
“Exodus”

Fall Series 2

Lesson 2

“Exodus 14:22-17:16”

Objective: To examine the account of the exodus from Egypt and to learn as much as we can about the nature of God, His mercy and what He desires for His creation. We will seek to do this by examining the historical background of the Exodus account, the interpretive history of Exodus amongst both Jewish and Christian scholars, where helpful. We will seek to understand the message of Exodus for us as Christians living in the 21st century American context.

Materials: The Bible, Ancient translations, Commentaries, both ancient and modern, Books, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet, and other resources as may be appropriate.

Procedures

1. To explore the message God of hope that the original audience will have understood from this text.
2. To understand how this text has inspired, challenged, and educated people down through the centuries guiding them not only in their personal lives, but the destinies of governments and nations.
3. We will seek to find out how these beliefs have played a role in the history of Christianity and how they continue to impact our existence and service to Jesus Christ today.
4. We will provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of these truths and their application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now. This sheet can be used as a discussion guide for small group discussion. We have several groups using this effectively.

Starting at 14:22 we have the launching of the Israelites as it were "... into the midst of sea...." This is a miracle of truly cosmic proportions. The laws of nature are broken and any of the explanations that are given that try to explain away this miracle as anything other than a miracle are the result of corrupted and corroded minds dulled by the ravages of unbelief and skepticism. In the context of Exodus, this is meant to be understood as a miracle wrought by God, that is the point here. The God who called for there to be a separation between the waters and also called for the dry land to appear from the sea in Genesis is here doing again what He did then.¹ This same God now acts on behalf of the Israelites and is active at doing what only the Creator can do, commanding creation. A wall of water forms on either side of the Israelites. How marvelous and how terrifying this must have been to see this seemingly impossible thing that was happening.

Now, in our time, just as in this time so many years ago people can be blinded to the truth by their refusal to accept it for

¹ Genesis 1:6-10 - **God said, "Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters to separate the waters from each other."** ⁷ **God made the dome and separated the waters under the dome from the waters above the dome. And it happened in that way.**

⁸ **God named the dome Sky.**

There was evening and there was morning: the second day.

1:9 God said, "Let the waters under the sky come together into one place so that the dry land can appear." And that's what happened. ¹⁰ **God named the dry land Earth, and he named the gathered waters Seas. God saw how good it was. CEB.**

what it is meant to convey. The Egyptians had seen the power of God in ten plagues, they saw the pillar of cloud, and the pillar of fire, and yet they still refused to comprehend what was happening. God, the creator, the only true God, was fighting to redeem His people and nothing would stop him, not arrogance, ignorance, or physical might. All of these are as nothing to God. The brokenness of sin blinds us to the truth and no matter what God does it seems that the blindness of our hard hearts can reach a point of being beyond redemption. The Egyptians saw what they wanted to see and what they saw was a vulnerable nation of slaves that they were free to manipulate and use as they pleased without any fear of having to answer to a higher authority. They saw themselves as the highest authority in the universe, ruled by a god (Pharaoh).²

The Psalmist describes what happens next: **16 The waters saw you, God—the waters saw you and reeled!**

Even the deep depths shook!

**17 The clouds poured water,
the skies cracked thunder;**

² Rabbi Nosson Scherman and Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *The Chumash*, The Stone Edition (New York NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2000-2014), p. 371.

your arrows were flying all around!

18 The crash of your thunder

was in the swirling storm;

lightning lit up the whole world;

the earth shook and quaked.

19 Your way went straight through the sea;

your pathways went right through the

mighty waters.

But your footprints left no trace!

20 You led your people like sheep

under the care of Moses and Aaron.³

The army of Egypt went from superpower army to dead in matter of minutes. This would become their final poor decision. There were a host of bad decisions leading up to this one, but this one would prove fatal. In our own lives things are often the same. There are some decisions that forever change our destiny. There are no unlimited chances and no unlimited opportunities, despite what are modern world would like us to believe. There is no cheap grace to be had, here, or anywhere else.⁴

³ Psalm 77:16-20 - Common English Bible.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1963).

