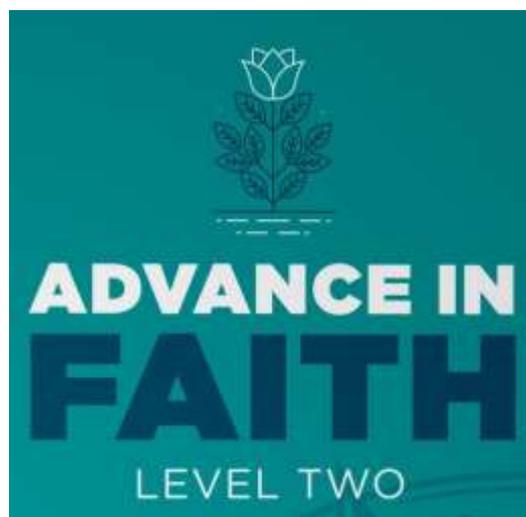


# Book of Exodus

## Week 3 — A kingdom of priests (Exodus 15–20)



## Introduction

Redeemed from slavery, passed over by death, saved from Pharaoh's forces, Israel passes through the Red Sea to be born as a nation. The promises God gave to Abraham are now reality. Their God—YHWH—has rescued his people. Pharaohs' power is gone.

They celebrate the one who delivered them, their new ruler:

### **Exodus 15:1-2, 17-18 (ESV)**

**15**<sup>1</sup> I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

<sup>2</sup> The LORD is my strength and my song,  
and he has become my salvation;  
this is my God, and I will praise him,  
my father's God, and I will exalt him. ...

<sup>17</sup> You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain,  
the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode,  
the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established.

<sup>18</sup> The LORD will reign forever and ever.

Led by YHWH, they make their way to the Promised Land. There they will be his nation under his law. "His abode" is the temple, the palace of the king who forever lives among them.

That's what the rest of the Book of Exodus is about. He leads them to his holy abode on Mount Sinai (Ex 16–18). There he makes himself known to them: he is their God; they are his people (Ex 19). He gives them laws for their nation, so his people reflect his character (Ex 20–23). They enter into covenant with him (Ex 24). He instructs them how to build a tent for him to travel with them to their destination in the Promised Land (Ex 25–31). They build a golden calf instead (Ex 32–34), but after bringing them back on track, they complete the tent for YHWH (Ex 35–39), and he moves in among his people (Ex 40).

## Israel's new ruler (Exodus 15–19)

### *The salvation song (Exodus 15)*

This is the first song in the Bible. There are poems in Genesis. The life of a key person is often summarized with a poem (Gen 2:23; 4:23–24; 9:25–27; 14:19–20; 24:60; 27:27–29; 39–40; 48:15–16, 20; 49). But the only mention of a "song" was one that Jacob didn't want. After two decades of conflict with Laban, Jacob tries to sneak away quietly, and Laban complains that he denied him a chance to party:

**Genesis 31:27 (ESV)** Why did you flee secretly and trick me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with mirth and **songs**, with tambourine and lyre?

Australian culture knows that kind of pub song. It's meaningless. Jacob didn't want it. By contrast, there is a real song, the spontaneous outbreak of joy, of deliverance. Here it is in Exodus 15, for the first time in the Bible's story.

This song introduces the language of *salvation* (15:2). But please do not reduce this to forgiveness from personal guilt! The salvation God brings to the world is release from bondage to the powers of sin and death, so the earth can be what he created it to be: his fruitful domain.

This song introduces the language of *redemption* (15:13). But please do not reduce this mean skipping hell and going to heaven instead. Redemption means being bought back out of slavery to serve our true Master instead of the powers we pawned the earth to.

The point of *salvation* and *redemption* is to bring us back under divine rule, as his people, living in his presence, under his governance:

**15<sup>18</sup>** The LORD will reign forever and ever!

That victory encompasses the whole sweep of salvation history, the entire purposes of God to restore the earth under his rule.

When Israel was released from earthly rule into YHWH's care, they were the first nation to experience life as the kingdom of God. YHWH humbled Pharaoh, showing him to be a mere man, not a god (ruler). YHWH dealt with Pharaoh's army, the power of death that enforced his rule. YHWH gloriously triumphed, while Pharaoh's power was tossed into the Sea. YHWH is exalted, shown to be the true ruler, while the power of earthly rulers sank to the lowest level, the seabed.

