

NO OTHER GODS...

The Leader's guide

We have a few goals for this leader's guide in order to free you up more to serve your group, listen to your group and also be deeply spiritually enriched yourself. We truly are praying for you to be able to experience the Holy Spirit's care and guidance during the retreat.

First, we want to give you some history and background to the story. Your group is getting the chance to study one of the most important and exciting times in Israel's history, so we want to help you see what God was doing over this period of time in Egypt and the wilderness.

We also want to give you some additional questions to ask if you need help getting the discussion rolling. Though on the other hand, if your group is really getting into a good discussion, please know you do not need to feel the pressure to hit on every question in the study guide. We will emphasize the themes that are crucial and we believe in God's power to guide your group!

How to prioritize your time for the Bible studies:

- No more than 10-15 minutes for your opening exercise
- 5-10 minutes in opening prayer
- 10-25 minutes discussing each section including the background (please tailor this according to how each study is divided in study sections – it will make sense to you once you look at it)
- 20-25 minutes discussing the summary application questions (feel free to pick just one or two questions if this will help stream line the time)
- 15-20 minutes in the ending prayer exercise

Bible Study #1

Historical Background

The book of Exodus begins with the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob. You may recall that Joseph was sold into servitude by his brothers (named in Exod 1:2-4), served in the household of Potiphar, even rising to be in charge of the household (Gen 39). He was then falsely accused of sexual misconduct with Potiphar's wife, thrown in prison, and forgotten for over two years. Eventually, however, he (with God's help) interprets the Pharaoh's dreams, wisely suggests a plan of action to counteract the coming famine, and is placed in charge of the whole land of Egypt; second only to Pharaoh (Gen 41:40-43).

When the famine spread across Egypt and Canaan, Joseph's family (Jacob and sons) came to live in Egypt—as a place of refuge, a place which had food because of Joseph's wise plan to store up grain. And the sons of Israel, "the Israelites," were fruitful in Egypt and grew in numbers (Exod 1:6-7). And when a new king, a new Pharaoh, came to power he felt threatened by the numerous Israelites and enslaved them, put them to work in his building campaign, and tried to limit their numbers by killing every Hebrew boy born (Exod 1:16,22).

Moses is born just at this time of oppression and attempted genocide, and he is cleverly and miraculously saved from death by being presented to and adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter. After growing up in the court of Pharaoh, Moses witnesses the oppression of his people firsthand and kills an Egyptian responsible for beating a fellow Hebrew. When this crime is found out, Pharaoh tries to kill Moses again (this time more directly), and so Moses flees Egypt. Moses becomes a shepherd in the wilderness of Midian (2:11-22). And, while tending a flock at Horeb, "the mountain of God," Moses witnesses a bush on fire which is not being consumed and hears his name being called from the midst of it. God, making himself known to Moses, therefore begins to reveal his plan to bring the Israelites, God's people, out of Egypt—and so sends Moses back to Pharaoh, to deliver God's people from Egypt to the promised land (3:7-10).

The people of God have been in Egypt, enduring harsh oppression at the hands of a human being who is considered within his cultural and religious context to be a god—the Pharaoh of Egypt, son of the sun-god Re and becoming, after death, the god Osiris. This god-king has required servanthood from Israel—a harsh, oppressive slavery, ruthlessly imposed. The consequence of the oppression has been a remembering (2:23-25). Another God has entered the story who remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and he has contested the sovereignty of Pharaoh of his world. He has entered Israel's story mysteriously, as a voice speaking from a burning bush, as an angel appearing, yet not seen (3:1-6). He has come as One who is known as God of the patriarchs. Yet, his name is unknown, and its meaning cannot be pinned down—"I am who I am, I will be what I will be" (3:14). It is not so much a name as a statement of intent, suggesting freedom of choice and unhindered power beyond all human power to contain, to objectify, and to control.