At 14:24-25 the Egyptians are thrown into a panic and in this panic they finally seem to realize the truth, "...because *YHWH* is fighting for Israel against Egypt." Despite this realization, the point has past for this fact to do them any good at all. God knows when this point even when we do not. Moses is then told by *YHWH* to stretch out his hand so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, their chariots and the chariot drivers (14:26). Moses did as he was told and the sea swallowed the Egyptians (14:27-28). We are reminded once again that in the midst of all this great calamity the Israelites walked through on dry ground with the water forming a wall on either side of them (14:29). Israel was saved on this day despite their complaining and their lack of trust in Moses and in *YHWH*. They saw the Egyptians lying dead on the seashore (14:30), and knew the finality of what God would inflict on their enemies. Verse 31 then says: **Israel saw the great hand of *YHWH* against the Egyptians. The people feared *YHWH*, and they believed in *YHWH* and in his servant Moses.** In seeing the same miracle that saved Israel and

simultaneously punished Egypt the Jews recognized a new dimension of God's greatness.⁵

The splitting of the sea is engraved upon the Jewish memory as a signature moment in time. The telling of this event is recited daily during the morning service in synagogues around the globe, at the transition from the Verses of Praise to the beginning of communal prayer.⁶ They speak of it again after the recitation of the Shema, just before the *Amida*.⁷ As we come to chapter 15 we come to *The Song by the Sea*. In the Torah's definition a "song" constitutes a profound and unusual spiritual phenomenon. According to *Mekhilta* 15:1, there were only ten songs from the beginning of creation to the end of the Scriptural period. Even the Psalms of David and Isaiah, as well as the songs of the other prophets are not among these ten songs. What then is the Torah's conception of what constitutes a song?

**In the normal course of events,
we fail to perceive the hand of God at**

⁵ Rabbi Mosh Feinstein in Rabbi Nosson Scherman and Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *The Chumash*, p. 375.

⁶ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Exodus: the Book of Redemption*, in the Covenant and Conversation series (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2010), p. 103.

⁷ The Amida is the central prayer of the Jewish liturgy. It has nineteen parts and can be looked up easily online.

work, and we often wonder how most of the daily, seemingly unrelated phenomena surrounding us could be part of a Divine, coherent plan. We see suffering and evil, and we wonder how they can be the handiwork of a Merciful God. Rarely, however - very rarely - there is a flash of insight that makes people realize how all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. At such times, we can understand how every note, instrument, and participant in God's symphony of Creation plays its role. The result is song, for the Torah's concept of song is the condition in which all the apparently unrelated and contradictory phenomena do indeed meld into a coherent, merciful, comprehensible whole.

At the sea, Moses and the Jewish people understood their situation as never before. The suffering of the Egyptian exile, the deception that led Pharaoh to pursue them, the hopelessness they had felt when they were surrounded by Pharaoh, the sea, and the wilderness; the demands from many of their own number that they return to slavery, even Moses' old recrimination that his arrival in Egypt to carry out God's mission had only made things worse for Israel - such doubts and fear disappeared when the sea split and, as the Sages teach in *Mechilta* even a simple maidservant at the sea perceived a higher degree of revelation than that of the prophet Ezekiel in his Heavenly vision, described in *Ezekiel* chapter 1. To the

Jews at the sea, Creation became a symphony, a song, because they understood how every unrelated and incomprehensible event was part of the harmonious score that led up to that greatest of all miracles.⁸

This song has little concern with events from the human perspective and instead is focused upon celebrating the mighty acts of God as He intervenes in human affairs. The Song at the Sea celebrates the direct and unmediated action of God; His personal incursion into the world of men.⁹ This song is a recounting of God's mighty acts intended to praise Him for His steadfast love (טִדְּוֹן), His strength and His power, and His redemption. You can imagine the relief that must have come over the people as finally they could see light at the end of the tunnel, or at least the light of freedom. Miriam sings along with the women praises to God as an unmitigated act of exuberant joy with tambourines (15:20-21). This great victory will however be short-lived as Moses orders the

⁸ Rabbi Nosson Scherman and Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *The Chumash*, p. 375.

