

Exodus Introduction

Exodus: the story of a journey

The Exodus story is one of the best known stories in the Bible. It has been the subject of spectacular films from Cecil B de Mille's *The Ten Commandments* to Dreamworks' *The Prince of Egypt* which, incidentally, is a great place to start for a group not sure of the story.

Exodus is the story of a journey. It begins with Israel in captivity in the land of Egypt. It tells how Moses was called by God to be the leader of God's people. After the plagues in Egypt the people were set free and escaped by a miracle through the Red Sea. It tells of their wanderings in the desert, and of how they learned there to trust the God of Moses and of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The Exodus themes of freedom and release are powerful for Christians. We know that we also have been set free by all that Jesus has done for us. We also need to learn to trust God, to be obedient and to live as we should in the freedom that God has given us in every area of our lives. Exodus teaches us how to live in the freedom to which God has called us. (1 Corinthians 10:1-6)

A journey into generosity

Israel made their journey in many different ways: a physical journey from Egypt into the desert, a journey from slavery to freedom, from a broken-spirited people to a new identity and homeland, from not remembering their faith to meeting with God at Sinai.

Preach Exodus! invites congregations to explore one other journey in the Exodus story. Exodus 1 depicts Israel as an enslaved people who possess nothing. Exodus 35 shows these same people bringing gifts of gold, silver and jewellery in abundance to build the tent of the Lord's presence. Their gift giving is so joyful and willing that Moses asks the people to stop presenting their gifts because there is more than enough. It is a journey from poverty of slavery to extravagant generosity.

Where did this wealth come from? When the people left Egypt they asked for, and were given, gifts of gold, silver and jewellery. They had after all been slaves and were entitled to compensation. We can also add that in the Old Testament wealth is often shown as a sign of God's blessing. So the gift giving affirmed that God was with his people. The wealth that Jacob took into Egypt is now restored (Genesis 46:5-7). Finally we should note that in

Genesis 15:14 a promise is given to Abraham that his descendants will come out of Egypt with possessions. So this giving of gifts by the Egyptians to Israel is not an accidental or unimportant part of the story. Israel was blessed with wealth – but having money is not the same as being generous! Before Israel could gladly bring their gifts to God (Exodus 35) they had to learn how to handle the blessing of wealth that God had given them. The famous story of the golden calf suggests that this did not come easily.

The gifts that the Israelite people took with them from Egypt and the manner in which they used them form themes that recur throughout the Exodus story. We have been given freedom in Christ. *Preach Exodus!* helps us to explore just one aspect of that freedom - how we handle our financial gifts as responsible and obedient Christians. This collection of all-age resource material encourages us to apply the spiritual principles of freedom and release to the difficult and sensitive area of the discipleship of our money and possessions.

In a nation where debt is soaring and the demands of consumerism are everywhere, the image of a people in slavery has a special power and relevance. Issues of personal debt are a hidden source of pain in our churches just as they are in our local communities – and it not only individuals that struggle.

Some churches are struggling to survive, others to afford the most basic essentials of parish ministry while others long for the resources to sustain effective ministry. For such churches the image of a joyful people bringing their gifts and talents in abundance offers both hope and challenge.

Back to the beginning

The story begins not in Exodus but in Genesis 47. A famine drives the sons of Jacob into Egypt where they meet their long-lost brother Joseph. Food is shared and the hospitality so characteristic of the Middle East is extended to the hungry as they are settled in the best part of the land. In return Jacob blesses the Pharaoh. In God's economy this is the pattern: sharing and blessing. Such a weaving together of sharing and blessing is the practical outworking of God's abundance, where those who are hungry receive what they need and bless those who meet the need.

Growing up alongside this economy of God is another economy, that of gain and of greed. As the famine in Egypt bites harder the people come to Joseph for food. In the first year he takes their money in exchange for corn, in the second their livestock, and finally in the third year they become Pharaoh's slaves. Not 10% of the first fruits given to God, but 20% of all they have given to Pharaoh. Fearful of scarcity and wanting to increase his own power Pharaoh enslaves his own people and with them the people of Israel.