This song resonates throughout Israel's history — the marvellous acts of YHWH making a way for his people (e.g. Psalm 66:6; 74:13; 77:16-19; 78:13; 53; 106:7-12; 136:13-15). It reverberates in the promises of the prophets, especially after Israel had gone into exile.

This song reverberates through the New Testament. The Messiah chose Passover as the time to face the rule of evil to defeat the power of death. He did so not only for Israel, but for all nations. He brought God's salvation to the world. He redeemed the earth back into God's care. "The Lord will reign forever and ever!" is his song.

The first song in the Bible—the song of Moses—becomes the song of the Messiah in the Bible's final song. It still celebrates the same thing: the mighty deeds of the Lord God to rescue his creation into his reign.

**Revelation 15:3 (ESV)**

They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God,  
and the song of the Lamb, saying,  
Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty!  
Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!"

***Exodus 15–17: Regal providence***

The euphoria of coming out from oppressive rule didn't last long. It's wonderful to be under YHWH's command, but they're still living in the broken world. Ever since Genesis 3, life has been a bitter struggle. This barren wilderness is nothing like Eden's Garden where the rivers of God's presence gushed out in all directions to water creation (Genesis 2:10-14).

***a) Fresh water (15:22-27)***

For three days, they go without water. Finally they find water, only to discover it's bitter. Can you relate?

God rescues his people, providing a log to make bitter water sweet (15:25). This is not just an odd event: it's an object lesson that reveals God's character. The God who heals the waters is the God who heals his people as they follow his ways:

**Exodus 15:26** ... I am the LORD, your **healer**.

The heavenly sovereign never gives up on his broken creation: he heals it, dealing with the bitterness, making everything sweet again (Revelation 21:5).

Under God's leadership, they arrive at Elim, a place with 12 springs — enough water for all 12 tribes (15:27).

***b) Food (16:1-38)***

In English, the *wilderness of Sin* (16:1) might sound like a place of wrongdoing. It's not: in Hebrew, it's related to the word *Sinai*.

They grumble that they have no food. They wish they had stayed in Egypt where, as slaves, they were given food (16:3).

YHWH provides food for his people—a kind of wafer bread. The people are curious, so they ask in Hebrew, *mān hū?* That means “What is it?” and that's what they end up calling it: **manna** (16:15).

They are instructed to go and collect the “What is it?” each morning, Sunday to Friday, but not on the **Sabbath**. Already, they're learning the difference between being people of Pharaoh and people of YHWH. YHWH provides, but he expects them to work for it. He expects them to work 6 days a week, and to have a holiday every week (16:22-30).

***c) Water again (17:1-7)***

To reject Moses is to mistrust God's leadership, since Moses was appointed by God. Moses felt his life was under threat (17:4). The Gospel writers depict Jesus in a similar position: God's anointed deliverer, with his life under threat from Israel's leaders.

Moses is instructed to strike a rock with his staff. When he does, water—what the people need in the moment—flows out. Rocks are generally barren and lifeless, but this rock yielded the life-giving presence of God to sustain his people.

The NT draws a parallel between this rock and Jesus. Jesus was struck down as lifeless as a rock by complaining Israel. But his death released the divine life that flows like living water to provide exactly what we need.

**1 Corinthians 10:1–4 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> ... our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, <sup>2</sup> and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, <sup>3</sup> and all ate the same spiritual food, <sup>4</sup> and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

What God did for Israel in Moses' time, he is doing for the world in Jesus. Don't turn from God's appointed leader as they did.

**d) Attacked (17:8-16)**

The nomadic Amalekites don't like Israel in their space. They attack. This is a problem Israel will have throughout their history.

Joshua leads Israel's fighters, but the battle only goes Israel's way when Moses appeals to God. Aaron and Hur hold up Moses' hands as he prays.

In prayer, Moses mediates heaven's authority to the earth. He stands on the ground, with *a hand on YHWH's throne* (17:16).

A clear picture is emerging here. God provides for his people, but his people must ask. **Prayer**—approaching the king with a petition for his assistance/provision—is crucial to survival. That was true of the bitter water, his provision of food, his provision of water from the rock, and their survival when attacked.

Prayer voices the partnership between Heaven and earth, between God and his people, between the king and the kingdom.

**e) Disputes (18:1-27)**

But the problem is not just other people like the Amalekites. The relational disputes among the Israelites are draining Moses. Fourteen chapters ago, Moses sent his wife and child back to her father to keep them safe, and he's still too busy to look after them.