⁹ Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary Exodus* (Philadelphia PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 75.

Israelites to set out from the sea and they travel into the wilderness of Shur. They journey for three days, probably about forty-five miles (15:22).

They then come to a place called Marah (15:23) and the joy of their victory is past; people “complained against Moses” (15:24). Already, in three days they appear to have forgotten the great victory at the sea and once again they resort to their true nature, complaining. This is a nature that comes so easily to humans and is the favorite pastime of so many. Some perfect it to an art form and even appear to have a doctorate in this endeavor. This complaining will, in time, lead to tremendous frustration on the part of Moses ultimately causing him to lose his temper with the people and will be the cause of his being unable himself to enter the promised land. On this occasion Moses cries out to *YHWH* and He showed Moses a piece of wood and when Moses throws this piece of wood into the water the water becomes sweet. This ends the complaining for a brief moment.

It is here that we are told that *YHWH* makes for them a “statute and an ordinance” and put them “to the test.” Here we have the terms: 15:26 **The LORD said, “If you are careful to**

obey the LORD your God, do what God thinks is right, pay attention to his commandments, and keep all of his regulations, then I won't bring on you any of the diseases that I brought on the Egyptians. I am the LORD who heals you.”¹⁰

This chapter ends with Israel camping at Elim (15:27). Notice that God calls them to do what “He” thinks is right, not what in their opinions is right.

Chapter sixteen begins with an accounting of their ongoing travels and their arrival at the wilderness of Sin. Here once again there is “complaining,” or “murmuring” (לַדָּבָר). Perhaps if Israel were to have a motto something like the motto of the Marines *Semper Fidelis* (Always Faithful) theirs would be *Semper Murmurant* (Always Murmuring). This too could be a motto for most churches as there is always a group, sometimes a large group, that excels at this. Certainly I can say it is the most discouraging part of ministry for most of those who are involved with church ministry. No matter how hard someone tries, some people are displeased and feel that at the most inopportune, and painful time possible, they will let you know about their complaints, and their

¹⁰ Common English Bible.

complaints shrouded as suggestions. Church work is a lot like being a coach, everyone is an expert and knows how to do it better than the coach. In their murmuring it appears that the whole congregation appears to be suicidal expressing their wish to have died in Egypt (16:3).

God sends bread down upon them from heaven, but He also tests them to see if they would follow His instructions (16:4). God also responds to their complaining against Moses and Aaron and Himself. He speaks to Moses out of a cloud (16:10-11) to show the people that Moses is indeed receiving his instructions from *YHWH*. *YHWH* sent what would come to be called “manna” in the morning (16:14) and he gave the Israelites instructions about how much to gather and they were supplied with what they needed (16:18). They were told to leave none of it until morning, but as might be expected “they did not listen” and “it became infested with worms and became foul smelling” (16:19-20). On the sixth day they were to gather enough for two days as none would fall on the Sabbath, they were not to go out looking for it on the Sabbath; and yet some did. The manna that was gathered before the Sabbath and kept overnight did not become infested with worms and become foul

smelling (16:23-24): This day things work differently than all others. On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather manna, but found none; they were in direct violation of what God had commanded (16:27) in going out to look.