'A king who knew not Joseph...'

With these words Exodus 1:8 introduces the plight of the people of Israel as Pharaoh's slaves. We meet a people broken by slavery and serving the glory of Pharaoh and ancient Egypt. Under the leadership of Moses, God guides them out of Egypt demonstrating his power through the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. As they leave, the people of Israel ask for and receive gifts from the Egyptians (Exodus 12:35-36). No doubt some Egyptians gave gifts, glad to see the back of the Israelites responsible for the plagues. For others, the giving of gifts may have included an appeal for forgiveness, compensation for slavery and recognition in gift giving of the value of the person to whom the gift was given. The reference in Ex12:36 to the Israelites "plundering" the Egyptians may suggest some looting; this is quite possible but probably is simply a way of expressing the total victory of God over Egypt.

The contrast for Israel is stark. From having nothing they find themselves more wealthy than they could have ever dreamed. How do they cope with this astonishing change of circumstances? All that this generation of the people of Israel ever knew about wealth was what they had observed as slaves in Egypt. What other experience did they have than what they saw around them? It is no different today for us as Christians. We come to Christ bringing with us the attitudes and thinking that have shaped our lives. Discipleship is learning to have the mind of Christ – about money as much as anything else. In fact Jesus spoke more about financial matters than he did about prayer, faith or the Holy Spirit!

A new economy

The Israelites' desert journey was a 'learning experience'. Their slavery involved not just poverty, but also poverty of spirit. The Bible tells us that they were a broken people who would not at first listen to Moses (Ex 6:9). They did not know who they were as a people and they did not know their God. They had to learn to trust the God who had called them into freedom and to live in a new way.

The economy of Egypt was built on forced labour. In God's economy things are different. In the desert, the Israelites experience hunger for the first time as a free people. They grumble against Moses and long to go back to Egypt where they had plenty – though in reality this was not true! In Egypt they learned dependency; in the desert they learned to trust in God's provision.

Each morning a strange substance, *manna*, is found on the ground. 'Manna' simply means 'What is it?' They had never seen this strange food before, but neither had they met this strange new way of living and trusting. The strong, the greedy, the ambitious could not collect too much because the surplus rotted by the next day. But the poor, the sick, the widow, the orphan who could not collect as much found that they never went without.

This is God's economy – his abundant provision. It is not unusual for those new to faith to be surprised by sudden experiences of difficulty which seem to contradict our new life in Christ. The fear might be that God has left us or that we have sinned. In fact the desert is the place where we learn to really live as Christians. It is not that God is absent, but that he is calling us to trust, to follow and to think in a new way that goes with the new life he has given us.

This is also true of our money and possessions. It is no accident that Paul uses this image of the manna as God's provision that when he writes to the Corinthians about the financial collection for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:15). He uses the gift of manna as an illustration of fair shares, of God's provision for all in their need – and unashamedly does so in the context of financial giving.

The golden calf

The people of Israel travelled through the desert sustained by God's provision of food and water. But lessons we learn early on in life are hard to unlearn. The temptations of money run deep. Moses goes up Mount Sinai (Exodus 24) to receive the stone tablets of law and the pattern for the Tent of Meeting where God will live with his people. In his absence an anxious people approach Aaron who instructs them to make an idol (Exodus 32). The idol they made could have been of wood, or stone, or taken the form of a sacred tree or spring. But significantly Aaron, the priest of Israel, tells them to make a golden calf and places it on the altar.

This is an incredibly important and powerful story for modern day Christians in the West. We need to note carefully two points. Firstly a portion of the gifts taken from Egypt that should have been given to the Tent of

Meeting are made into a golden calf. That which belongs to God is given over to idolatry. It is so hard for us to see how and where our money is claiming a wrong place on the altar of our lives – instead of its rightful place as a gift to be received and shared gladly. Jesus himself said we cannot worship God and money. The gold at the centre of our community life today does not take the form of a golden calf. But perhaps it takes the form of designer clothes, expensive holidays and the ever increasing accumulation of possessions.