Jethro (Moses' father-in-law) visits Moses (18:6). He rejoices to hear all that YHWH has done for his people. He's a Midianite priest, but he offers sacrifices to Moses' God (18:1, 12).

Moses' father-in-law advises him to delegate responsibility:

**18** <sup>25</sup> Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. <sup>26</sup> And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves.

This kind of bureaucratic structure is absolutely essential to managing people in the broken world. We already argued that God permitted human governance, even though it was not his original kingdom ideal.<sup>1</sup> What's interesting here is that this necessary bureaucratic structure comes to Israel from the nations, not from the LORD.

As we will see in coming chapters, Israel's justice laws come as revelation from YHWH (Exodus 20–23). But the human governmental structure comes not from YHWH but from a Midianite priest.

### ***Exodus 19: Israel meets her ruler***

Finally, Moses leads the people to where they've been heading ever since the Red Sea: "the mountain of God" (3:1), the palace where the heavenly king revealed himself to Moses (3:14). The first sign God gave Moses was that he would bring the people to this mountain to commit themselves to serve God (3:12).

The heavenly sovereign speaks to Moses from his palace on Mount Sinai. He gives Israel their national identity:

#### **Exodus 19:4–6 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. <sup>5</sup> Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; <sup>6</sup> and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

God is about to establish the nation of Israel as:

- a) the people rescued from oppressive rule, into God's reign
- b) God's treasured people, uniquely covenanted to him
- c) a kingdom mediating God to people and people to God
- d) a nation revealing the faithful character of God to the nations

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<sup>1</sup> [allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/03/human-government-a-concession-genesis-91-6/](http://allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/03/human-government-a-concession-genesis-91-6/)

### ***Covenant***

God had already committed himself to Abraham's family with a covenant (2:24; 6:4-5). Now he is entering a legally binding agreement where they are his people and he is their sovereign:

6<sup>7</sup> I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

We isolate church and state as separate powers, but the ancient world did not. The gods ruled and gave power to the rulers. That was true even in Egypt. When God says, *I will be your God*, a part of what he is saying is, *I will be your ruler*. If you miss that, you will think of God only as their religious leader, not their political leader too.

Nations had covenants with their kings (e.g. 1 Samuel 11:1), never with their gods! The *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* has this to say about *b<sup>e</sup> rîṭ*, the Hebrew word for covenant:

The idea of a **covenant between a deity and a people is unknown to us from other religions and cultures**. ... the covenantal idea was a special feature of the religion of Israel, the only one to demand exclusive loyalty and to preclude the possibility of dual or multiple loyalties such as were permitted in other religions, where the believer was bound in diverse relationships to many gods. The stipulation in political treaties demanding exclusive fealty to one king corresponds strikingly with the religious belief in one single, exclusive deity.<sup>2</sup>

The Sinai covenant is therefore a kingdom document. It establishes Israel as a unique nation — the only nation ruled directly by a deity. They were the representative kingdom of God among the nations. Their unique commission was to represent the holy character of the divine sovereign to the other kingdoms of the earth.

Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, therefore, Israel is the nation where God dwells among his people, the people through whom his authority is to be known throughout the earth. What a calling!

The covenant ceremony takes place in Exodus 24. Before they commit themselves, the heavenly king spells out the terms of the covenant to which they will agree.

Moses must prepare the people to meet God and hear from him. Crucially, they cannot enter the holy space of God's palace on Mount Sinai (19:10). The God who had been among them in a pillar of cloud and fire is visibly present in smoke and fire (19:18). They must not

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<sup>2</sup> M. Weinfeld, "berith," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, translated by John T. Willis, (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 1977), volume 2, 278.

approach him uninvited. After the covenant commitment is made, they will be invited to learn how to approach him.

A trumpet prepares people to attend to God. God answers in thunder (19:19). God descends to his mountain, and Moses goes up to meet him (19:20). After three days, the heavenly king speaks to his people.

## A nation under divine law (Exodus 20)

In the ancient world, laws were not passed by parliament. They were given by the king. Israel's king begins issuing the laws for his nation.

### *Ten Commandments (Exodus 20)*

Do the Ten Commandments apply to Christians?

Most Christians agree that the purpose of the Hebrew law

is not primarily to give information about morality ... but to provide materials that, when pondered and absorbed into the mind, will suggest the pattern or shape of a way of life lived in the presence of God.<sup>3</sup>

But the Ten Commandments are often treated as a special case:

The Ten Commandments have, traditionally, been given a place within Christian ethics denied to the other law codes of the Pentateuch.<sup>4</sup>

Eastern Orthodox,<sup>5</sup> Catholic,<sup>6</sup> and Protestant<sup>7</sup> churches have all treated them as definitive for Christians. Is this right?

