

Book of Exodus

Week 6 — Faithfulness

(Exodus 32–40)



Introduction

Faithful to his promise to Abraham, God has freed Jacob's descendants from Pharaoh's domination. With the plagues, God revealed his authority and Pharaoh's impotence. At the Red Sea, he terminated the terminator, drowning Pharaoh's army.

God led his people to his mountain, where he established Israel as a nation under his governance and gave them his laws. They accepted his covenant: YHWH as ruler, they as his people.

He instructed Moses how to build a tent suitable for him to live among them, so he could lead their nation through the years ahead. After spending nearly 6 weeks on God's mountain receiving these instructions, Moses returned to explain how they were to build the tent for the sovereign to live among them.

But ...

Israel's unfaithfulness vs God's faithfulness (32–34)

Exodus 32: Misrepresenting God

Forty days was too long to wait. They wanted to party! They wanted a big BBQ and a bonfire and a dance. They couldn't imagine slaughtering animals without offering them to the gods, but they didn't have anything to represent God yet.

They asked Moses' brother to shape something for them. Aaron collected gold from the people and shaped it into a calf (32:4).

How could Aaron do this? A Jewish commentator suggests:

Often the bull or some other animal served as the pedestal on which the god stood, elevated above human level. ...

The young bull would have been the pedestal upon which the invisible God of Israel was popularly believed to be standing.¹

Whatever Aaron intended, presenting a carved metal cow as "your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (32:4) is a demeaning insult to the living God. God has been explaining to Moses how he might live among his people, and the contrast could not be starker.

YHWH cannot be represented as a bull in public space! His house must be cordoned off from the profane world. His presence is holy, so only cleansed royal servants may enter and mediate his presence. Even the priests were not permitted to enter the inner chamber to look

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 203.

on the throne of the divine presence. Aaron's publicly exposed image grossly misrepresents the God who brought them out of Egypt. Its unholy setting grossly dishonours their sovereign.

The stench of unholiness permeates the people. They don't care about misrepresenting their sovereign, only about partying:

32:6 (NIV) So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.

Aaron's actions violate the foundational commands of the covenant:

1. Aaron attributed their rescue from Egypt to another God (32:4), violating commandment #1: no other gods (20:2-3).
2. Aaron used "a graving tool" to carve golden calf" (32:4), violating commandment #2: no graven images (20:4).
3. Aaron declared the worship of an idol to be "a feast to YHWH" (32:5), violating #3: using the holy name in vain (20:7).

The covenant called Israel to exclusive devotion to YHWH, but they gave themselves to another god. God is outraged! It's as if his bride has been being unfaithful to her vows before the honeymoon is over!

Ruined

Is the covenant over? Is this the divorce? How would you feel if this was your partner? God's partnership with Israel is ruined, for his bride has been corrupted:

32:7, 10 (NIV) ⁷ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become **corrupt**. ...

¹⁰ Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."

The Hebrew word translated "corrupt" is *šā·hāṭ* and it's truly tragic. When something is *šā·hāṭ*, you can't use it any more. God's new nation of Israel is ruined, corrupted, destroyed.² They have adopted the religious practices of the nations and are unfit for their purpose, no longer useful for representing the true and holy sovereign of the whole earth to the nations. This is the end, already! YHWH must discard this corrupted people who can no longer represent him.

² *Šā·hāṭ* was a keyword in the flood narrative for the ruination of creation (Genesis 6:11, 13, 17; 9:11, 15).

God will have to start over with Moses, the only one who was not ruined by this event (32:10). He will still keep his promise to Abraham: it will just take a few hundred years longer to get there.

Here we have the major problem that will dog God's people in Old Testament times. They are called to be his *royal priests* and *holy nation*, representing their sovereign to all the nations that belong under his control (19:5-6). But in practice, they are as broken as the nations, as rebellious and corrupted as anyone else.

Mediation

But hasn't God been explaining to Moses how the covenant between himself and Israel should be mediated? Isn't that the purpose of the priests, to maintain the relationship between God and his people?

Moses therefore takes the role of arbitrator between the wounded bridegroom and the guilty bride. He pleads for the people, not because they deserve it, but because giving up on them will further dishonour God's name (32:12).

YHWH changes his mind (32:14). I'll let you figure out the implications of that, but this is important: if you don't believe that prayer changes things, you probably won't pray much.

So far, Moses has only heard about Israel's covenant-shattering rebellion. When he *sees* the profanity they offered to YHWH as worship, he's livid! He discards the covenant-defining tablets, for the covenant is broken (32:19). It's all over. Moses reacts as God did.

Exodus 33: Going without God

Next day, Moses negotiates for Israel. God had offered to save Moses. Moses counteroffers: save the people instead (32:32).

