharaoh continues when Pharaoh and his army ride against the Israelites, trapping them at the Red Sea. God saves the Israelites by parting the sea with a strong east wind, creating dry ground by which the people could escape to the other side of the sea. When Pharaoh and his army try to pursue the Israelites through the sea, the Lord causes the water to come crashing down, utterly defeating Pharaoh.

In Exodus 19, the people finally arrive at Mt. Sinai, the place where Moses first encountered God in the burning bush. Here the people consecrate themselves in preparation to enter into covenant with God. In Exodus 20, we find the Ten Commandments, God’s terms for this new covenant agreement with his people.

In Exodus 32, the people grow restless in waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain, so they persuade Aaron to make gods for them. He obliges, taking their gold, melting it and forming it into a golden calf that they then begin to worship as their new god. The Lord immediately sends Moses back down the mountain to put a stop to the people’s revelry, which he does then pleads the Lord for mercy on their behalf. Chapter 33 opens with the Lord’s command to continue the journey to the promised land, but this time they must go without the Lord’s presence among them. Now,

Moses pitches a tent outside the camp and there goes to meet with God, and again, he pleads on Israel's behalf for the Lord to go with them. The Lord agrees, renewing the earlier covenant by rewriting the tablets of stone containing the Ten Commandments – which Moses broke earlier in a rage over the golden calf – and promising to indeed bring the people into the land flowing with milk and honey. This forty day/night encounter with God transfigures Moses face so that his appearance seems so bright to the Israelites that they implore him to wear a veil to hide the brightness of his face.

In Joshua, we find that Moses has now died and the people have reached the threshold of Canaan, the promised land. The Lord now chooses Joshua to lead the people in place of Moses, promising to be with him in the same way he was with Moses. In Joshua 3 and 4, just as they began their journey through the waters of the Red Sea, so now the people must cross the river Jordan. They do so on dry ground just as before. The Lord instructs the people to mark the day as another day of new beginnings by setting up twelve stones (one for each tribe) and telling the story to their children in years to come.

At the end of Joshua 5, the newly minted leader of the Israelites encounters God in a similar fashion as Moses did with the burning bush (Exodus 3), setting the stage for the battle of Jericho in Joshua 6 – where God once again confirms his sovereignty over all nations.

General Discussion Questions

Use any or all of the following questions, depending how much time you have:

- How familiar were you with this week's readings? Was there anything that surprised you?
- What do you learn about God from these readings? What do you learn about humanity, or about human nature? How did the authors of these writings understand their relationship with God?
- What passages or aspects of these readings give you comfort or assurance? What passages or aspects of these readings do you find difficult to accept?
- Are there any particular passages that you want to study in-depth?

This Week's Discussion Questions

Exodus 7-11 | One commentator writes:

In fact, the contest...is really between Yahweh [God] and Pharaoh, between the God of emancipation and the awesome power of evil and brutality. ...contemporary people, like ancient people, have in endless ways sworn allegiance or found themselves in bondage to false authorities who intend no good, but who only exploit or abuse. The [Christian life] has as its work the emancipation of persons from all seductive bondages. This may entail the dramatic disclosure that the old loyalties are discredited. It also invites people to the hard, slow work of boldly withdrawing allegiance and refusing to obey or submit to these loyalties.

In what ways have you seen the “power of evil and brutality” at work in the world, in the community or in your own life? In what ways have you witnessed the power of God at work to overcome oppression and injustice, to set people free? In what ways might God be calling you to the “work of boldly withdrawing allegiance and refusing to obey or submit to these loyalties?”

Exodus 34 | Earlier in the Exodus story (ch. 3), God reveals the divine name to Moses: YHWH, which means “He who is” or “He will be,” an enigmatic name whose full meaning is only made clear through the unfolding of the events leading to the people’s arrival at Mt. Sinai. Here again in Ch. 34, God reveals the divine name to Moses; however, now the name comes with greater clarity and context:

‘The Lord [YHWH], the Lord [YHWH],
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children’s children,
to the third and the fourth generation.’

Here seven terms are used to describe the essential character of YHWH: merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, faithfulness, keeping steadfast love, forgiving. All of these combine to paint a picture of a God who is deeply committed to sustaining covenantal relationship with Israel, even when they are unable or unwilling to do the same. In light of this, why do you think it might be crucial that this revelation of God’s character is given at the precise moment God is most deeply offended (see ch. 32)? In what ways have you experienced these attributes of God in your own life? In what ways have you allowed God to demonstrate these to others through you?

Closing Prayer

God of mercy and steadfast love,

We are in awe of your wonder and power at work in the world and in our lives. We give you thanks for the ways you continue to lead your people to freedom, confirming your love and faithfulness through signs and wonders – through basin, water and towel; through table, bread and cup. Lord, by your grace, strengthen our faithfulness to you and to the ways in which you call us to be your covenant people. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.