The Ten Commandments were not the original laws for all societies. Egypt and other nations already had their laws. **Hammurabi** was king of Babylon back closer to Abraham's time. An engraved copy of his 282 laws has survived:

The Code is a case-by-case formulation of customary law, covering civil, criminal, and administrative law, and reflects a well-developed commercial society. Subsequent discoveries of other law codes have made it clear that the Code of Hammurabi is neither the oldest nor the most original, but it is still the most detailed ...<sup>8</sup>

#### Ten Commandments

1. No gods before YHWH
2. No idols
3. No abuse of the name
4. Sabbath rest
5. Honour parents
6. No murder
7. No adultery
8. No theft
9. No perjury
10. No coveting

<sup>3</sup> J. Barton, 1998. "Approaches to Ethics in the Old Testament" in *Beginning Old Testament Study*, edited by J. Rogerson (London: SPCK, 1998), 128.

<sup>4</sup> Paula Gooder, *The Pentateuch: A Story of Beginnings*, T&T (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 91.

<sup>5</sup> D. N. Bernardakis, *A Catechism*, trans. C. D. Cobham (Nicosia, Cyprus: Government Printing Office, 1903), 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 498–504.

<sup>7</sup> Westminster Assembly, *Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Ed.* (Philadelphia: Young, 1851), 239–319.

<sup>8</sup> R. E. Hayden, "Hammurabi," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Eerdmans, 1979–1988), 2:606.

The Ten Commandments were the foundational laws *for Israel*, not for other ancient nations, nor for modern democracies. It would be a misuse of Scripture to suggest that Australian law should implement the Ten Commandments. We should not legislate the death penalty for anyone who works on Saturday. Do not make the Ten Commandments normative for Christians, or for democratic legal systems.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, God did not give Israel these laws in order to make life hard for them. He didn't pick random rules. He's not capricious. These commands reflect something of God's character, or at least they were designed to help Israel represent something of God's character to the nations. *What does this law reveal about the character of God?*

### ***#1 No gods before YHWH (20:3)***

YHWH was Israel's deity, but also the ruler of their nation. Giving a higher allegiance to any other ruler violates this command.

### ***#2 No idols (20:4-6)***

God made humans to be the living image of their heavenly sovereign (Genesis 1:26-28). A lifeless image made by a human cannot represent God: it's an insult to God.

### ***#3 No abuse of the name (20:7)***

Taking the name in vain is not just swearing. It's using his name in a vacuous or deceptive manner.

The name of YHWH is the ultimate authority in the universe. You misuse the name if you claim divine authority in order to subjugate people to your authority (as a false prophet might do).

### ***#4 Sabbath rest (20:8-11)***

For ex-slaves, this must have sounded wonderful. Their new sovereign didn't want them working all the time: he wanted them to stop and have time off together every week. How good is that?

So, what does this command reveal about God? The way he created the world, we don't need to work seven days a week. We derive some fulfilment from work, but life isn't all about work. We need time to stop and enjoy family and friends too. Crucially, they were all to take time off **at the same time**, so the joy was communal.

This is not a command to attend synagogue or church.

### ***#5 Honour parents (20:12)***

Israel was never commanded to honour their leaders; only their God. (The nearest you get to the command not to curse a ruler — Ex 22:28). But they are commanded to honour their parents, the people who procreated them (procreation = creation on behalf of God).

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<sup>9</sup> [allenbrowne.blog/2017/02/22/do-the-ten-commandments-apply-to-christians/](http://allenbrowne.blog/2017/02/22/do-the-ten-commandments-apply-to-christians/)

Honouring parents includes providing for them, just as they provided for you early in life. If children don't honour their parents, the society won't live to a ripe old age. The command comes with a promise.

### **#6 No murder (20:13)**

Lawlessness results in violence, people taking matters of justice into their own hands, cf. Genesis 4:23-24.<sup>10</sup> Other nations have laws about murder too, for God authorized communal governance to prevent violence.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, those in power are sometimes the killers, e.g. Genesis 10:8-14;<sup>12</sup> Judges 9:5; 1 Kings 2; John 11:48.

### **#7 No adultery (20:14)**

What does this command reveal about God? His faithfulness.