God agrees to release the people from the covenant. In effect, God offers his bride divorce rather than death. Moses can lead them to their new land, divorced from him (33:3).

But Moses doesn't want to be sent off alone, and he won't let God off the hook: "Remember that this nation is your people" (33:13).

God relents: "My Presence will go with you" (33:14).

Moses asks to see God's glory (33:18). God agrees to show Moses his "goodness" (33:19). The **character** of our heavenly king is his glory.

God hides Moses in a cleft in the rock, and arranges for a royal parade. Moses will not see the face of God, just his back (33:21-23). You see God if you look back in history, to where he's been.

Exodus 34: The sovereign's character

If a powerful leader like Pharaoh was giving a parade, a crier would run ahead so everybody knew to bow to their great ruler. When the king of heaven and earth agrees to put on a regal parade for Moses, no one else is sufficient to proclaim his dignity, his glory. God's own voice declares his dignity, his glory, his character:

34:5-7 ⁵ YHWH descended in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, YHWH.

⁶ YHWH passed in front of Moses, proclaiming,

“YHWH, YHWH the compassionate and gracious God,
slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

⁷ maintaining steadfast love to thousands, and forgiving
misdeeds, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not clear the guilty.

He holds the children and grandchildren accountable for their parents' misdeeds, to the third and fourth generation.”

If Scripture is the revelation God, the revelation of his character here is one of the most important lessons in Exodus. Later writers thought so: they often quoted these phrases, e.g. Numbers 14:18; 2 Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Nahum 1:3; Jonah 4:2.

So what is God like? His reign over his people is characterized by his *compassion* and *grace* towards his people. He is *not easily angered*.

Steadfast love is the Hebrew word *hē-sēd*. It's a keyword, repeated in the next verse. In the context of the covenant, it emphasizes the consistent kindness of the heavenly king in persisting with his people. Poetically, it's often paired with the word *faithfulness* (e.g. Psalms 25:10; 26:3; 40:10-11; 57:3, 10; 61:7; 69:13; 85:10).

Something amazing just happened. Israel's *unfaithfulness* has resulted in an even greater revelation of God's *faithfulness* to his people. Moses asked to see his glory, and God showed his goodness.

So does that mean Israel can be as evil as they wish and it will still show the glory and goodness of their sovereign? No: their ruler will manage them with justice as well as mercy. He will not pretend that guilty people are innocent (34:7). His absurdly generous character does not mean he wants a kingdom characterised by injustice.

When parents do wrong, their children suffer. So do their grandchildren. The sins of the parents impact their descendants, even in the third or fourth generation.

Because of YHWH's astounding character, he renews his covenant with them (34:10), reminding them that the terms of the covenant matter (34:11-28).

Now that the great divorce has been averted, we're treated to a detail that wasn't mentioned before. Moses' face was glowing when he came down from 40 days in God's presence (34:29-35). Moses veiled his face so the Israelites would not see God's glory fading from him.

Human beings were designed to image God's glory. His Spirit — God's own presence — is restoring us to do exactly that:

2 Corinthians 3:18 (NIV) We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Finishing what they began: nation led by God (35–40)

Exodus 35–39: Constructing YHWH's dwelling

With the relationship restored, the task (constructing a tent for God to live among them) is back on. Building this tent is inviting YHWH to come and rule over them.

Their actions were effectively a prayer like the one Jesus taught us to pray, "Your name be honoured. Your kingdom come. Your will be done here on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9-10).

That's why the people donated all the materials needed to build the tabernacle, its furnishings, and the robes for the royal servants/priests. The felt like they were contributing it to YHWH (35:5; 35:21; 35:24).

35:29 All the Israelite men and women who were willing brought to the LORD freewill offerings for all the work the LORD through Moses had commanded them to do.

They bring more than is needed (36:6).

38:21-29 lists the weight of metal donated, measured in *talents* and *shekels*. Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna estimates a talent as 34.27 kg, with 3,600 shekels making a talent.³ It converts to something like this:

- **gold:** 1.0 tonne 29.2 talents (38:24)
- **silver:** 3.4 tonnes 100.5 talents (38:25)
- **bronze:** 2.4 tonnes 70.7 talents (38:29)

The project manager is Bezalel, and he embodies that partnership: he has "wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and all craftsmanship" because he's "filled with the Spirit of God" (35:31).

³ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 231.

They build the house suitable for their sovereign, as he specified:

- **the tent:** transportable stands and curtains (Ex 36)
- **furnishings:** ark, bread table, lampstand, incense altar (Ex 37)
- **exterior:** burnt-offering altar, washbasin, courtyard (Ex 38)
- **priestly garments:** ephod, breastpiece, robes (Ex 39)

The important thing is that Israel is willingly entering into **partnership with YHWH**—a covenant partnership where he is ruler (king) and they are his people (kingdom).