They were failing miserably the test, and *YHWH* become upset with them and questions Moses regarding their disobedience (16:28). The people were told to rest on the seventh day. This was a part of the test to see if they would be obedient to *YHWH* (16:29-30). The Israelites were to put an omer of the manna aside to show to the following generations in a jar (16:31-34), this was to be a monument to God for future generations. The Israelites would eat Manna for forty years until they came into a habitable land (16:35). To be certain this miracle gives a great many problems to modern skeptics. Sustaining two million plus people in the wilderness with bread that fell from the sky and quail for forty years is truly a magnificent feat. In reality, though we still today do not acknowledge the fact that it is God who sustains all people everywhere, always. We just fail to recognize this because we have come to expect things to work in certain ways. I am sure the Israelites quickly came to just expect

things to work in this way and so took it for granted. Human beings have an amazing capacity to normalize things, even extraordinary and amazing things, even things that should never be normalized.

At 17:1, we are told that the Israelites travelled to Rephidim where there was no water at all for them to drink. So once again the people “argue” with Moses. They challenged him to give them water to drink. They once again brought up the old complaints against Moses asking why he had brought them out “to kill” them, their children and their livestock “with thirst” (17:3). Moses then turns to God (17:4) asking what he is to do with this people that are “soon going to stone” him. *YHWH* instructs Moses to take some of the elders with him and to take the staff that he used to strike the Nile (17:5) and go and stand in front of the “rock” (צור) at Horeb. Though here, in the context of Exodus 17, there is no indication of God’s anger with the Israelites there is at Psalm 78:18-22.¹¹ The psalmist portrays God as “furious” at their lack of

¹¹ They tested God in their hearts, demanded food for their stomachs. ¹⁹ They spoke against God! “Can God set a dinner table in the wilderness?” they asked. ²⁰ “True, God struck the rock and water gushed and streams flowed, but can he give bread too? Can he provide meat for his people?” ²¹ When the LORD heard this, he became furious. A fire was ignited against Jacob; wrath also burned against Israel ²² because they had no faith in God, because they didn’t trust his saving power. CEB.

trust, at the disbelief and faithlessness inherent in the people's grumbling.¹²

It may be that it is to be seen as implicit in the Torah's narrative, the Biblical teaching, that human beings have an obligation to imitate divine qualities (the divine image - Genesis 1:26-27). This Jewish doctrine is based upon such Biblical passages as Leviticus 19:2 **"Say to the whole community of the Israelites: You must be holy, because I, the LORD your God, am holy."**¹³ It then follows from the Biblical narrative that Israel would be expected to emulate the qualities of God, which includes His self-restraint and His positive quality in the face of their base ingratitude; God inherently, by nature, has a concern for the hungry, for those whom He has created.¹⁴ Moses was to find God in the front of this rock and he was to strike the rock in the sight of the elders and when he did water came out of the rock. The name of this place then came to be called "Massah" (מַסָּה), which literally means "testing," and "Meribah" (מְרִיבָה), which literally means "strife."

¹² Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary Exodus*, p. 86.

¹³ CEB.

¹⁴ Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary Exodus*, p. 86.

It was at this place that they quarreled and tested *YHWH* asking “Is *YHWH* really among us or not.” The account ends here with this very brief comment and then at 17:8 we are told that Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. There is a more detailed account of this attack at Deuteronomy 25:17-19, and in this account we are told that the Amalekites made a surprise rear attack on the famished and exhausted Israelites not long after their escape from Egypt. Who were the Amalekites? We first encounter Amalek as the thirteenth descendent of Esau-Edom in the lists of Genesis 36 (Genesis 36:16). The Amalekites in their rear attack on the Israelites ruthlessly cut down the stragglers, the elderly, the weak, and the infirm (Deuteronomy 25:17-19). Israel was forced to fight its first battle in order to survive.¹⁵

Moses told Joshua to choose men to go out and fight with the Amalekites telling them that he would stand on a hill with the staff of God in his hand (17:9). During the battle, whenever Moses held up his hand Israel prevailed and when he lowered it the Amalekites prevailed (17:11). Aaron and Hur took a stone and put it under Moses so he could sit down and then they held up his

