

EXODUS

Exodus means exit or going out. It is the great rescue story of the Old Testament.

The book divides into two equal halves. The first half is the dramatic story of God calling Moses, confronting Pharaoh with ten plagues, the midnight escape and walking on dry land through the Red Sea. The second half of the book focuses on the spiritual and emotional exit from slavery to living as the sacred people of God. This story dominates the whole Old Testament. As Christians, we hear this story knowing that God through Jesus has rescued us from an even deeper slavery: the bondage to sin and death.

A teacher asked her class: "What is your first memory?" She called on the boy who raised his hand confidently and quickly. "Mt. Sinai," he said. It was not the answer she had expected, but with awe she understood. He gave his answer as a member of the people of God who found their identity in their covenant relationship with God.

God's dramatic rescue of the Israelites is not complete without the sacred promise established at Mt. Sinai: "I will be your God." It requires a sacred promise in response: to be his people and only his people. The first words from God after the people have crossed the Red Sea and reached Mt. Sinai are "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." Exodus 20:1-3.

Reading Exodus is both easy and challenging.

When I was a girl, one of my friends and I decided to have a contest. Who could finish reading the Bible first? I thoroughly enjoyed the characters in Genesis and the drama of God's rescue in Exodus. Then I bogged down at Mt. Sinai just after God gave the Ten commandments to the Israelites. All I saw was chapter after chapter of laws and instructions for building the tabernacle (traveling tent for worship). I dreaded the embarrassing moment of telling my friend that I had only gotten as far as Exodus 20. I was relieved when I learned that she had stopped at the exact same place. Some of the advice we needed then, I will give to you now:

1. If you want to know how the Israelites got to Egypt, go to Genesis 37-47 to read the story of Joseph.

2. Be prepared to discover differences between the real Exodus and all the movie versions that you may have seen. Even the best invent episodes in Moses' life. The book of Exodus does not say that Moses ran races with the heir to the throne or that he broke the heart of young princesses. Hollywood tends to minimize the ten plagues and the suffering that it took to break Pharaoh's hardened heart. I am waiting for the movie that shows blood red water, frogs in cooking pots and locusts so thick you cannot see the ground.

3. If you get bogged down in the laws in chapters 20:22-31:7, jump over them. Go to 31:18 where God finishes speaking to Moses on the mountain and sends him down with two tablets of stone containing the Ten Commandments. On your way, stop at chapter 24 for amazing story of Israelite leadership encountering God before Moses goes alone for 40 days on the mountain.

4. In chapter 32, Moses discovers that the people have made a golden calf to worship while he was on the mountain. It gets rather exciting as he throws down stone tablets in anger and God consumes the golden calf in an earthquake. Then come chapters 35-40 with detailed instructions for the tabernacle, candlesticks, priests' clothing and so forth. You may find it fascinating to compare this to our building and other sanctuaries you have been in, but...if you get bogged down, give yourself permission to jump ahead to the conclusion of the book, which is chapter 40:34-38.

5. Expect most of the laws in chapters 20-31 to be understandable and/or interesting. Some may be puzzling, such as "You may not boil a kid in its mother's milk." Archeologists have discovered a recipe like this in ancient Egypt. Bible scholars and theologians suggest that this law was a way of saying "You are not Egyptian. You belong to Yahweh." As you read the laws, remember that they are not required of Gentile Christians (see Acts 15:19-21) and that all of the Old Testament is understood through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Fun Fact: the Song of Miriam in chapter 15 is the oldest Hebrew in the Old Testament.