Moses inspects their work to verify that they have followed their sovereign's instructions. His conclusion is reported three times:

39 ³² The Israelites did everything *just as the LORD commanded* Moses. ...

⁴² The Israelites had done all the work *just as the LORD had commanded* Moses.

⁴³ Moses inspected the work and saw that they had done it *just as the LORD had commanded*. So Moses blessed them.

For the first time in the Biblical narrative, a nation has constructed a palace for the divine sovereign to live among them and govern them. There is no mention here about their previous fiasco, constructing a pedestal to worship YHWH according to their own plans and desires. Instead, we hear only the three-fold affirmation that they constructed this dwelling for their sovereign just the way he had commanded them. Moses blessed the people (39:43). Here God can live among men. They can experience the blessing of his reign.

The story of the kingdom of God can proceed.

Exodus 40: The sovereign moves in

The sovereign himself directs the completion of the project, as they erect the tent that invites him to live among them (40:1-33).

Moses' obedience is the focal point. Seven times we're told he did *as the LORD commanded him* (40:16, 19, 21, 23, 24, 27, 29).

Ever since they left Egypt, they have known their heavenly ruler's presence leading and guiding them in the visible expression of his presence in the sky over them—the pillar of cloud by day, the pillar of fire by night. This cloud that swathed the glory of their sovereign now moves into the tent they completed for him (40:34-35).

They are indeed the kingdom of God, under the direct guidance and leading of heaven. When the cloud rose above the tabernacle, they recognised their king was calling them to rise up and move on. When the cloud rested over and in the royal tent, they stayed where their

sovereign stayed (40:36-37). This obedient partnership between heaven and earth was what we were created for. They were under his governance, human beings restored into the kingdom of God.

The closing verse of Exodus captures that sense of these people experiencing the kingdom of God as it was intended to be. They live in his presence, under his governance, directed by his leading throughout all their journeys.

40:38 (ESV) For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.

The message of Exodus

Exodus is the story of how the descendants of Jacob (Israel) were freed from tyrannical human rule to become the first nation on earth ruled by God.

Old Testament scholar, John Goldingay provides this summary of Exodus as the story of YHWH's kingship:

A king [i.e., Pharaoh] confronts Israel, so Yhwh becomes a king in order to confront this king and play him at his own game, as king delivering Israel from Egypt with powerful decisive acts.... Yhwh has dethroned that king. He no longer reigns over Israel as he did. Instead of being ruled by the king of Egypt, henceforth Israel will have the benefits of being ruled by Yhwh, the world ruler.⁴

The rulers of this world will do anything to keep their power, even killing babies. With ten mighty works, YHWH demonstrated that, despite all his claims, Pharaoh is not God. The Egyptians and the Israelites came to understand, "I AM YHWH." (Exodus 1 – 11.)

The ultimate enemy, Death, "passed over" God's people as he led them out from oppression into life under his reign. Pharaoh's military might could not hold them: it sank in the Red Sea as God made a way for his people to pass through. (Exodus 12 – 15).

The exodus from Egypt becomes the paradigmatic history of God saving people, and setting them up under his reign. Key words from the Song of Moses (Exodus 15) reverberate throughout Scripture: words like *salvation*, *redemption*, and YHWH's *reign* after defeating evil and oppression.

⁴ J. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology, 1: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 331-332.

Jesus chose Passover as the season when he provided this kind of exodus from evil into God's reign. What God did for Israel through Moses, he did for the whole world through Jesus.⁵

Moses led Israel to God's mountain, the place where he had previously encountered YHWH. God revealed himself to his people, giving them the laws for their newly birthed nation. Israel agreed to the covenant, establishing them as the people under YHWH's rule.

Moses was not Israel's king. He was a **prophet**. Prophecy is not predicting the future, it's receiving a revelation from the heavenly sovereign and delivering it to his people. The message can be aural (the word of the LORD) or graphic (a vision or dream). It may or may not be about future; what matters is that it is revealed by God.

Moses heard God's Law for his nation and delivered it to his people. In that sense, the Law is therefore a prophecy. Actually, God intended to speak it to the people himself but they found it too frightening so he agreed to deliver it through a spokesman—a prophet. (Exodus 18–24.)