¹⁵ Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary Exodus*, p. 95.

arms, one on each side (17:12). Joshua defeated the Amalekites, with the sword (17:13). After this, *YHWH* instructs Moses to write a reminder in a book and to recite the text in the hearing of Joshua that He would blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. This would not be the end of the Amalekites on this day as they would continue to be a threat to Israel for many years to come: ultimately David appears to have finished them off as a nation (1 Samuel 30). We encounter the Amalekites and their descendants several times through the history of Israel. Saul would spare “Agag king of the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:8, 20, 32-33), though Samuel corrected this when he arrived by hacking Agag in pieces. The Amalekites are ultimately not heard of as a nation again after David finished the job except for perhaps the case of “Haman the Agagite” in Esther 3:1, which likely means that Haman was of Amalekite ancestry.¹⁶

As we return to our narrative in Exodus, once again the people are saved, this time is different though; instead of God bearing them as on eagles wings and doing everything while Israel was a mere spectator (Exodus 19:4) they must learn to fight, to

¹⁶ Peter Enns, *Exodus*, in The NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2000), pp. 345-346.

defend themselves against forces that would destroy them. No one today knows for sure what it means that they would win when the hands of Moses were uplifted and lose when they were down; it is not explained. Whatever it was; it had something to do with the staff standing as a sign of the power and presence of God. Moses then built an altar and called it “*YHWH* is my Banner” (יְהוָה נִסִּי). There is no certain connection here between the altar and the banner, but certainly the point of the naming is to bear witness to *YHWH*'s role in the battle. He is the standard beneath which Israel rallies. The final verse of this chapter (Exodus 17:16) summarizes the whole story of this incident. The war with Amalek will continue generation upon generation because *YHWH* willed it to be so.¹⁷

In this section we see Israel experiencing the mighty hand of *YHWH* rescuing them in the most incredible of circumstances and yet as soon as there is any great difficulty they turn on God and Moses and begin complaining, and murmuring. God seeks to teach the Israelites to rely upon Him, to trust Him, but as in even the Garden of Eden human beings resist this. We today still resist

¹⁷ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, in The Old Testament Library series (Philadelphia PA: The Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 315-316.



trusting in God, choosing instead to trust in wealth, doctors, power, in nations, and in so many other things that can become idols that stand in the place that only God should occupy. We too are being tested in order that God might instill in us what it means to be human, to have the character that is fitting for one made in the “image” of God. As N. T. Wright says, “The present time is the time of formation of truly human beings; this cannot be achieved at a stroke, precisely because of what a human being is.” Our present sojourn on this earth is meant to produce in us “character.”¹⁸ Will we become “image-bearers” of God, or will we allow our animal nature to continue to reign?

¹⁸ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, in the Christian Origins and the Question of God series, Vol. 4, Book II, Parts III and IV (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2013), p. 1048.

Synopsis

As we start this section, we find Israel poised in the most incredibly tenuous position with the sea in front of them and the Egyptian army in hot pursuit behind. The situation looks hopeless and yet the very first verse of this section (14:22) says the Israelites went into the sea on “dry ground.” *YHWH*, the creator God, intervenes and the impossible becomes possible and Israel is saved and the Egyptian army is all drowned. This account highlights the good decision made by Israel to follow the instructions of God and the poor decision made by the Egyptians that put them on a collision course with God. In their arrogance they ignored the fact that *YHWH* was “fighting” for Israel and too late they realized this.

This event has become engraved in the Jewish psyche as a signature moment in time, when God redeemed a helpless people from a tyrannical, and cruel country and fought on their behalf. In this moment we can see that God has a plan and He has the power to fulfill that plan. Moses and the Israelites sing a great song of praise to *YHWH* recounting His glorious rescue of Israel. The song

praises Him for His steadfast love, His strength, His power, and His redemption.

