

Title: The Book of Exodus

Text: Exodus 1:10, 16; 4:21; 12:29-32

Main Point: To understand the work and ways of the God of the Exodus.

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Series: The Beginning of the Book

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of our new series, “The Beginning of the Book,” is to provide you with an overview of the first books of the Bible. Today’s book is Exodus. Because one sermon cannot address the many concepts contained in Exodus, I will use this outline:

- First, I will cover the historical and biographical details regarding the book of Exodus.
- Next, I address two highly controversial and troubling events in the book.
- Finally, I want to offer reasons Christians should invest time in Exodus.

Historical and Biographical Details

I like Andrew Knowles’ book, “The Bible Guide,” which provides an accessible treatment of the Bible Books. If you desire to understand a Bible book’s content, meaning, and relevance, I find this work a good starting point. He introduces the book of Exodus as describing “How God rescues his people, the Israelites, from slavery in Egypt. The climax of their escape comes when God causes a wind to part the waters of the Red Sea. The Israelites cross in safety, but the Egyptian army is drowned. This is the defining moment of the ‘Exodus’ which means ‘way out’. (The same idea is in our word ‘exit’.) God leads his people through the desert to Mount Sinai, where he gives them his law and prepares them for their new life in Canaan, the Promised Land. The Israelite leader is Moses. He is born a Hebrew, raised as an Egyptian prince and works as a shepherd on the slopes of Sinai. He is assisted by his brother Aaron, who acts as spokesman and later becomes Israel’s first high priest.”

I also find Mr. Knowles’ outline of the book accurate and simple:

- The slavery of the Israelites and the birth of Moses (1:1–2:25)
- God calls Moses (3:1–4:31)
- The great escape (5:1–15:21)
- The desert journey (15:22–18:27)
- The giving of the law (19:1–24:18)
- The tabernacle and the priests (25:1–31:18)
- Rebellion and judgment (32:1–34:35)
- The climax of Exodus (35:1–40:38)

(Andrew Knowles, The Bible Guide, 1st Augsburg books ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 41.)

The book of Exodus historically places God’s people as enslaved in Egypt and concludes with them in the Egyptian Southern Sinai Peninsula. The book describes God hearing the prayers of His people and selecting a leader (Moses) to confront the Egyptian leadership, particularly the supreme leader (Pharaoh), to release God’s people from Egypt. A contest of power ensues between Pharaoh and God, resulting in Pharaoh allowing the people to leave. The remainder of the book outlines the trip from Egypt (chapter 14) to Mount Sinai (chapter 19), and God’s preparation of His people for their new land at Sinai (the remainder of the book).

I support Mosaic authorship of the book for the following reasons:

- Sections of the Book of Exodus support Moses as its author (17:14; 24:3-4; 34:27).
- Malachi attributes Exodus to Moses (Malachi 4:4).
- The Apostle Paul claims that Moses is responsible for God’s law, as given in Exodus (Romans 10:5).
- Finally, Jesus gives Moses the credit for the book (Mark 7:10; 12:26; Luke 20:37; John 5:46, 47, 7:19-23).

Two Controversial and Troubling Highlights from the Book

1. Early in the book, the issue of God “hardening Pharaoh’s heart” is introduced (4:21). See 7:3, 13, 14, 22; 8:15,19,32; 9:7, 12, 34, 35; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, for more on the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.
 - 1.1. Some find this action by God troublesome. Directly to the point, God hardens Pharaoh’s heart so that he will not let the people go, and then severely punishes him for not letting the people go. For many, this raises concerns about God’s goodness and justice.
 - 1.2. Generally, how to reconcile this delimma divides along two distinct lines: One, promoted by the architect of the Prostestant Reformation, Martin Luther, following Romans 9:15, God “will have mercy on who [He] will have mercy and . . . compassion on whom [He has] compassion,” emphasizing God’s freedom to reject and elect whom He wills.
 - 1.3. The second position is well represented by the church father Origen (A.D. 185-A.D. 254), who sought to reconcile God’s mercy and justice with the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. God’s mercy is not intent on hardening Pharaoh’s heart, but it does allow him the choice to obey God or not, and his choices result in his hard heart.
 - 1.3.1. In his commentary on Exodus, Origen [cites] the words of Paul: “What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction (Rom 9:22). It is ‘as if the [patience] of God having endured the vessels of wrath, had, as it were, produced them,’ Origen points out. He extrapolates, suggesting that if God’s patience with sinners allows their wickedness to abound, then one can rightly say that, in this way, he hardened their heart. And because Pharaoh is not convinced by the signs and wonders wrought in his midst but is thereby proved to be even harder and more unbelieving, then, ‘does it not look as though the hardness and unbelief had arisen from the marvelous miracles . . . ?’