As our king, Jesus reframed and restructured the law for the kingdom of God in what we call the Sermon on the Mount.⁶

Exodus 25 – 40 is all about the tabernacle. God's nation should construct a house so he, their sovereign, could live among his people. He disclosed to Moses how they should build a tent for their king, a tent suited to the honour of his holy character:

- It's fenced off from the defiled world, with a courtyard where they offered him food and washed before entering his house.
- The only people permitted in his holy space are priests, royal servants consecrated to the task, mediating God's presence to his people and representing the people to God.
- No one was permitted into the king's private chamber in God's holy tent — the Most Holy Place.
- The ark represented his kingship. It represented the footstool of his throne, flanked by guardian cherubs. It contained the Ten Commandments, the founding document of their nation. Its covering (lid) spoke of God covering their faults, maintaining relationship (at-one). (Exodus 25 – 31.)

In the new covenant, all God's people (regardless of ethnicity) are priests offering God gifts: "Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice,

⁵ Tom Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Rethinking the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* (London: SPCK, 2016), especially "Chapter 9 Jesus's Special Passover" and "Chapter 14 Passover People."

⁶ <https://allenbrowne.blog/2017/01/23/instruction-from-the-king-sermon-on-the-mount/>

holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1).

But instead of honouring God with this holy space, they carved a golden calf and treated it as a god. God’s holy people were corrupted like the nations. This threatened the whole redemption project.

Moses acted as mediator. In doing so, he (and Israel) came to know the astounding character of their sovereign. Their unfaithfulness ended up disclosing his faithfulness. (Exodus 32 – 34.)

The faithfulness of God becomes a key theme throughout Scripture. Since God is our heavenly sovereign, “the righteousness of God” is primarily expressed as his faithfulness to his people, even when they have been unfaithful to the covenant.

By the end of Exodus, Israel had completed the tent for God to live among them, just as he had specified. The glorious guiding cloud of God’s presence moved in to lead and guide them in all their journeys. (Exodus 35 – 40.)

Those of us who accept Jesus’ kingship today therefore have a role very similar to Israel’s in the Old Testament:

| Exodus 19:5–6 (NIV) | 1 Peter 2:9–10 (NIV) |
|--|--|
| <p>⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.</p> | <p>⁹ But 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.</p> <p>¹⁰ 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.</p> |

He is “tabernacled” among us. In that sense Jesus’ body was the tabernacle of God among his people (John 1:14), for his body was the place where God was tempted among people (John 2:21). God’s Spirit is building us into his body, for we together are the dwelling place of God on earth (1 Peter 2:4-5).

Jesus has created a new humanity combining Jews and gentiles together into the people of God. He has dismantled the old dividing wall of hostility, making peace between those who were near (Jews) and those who were far from being his people (gentiles). He is forming us together into one new house of God, resting on the

foundation of both the New Testament leaders (apostles) and the Old Testament spokesmen of God (prophets), with Jesus as the cornerstone in which the whole building comes together and grows into a holy temple for our heavenly sovereign, the place where God dwells among his earthly citizens through his Spirit (Eph 2:11-22).

It was the first step towards the restoration of God's reign over all the earth, the holy dwelling place of God (Revelation 21).

YHWH has freed the descendants of Israel from earthly rule. In establishing them as his kingdom, he has given notice to the rulers of the earth that their days are numbered. The earth will be restored into the rule of the heavenly sovereign.

Questions?

Memory verse

Exodus 34:6-7 (NIV)

He passed in front of Moses, proclaiming,
“The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God,
slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,
maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”

Take home exercise

Read Acts 7:17-53.

There's a lot of history between the close of Exodus and Jesus' time, and it's a chequered history. At times, Israel brought honour to their heavenly sovereign. In Solomon's time, they even built a more permanent house for him in Jerusalem. At other times, they dishonoured their sovereign and disgraced themselves, losing the kingship, the temple, and the land to foreign rulers.

Those who returned from the Babylonian exile, built another temple, but they remained under foreign rule. Eventually the king himself came to live among them again, in the person of Jesus. But those who held power didn't want to release it. That's why they put Jesus to death.

But God vindicated Jesus and restored his kingship by raising him from the dead. Jesus received the position at God's right hand. He poured out the Holy Spirit on his followers, so they became the place where God lives, the temple of God.

That's the way Stephen described it in Acts 7:54-60. It's a brilliant summary of the exodus and the purpose of the temple. And it's a tragic summary of Israel's resistance to God's governance, giving themselves to other rulers (“tabernacle of Molek” in 7:43).

But declaring Jesus' kingship is not popular with those who want to retain power in their own hands. That's why Stephen was killed, like his Lord.

But not even death can stop the reign of God. Jesus is the person who connects heaven and earth back together again, bringing earth under God's authority. Stephen saw it so clearly:

Acts 7:56 (NIV)

“Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

Exodus was the first step in God's plan to bring the earth back under heaven's reign. What Moses did for Israel, Jesus has done for all the people of the earth.