Many in our culture think it's strange that you remain faithful to one person for life. If we don't, we're not embodying God's character.

### **#8 No theft (20:15)**

What does this command reveal about God? His generosity.

God has provided enough for everyone. To steal is to devalue the other person, to value possessions over people, and to say that God's provision is inadequate.

Nevertheless, the Torah God gave to Israel defines ownership quite differently than we do (Leviticus 25:23).

### **#9 No perjury (20:16)**

Primarily, this command was about the Israelite law court. Penalties applied to anyone who falsely accused others or who lied in court for personal benefit. Truthfulness/honesty reflects God's character.

### **#10 No coveting (20:17)**

This is almost an unenforceable command, but it does reveal something about God's heart. If you value persons as God does, you cannot plan to take their stuff.

## **Hearing God is terrifying (20:18-21)**

These foundational laws defined the relationship between the heavenly king (YHWH) and his representative nation (Israel).

But they found it too frightening to have a God rule over them, speak to them, and give them their laws:

### **Exodus 20:18–19 (ESV)**

When all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain

<sup>10</sup> [allenbrowne.blog/2016/05/23/how-far-does-the-kingdom-of-god-extend-genesis-416-26/](http://allenbrowne.blog/2016/05/23/how-far-does-the-kingdom-of-god-extend-genesis-416-26/)

<sup>11</sup> [allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/03/human-government-a-concession-genesis-91-6/](http://allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/03/human-government-a-concession-genesis-91-6/)

<sup>12</sup> [allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/13/the-nations-develop-from-gods-concession-genesis-10/](http://allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/13/the-nations-develop-from-gods-concession-genesis-10/)

smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.”

Amazingly, God accepted their plea. From this moment on, God spoke to them **only through a mediator**. For the rest of Exodus, the mediator is Moses. Later it’s Joshua, then one of the judges, then through their kings and prophets.

After this event, God spoke to Moses rather than the people:

**Exodus 33:11** (ESV) Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses *face to face*, as a man speaks to his friend. ...

Forty years later, God reminded Israel of that special moment that was no longer their experience:

**Deuteronomy 5:4** (ESV) The LORD spoke with you *face to face* at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire ...

**Deuteronomy 34:10** (ESV) And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew *face to face* ...

Note this crucial definition of a prophet. Prophecy is not predicting the future; it is hearing what the heavenly sovereign is saying, and delivering his message. In that sense, the entire Torah is prophecy—the message from God to his nation regarding how he wants his people to live.

The ultimate revelation of God also comes through a human being—Jesus. He is the prophetic word from God embodied in human form (John 1:1-14). He is the living image of the otherwise invisible God (Colossians 1:15). He is the exact representation of God:

**Hebrews 1:1–3** (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. <sup>3</sup> The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

Through Jesus, we live in the presence of God in ways the Old Testament people could never have imagined. The divine presence is not restricted to the Most Holy Place in the temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem; God’s Holy Spirit is templed in his people! Through Holy Spirit, we all hear God speaking to us. What a contrast! What a joy!

## Memory verse

### Exodus 19:5–6 (NIV)

Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

## Take home exercise

How does the exodus story inform us of what we are called to do? See if these thoughts from Chris Wright help you shape what the exodus means for us:

*Who are we and what are we here for? ...*

Like Old Testament Israel, we are people who have experienced past grace—God’s historical acts of redemption, at the exodus and supremely, of course, at the cross.

Like Old Testament Israel, we are people whom God wants to use for the mission that is driven forward by his future grace—bringing people of all nations in the whole earth into that multinational family of those who know him, love him and worship him alone.

Like Old Testament Israel, we are people who are called to live in response to that grace, with lives that represent God to the world and that show the difference between the holiness of the living God, seen especially in the face of Jesus Christ, and the degraded ugliness and impotence of all the false gods that surround us.

In other words, we are exactly as Peter describes us, with the same identity, the same mission, and the same ethical responsibility.

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Peter 2:9–12)

Peter applies Exodus 19:4–6 directly to Christians: “You’ve had your exodus experience [out of darkness],” he says. “You’ve tasted God’s grace and mercy. You are his precious, treasured possession, his very own people. Now then, live by *that* story. Live out *that* identity. And live with such attractive obedience of ‘good lives’ that people will be attracted to the God you worship, and whatever they say about you, they will come to glorify him.”<sup>13</sup>

Read Exodus 17 – 24 before next week.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 126–127.