Optional supplemental questions for discussion:

- 1) In the section of 5:1-5, compare the similarities and differences between God and Pharaoh.
- 2) In the section of 5:20-6:12, what are their pressing concerns? How do these concerns affect their view of going to worship God in the desert? Try to put yourself in their place and share with each other how you think you would respond.
- 3) From vv. 22-23, what can you tell about Moses' mind-set and his understanding of God?

For the prayer exercise:

Feel free to talk about a “macro” idol. What do we mean by this? For the first time of sharing, it may feel more natural for people in your group to talk about a larger problem that all of you deal with such as dealing with the pressure to be materialistically successful, desiring a romantic relationship more than anything else or prioritizing career ambitions more than your relationship with God. Talking about something like this may also seal in the idea that idols can be cultural and communal and therefore the strategies to fight these idols can also be a communal process. This can be a great time to form a new level of support and understanding in your group.

Bible study #2

Between the Exodus and the giving of the Law:

Exodus 7-12 records the almighty, cosmic—and very real—battle between the god of Egypt (Pharaoh) and the God of the burning bush. The battle proves beyond doubt that what is assumed of the God of Abraham in the opening chapters is indeed true—that we are dealing here with the only true God, who has ultimate power over both creation and history, and that other gods are not truly gods at all, even if they are often regarded as such. The God of Israel, and not Pharaoh or any other god of Egypt is the God of blessing, the God of life and death. Regarding the final plague—the Passover—God says in Exodus 12:12, “On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD.” God who promised to deliver his people from the Egyptians—to shape history in terms of his own will rather than permit it to be shaped by Egyptian gods (Exod 3:7-12)—has proved able to deliver on his promises, for he is the true and living god who creates and redeems and blesses.

God instructs Moses to appear before Pharaoh again and inform him of God's demand that he let the people go. Moses and his brother Aaron do so demonstrating powerful signs such as the staff turning to a snake (7:10), but Pharaoh refuses, becoming more and more “hard hearted”. God causes a series of plagues (the Nile becoming blood, frogs, flies, death of the livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness), but Pharaoh does not relent. God instructs Moses to institute the Passover sacrifice among the Israelites which protects the Hebrews from the loss of their first born son. Because the Egyptians do not participate in the Passover ritual, God kills all the firstborn sons of the Egyptians. Pharaoh, in much grief, agrees to let the Israelites go. Moses explains the meaning of the Passover: it is for Israel's salvation from Egypt, so that the Israelites will not be required to sacrifice their own sons, but to redeem them.

Pharaoh in his anger changes his mind and decides to pursue the Hebrews while they flee Egypt. He sends out his army to punish and retrieve them. After the Hebrews cross the Red sea, made possible through a miracle in which Moses parts the water of the sea, the Egyptian army is destroyed in the water. After this deliverance of the people (which historically and symbolically represented a re-creation of God's people) from their oppressor Pharaoh, God provides water and food for Israel in the desert and promises to protect them as long as they “listen carefully to the LORD your God and do what

is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees.” (15:26). After some time in the desert, the community begins to grumble against Moses and Aaron, and God responds by giving them meat (quail) and bread (manna) to eat—along with a test regarding how much and when they are to collect the manna each day. (Exod 16:4-5)

In the desert, the Israelites are attacked by the Amalekites, but they defeat them (with God’s help) (17:8-15) and begin to organize themselves into a nation of people with leaders and officials and judges (Exod 18). At the beginning of the third month after they left Egypt, the people arrive and set up camp at Mt. Sinai in desert, where Moses goes up to God for direction and words from God for the people. Here he receives the stone tablets with the covenant law on them.

Optional supplemental questions for discussion:

- 1) For the Exodus 15:1-13 passage, concentrate on how as soon as the Hebrews were able to be free ,their first natural reaction was to worship. How is worship and salvation connected in this passage?
- 2) Note if you see any things that are repeated, both words or themes. What meaning can you find in the repetition and structure?
- 3) What are all the names or words used to describe God in this passage? What do these descriptions have in common? How do these descriptions help us better understand the God of the Hebrews? Is he who he said he was?
- 4) How have their passions been transformed?
- 5) For the Exodus 20:1-11 section, how does chapter 19:1-8 impact your understanding of the preamble (vs. 1-2) to the ten commandments?
- 6) When looking at some of the overlapping themes between chapter 15 and chapter 20, discuss how sincere and authentic worship can reflect what God asks of us in the commandments.