Then almost as soon as the song has drifted away on the wind the Israelites find something that they do not like and they begin complaining. This persists as they are thirsty, then hungry, then do not like the food, and in their arrogance and in their immaturity they fail to follow God as they should, because they continually drift back to the human default of thinking that we, as “humans” know how to something better even than God. In this pattern we return to what caused this predicament in the first place and we are once more without hope, without direction, and without honor. We fail to honor the image of the one who created us. The Amalekites attack Israel and in this attack, with Joshua, we see a glimpse of the great salvation of *YHWH*. Israel survives and glorifies God for their victory. We can leave this section at least hoping that perhaps now we will see some glimmer of character beginning to develop in the people. *YHWH* is praised once more and the people seem content for the moment.

Questions

1. What do you think it would have been like to see *YHWH* split the sea and make it stand up with a wall of water on the left and on the right?
2. Why do you think the Egyptians pursued the Israelites into the sea?
3. Why do you think God appeared to the people in a pillar of cloud and fire?
4. What do you think it means that God destroyed the Egyptians in the sea?
5. What does it say about God that the Israelites walked through the sea on dry land and yet the Egyptians are seen dead upon the shore?
6. At 14:31 what connection do you see between the fear of the Israelites and their belief in *YHWH*?
7. Why do you think Moses sang to *YHWH*?
8. What connection do you see between the song that Moses sings and His faith?
9. What can we learn about what Moses believed concerning *YHWH* from his song?
10. What do you think it means that the nations trembled at 15:14-16?
11. Why do you think people are so quick to complain when something does not go the way they think it should (15:24)?
12. Why do you think God puts the people to the “test?”
13. What do you think the Israelites are meant to learn from 15:26?
14. Why do you think we are told that Israel complained so much? What lesson do you think we are meant to take away from this today?

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15. What lessons do you think Israel was meant to learn from God giving them manna?
 16. Why do you think *YHWH* gives the people meat to eat 16:12-13?
 17. What lesson do you think Israel was meant to learn from not gathering manna on the Sabbath?
 18. Do you think the quarrelsomeness of the Israelites is connected to the attack of the Amalekites? Why, or why not?
 19. Why do you think God does not just destroy the Amalekites in some miraculous fashion like He did the Egyptians?
 20. What is the most important lesson that you believe we should take away from this section for today?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know that God expects us to follow Him obediently and that when we do we will be blessed. When we think we know how to do things better than God things will not go well for us, and the journey of character building, for us, will likely be a much longer journey. God is very patient and merciful, but He also expects change in our lives when we are not following Him. God also expects us to partner with Him and not just stand and wait for Him to do everything. What are some ways that you have seen God building character in your life through challenges?

Where is God in these words?

God is in these words redeeming Israel from danger and leading them into the wilderness where He can begin to shape and mold their character and help them to truly become a people that trusts in Him and listens to Him. God tells the people what He expects and then helps them to understand His words by the things He asks them to do. The collecting of the manna was meant to teach them to trust Him and comply with His words. If you did not do this you would either go hungry, or have a stinky mass of worms. What are some ways that you are seeking to learn the will of God for your life?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

Since God is the Creator of all things and He seeks the redemption of the whole of creation we can either be a part of His plan, or deal with the consequences of being in opposition to Him. God seeks to be gentle and merciful, but He also is just and righteous and He is advancing the agenda of bringing His creation into alignment with His purposes. If we fail to recognize this there is a consequence and if we do recognize this the consequence should follow that we will seek to be a part of His redemptive plan. How should such an understanding change my priorities in life?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The word of God is here calling us to recognize that He is indeed the sovereign, creator of the universe, the one and only God worthy of our allegiance and trust, the only true God. He calls us to listen to Him and to be obedient to Him as our gracious and caring Father, the one who knows what is best and seeks it for all of His creation. We are called to be obedient especially in the moments when we do not understand. When do you find it the easiest in your life to be obedient to God?