An illustration of this truth is suggested by Heb 6:7: ‘Ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly, and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed; its end is to be burned over.’ ‘There is one operation in respect of the rain,’ Origen observes, but different land produces differently. Without the rain there would be neither fruits nor thorns. With the rain there are both. ‘It would sound harsh for the sender of the rain to say, “I made the fruits and the thorns to grow that are in the land,” he suggests, “but however harsh it might sound, it would nevertheless be true.” At the same time, ‘it was the inherent badness of the land, left uncared for and uncultivated, which caused thorns and thistles to grow.’ So it is with God:

‘God’s marvelous doings are, as it were, the rain; but men’s different [behaviors] are, as it were, the cultivation or neglect of the land; the nature of the land is one and the same.’

Origen observes that on occasion Pharaoh softened [Exodus 8:8 (2nd, frogs), 28 (4th, flies); 9:27-28 (7th, hail); 10:16-17 (8th, locust)], conceding, for instance, that the Israelites might go out into the wilderness, but not far away, or that they might go, but without women, or livestock, and so on. ‘Now there would not have been even this degree of softening, if as is thought by the many, the meaning of ‘I will harden Pharaoh’s heart’ is that the hardening was effected by God Himself.’ ” (Claire Mathews McGinnis, “The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in Christian and Jewish Interpretation,” ed. Joel B. Green, *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, Volume 6, no. 1–2 (2012): 46–47)

- 1.4. I agree with Origen’s understanding. Origen’s points of “softening” describe the sovereign God allowing him the choice to concede to God’s will and free His people, or to reject and face God’s consequences. Either way, God’s will is accomplished. However, Origen’s understanding best honors the entire Bible’s description of God’s sovereignty, mercy, and justice in the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.
2. The second issue is the tenth plague and the killing of the firstborn in Egypt (Exodus 12:29-30).
 - 2.1. Some address the plague this way: “Why would I want to worship a vengeful God who slaughters innocent children?”
 - 2.2. I offer my best understanding of God and the tenth plague.
 - 2.2.1. Two laws are operating during the time of Exodus: the *Lex Talionis*, the principle of proportional punishment, also known as “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (Exodus 21:23-24). The second comes from the Noahic Covenant: And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man, I will require a reckoning for the life of man. ‘Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image’” (Genesis 9:5-6). If you value and believe in justice, in this case God’s justice, He cannot ignore the laws He has given.
 - 2.2.2. Also, the context of Exodus is important. Exodus 1:10 states: “Come, let us [Egyptians] deal shrewdly with them, lest they [God’s people] multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” The Egyptians improvised a plan to control births. The exact means are unclear, but the intent is clear. Likely, the treatment of hard work and lack of care impacted pregnancy or longevity of life. In addition to their “shrewdness,” Pharaoh ordered the killing of all Hebrew newborn males (Exodus 1:15-22).
 - 2.2.3. Before the final plague, nine plagues were demonstrating God’s mercy to Pharaoh (to which he softened at points) and the Egyptians, but they refused His mercy. Each plague advances the consequences leading to the final plague. Had the Egyptians allowed the release of God’s people, there would not have been a final plague.

- 2.2.4. God had promised that He would provide freedom for His people and provide them a special land prepared for them (Genesis 50:24-24). Not to free His people would demonstrate a God unable to do so or a God untrustworthy to His promises.
- 2.2.5. God said what the tenth plague was unique: “There shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there has never been, nor ever will be again” (Exodus 11:6). The tenth plague had a special role in the work of God to develop a people who would provide Jesus as Savior of the world.
- 2.2.6. Pharaoh believed himself to be the supreme god along with the gods of Egypt (12:12). God was proving Himself the supreme God over all, first to His people and any Egyptians who would worship Him. Specifically, the Egyptian god Isis was the protector of children. The final judgement established God as more powerful than Isis.
 - 2.2.6.1. “Isis was an Egyptian goddess, the ‘giver of life. . . .’ Isis had great magical powers and was the protector of children. . . . Her cult flourished throughout the Greco-Roman world until the sixth century A.D. (Allen C. Myers, “ISIS,” in The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 535.)
3. In conclusion, the killing of the firstborn displayed God’s justice, demonstrated His superiority over all the gods of Egypt, and was the means to honor His covenant by freeing the people to possess the new land God promised them.

Reasons Christians Should Invest Time in Exodus

1. I conclude with the following reasons Christians should invest time in the book of Exodus.
 - 1.1. It provides a clear example of God’s moral law in the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20).
 - 1.2. It portrays God as keeping His promises, defending His people, and issuing justice for sin.
 - 1.3. It reminds Christians of the hardening effect of sins on the inner life.
 - 1.4. It encourages the “fear of the Lord.”
 - 1.5. It demonstrates God’s power to control nature.
 - 1.6. It details why human resistance cannot impede God’s will.