For the prayer exercise:

Try to really lead your group in the direction of making a concrete action plan for obedience. Is it setting formal accountability pairings within your group ? Is it to communally worship together and truly encourage each other to have a Sabbath rest day, dedicated to the Lord? Ask for God’s blessing and leading with this!

Bible study #3

Between the giving of the Law and the Golden Calf:

After the Ten Commandments are given in Exod 20, chapters 21-23 record what has become known as the “Covenant Code” which includes case law instructions, social responsibilities, and Sabbath and festival ordinances. This is followed in chapter 24 with the ratification of the covenant in ceremonial fashion with offerings and a reading of the Book of the Covenant. After this, chapters 25-31 record God’s instructions on the means of worship including the building and contents of the tabernacle, the consecration of the priests, and the choice and gifting of the builders and decorators of the tent of meeting, the ark of the covenant, the atonement cover, etc...

Later, in Isaiah, we learn Egypt remains a temptation for the people of God—and are reminded of the lie and devastation of idolatry:

Isaiah 31: 1-3:

¹Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the LORD. ² Yet he too is wise and can bring disaster; he does not take back his words. He will rise up against the house of the wicked, against those who help evildoers. ³ But the Egyptians are men and not God; their horses are flesh and not spirit. When the LORD stretches out his hand, he who helps will stumble, he who is helped will fall; both will perish together.

The “battle” between God and Egypt continues in the hearts of God’s people as they are tempted to turn to Egypt for deliverance and provision. In the above quote of Isaiah, it is clear that military reliance on Egypt is akin to abandoning the true God and treating the Egyptians as if they were divine, which leads to the reminder: “the Egyptians are men and not God” in verse 3.

Egypt in particular often appears in the OT as a place of both economic and political or military temptation for the people of God. It is a richly fertile and very powerful country to which the Israelites characteristically wish to return (e.g. Exod 14:10-12; 16:2-3, ironically in view of their oppression there) and which they are often tempted to imitate (e.g., Deut 17:14-20). Above all, Egypt embodies the temptation to turn to idolatrous superpowers rather than God in times of trouble (e.g. Isa 30:1-5; Jer 42-43; Ezek 23). Idolatry, then, is more than merely the practice of a certain type of ritualistic religion. It is a matter of the whole orientation of a person’s (or nation’s) being, as it impinges on a social, economic, and political life.

It is directly after these specific instructions on proper worship that, in Exodus 32, the people ask Aaron to make “gods” who will go before them—and the calf is fashioned out of their gold earrings brought to Aaron...

Optional supplemental questions for discussion:

- 1) Compare Exod 24:4-7 with Exod 32:5-6. What accompanied the peace/fellowship offerings and the burnt offerings in the covenant renewal ceremony of chapter 24, and what accompanies them here?
- 2) How does the people's request reflect their experience in Egypt? How does it betray their new identity that they experienced in chapter 15?
- 3) In verses 21-25, How does Aaron explain the situation? What strikes you about this? How does it inform us of how he was affected by God's commandments?
- 4) How does the punishment remind the people that he is the same God that brought them out of Egypt? How does God's response to the people's sin reinforce that he is the same God they were able to worship in chapter 15? How does the Ezekiel passage impact your thoughts on this?

For the prayer exercise:

For the prayer exercise, please leave enough time that the group really has enough time to talk about a personal issue that they want to specifically deal with and because of, get support from the other members of the group. Don't hesitate to approach the leadership team or Jeff if a serious issue arises – we want to support you. But do not be overwhelmed if God brings up big things – he has been powerful before and he will, as he has said, continue to do so!