The second point to note is that Aaron places the calf on the altar and then proclaims that the next day will be a festival to honour the Lord. The story underlines the complex and seductive role that money and possessions can play in our lives. There is confusion between idolatry and worship of the Lord. Around this golden calf a festival is held, food and drink are shared and things get out of hand. The contrast could not be more stark compared to the account of Moses and the elders of Israel eating and drinking in the presence of God (Exodus 24:9-11). For many western Christians there is a danger that we simply accept the lifestyle around us and call it Christian without distinguishing true spirituality in this difficult area of discipleship. As Paul Schervisch notes, money gives choice and freedom and power but it cannot guarantee the quality of the choices we make nor the way we use that freedom and power.

The value of repentance

How do we step back from putting our “gold” at the centre of our lives? What choices can we make to put money and wealth and possessions in their proper place? There is a fascinating insight in Exodus 33:1-6 which helps us understand the first step. God affirms his promise that the people will enter a land of milk and honey but he withdraws his presence from them; he will not go with them lest his anger consume them. Put bluntly, Israel will receive the promise, but lose the presence of God. The response of the people is to mourn, to repent and to take off their ornaments! The gold, silver and jewellery they carried away from Egypt as a sign of their freedom has become captivity. They choose to remove their ornaments and God dwells with his people, meeting Moses at the tent of the Lord's presence (Exodus 33:7-11).

The tent of God's presence

The first step taken by the people was to remove their ornaments. They did not destroy them or get rid of them; after all they are a blessing of God. But they were to be taken off for a season of repentance. The second step Israel takes to resist placing money at the centre of their lives is to begin to give. Moses invites those of the people

who have a generous heart to bring their gifts to build a tabernacle, a new Tent of Meeting that will declare the presence of the God who dwells with Israel (Exodus 35). The people bring their gifts generously until the leaders inform Moses that the people are bringing too much! (Exodus 36:5)

The important point is that the gifts the people bring are not given to build a fine tent but to declare the presence of God among his people. Nevertheless the materials to construct the Tent are lavish because the Tent should in its beauty reflect the glory of the God of Israel. The resources given were matched to, were appropriate to the purpose for which they were given. And here is the hard bit: where our hearts are dominated by another idol, another god, the presence of God cannot settle in the midst of his people. We might obtain the promises but still miss out on the presence of God. The danger is that we talk of the things of God, of our vision for our church and its ministry and mission but day by day, often without realizing it, we walk with and even worship another god. Our vision for ministry and mission must be matched by hearts generous to resource that vision.

A Sabbath rest

It is interesting that before Moses invites the people to bring their gifts to build the Tent of Meeting in Ex 35:1-3 he reminds the people of the law of Sabbath rest. Why, of all the laws of God that he could mention, including the command to have no other gods, does Moses stress this one? In a similar way Moses was angry with those who tried to collect the manna on the Sabbath. The principle of the Sabbath is that of rest, not laws about what we can and cannot do on one day in the week. As Walter Brueggemann points out learning to trust in God's abundance and provision allows us to take the opportunity for Sabbath rest. If our lives are driven by the need to accumulate, to possess more than Sabbath rest will always elude us.

Conclusion

The people of Israel took two steps: they remove their ornaments, the symbols of wealth and possession and accumulation; they give generously to the tent that declares God's presence. The Christian stewardship of finances is not simply about giving something back to God each week in church, not even about tithing our money. Pharaoh asked for 20% from his people but they were still his slaves not joyful stewards of all that had been given to them.

Christian stewardship is the lifetime journey of learning to trust God's provision, of handling our financial blessings

Preach Exodus!

as gifts received, not ornaments around our neck, of not putting money and wealth and possessions at the centre of our lives and about choosing to give, and to give generously to declare the presence of God in our hearts, our churches and in our communities.

At this point in our story the journey is complete, at least for those who left Egypt – a journey from captivity to generosity. It is a journey that must be taken afresh by each generation. This journey is a lifetime's work but it is a journey to freedom and the promise of God's presence with us. As Jesus himself reminds us, we cannot serve God and our money.

Appendix: a money autobiography

On the next page is an introduction to the idea of a money autobiography which forms part of the material in the *Study Exodus!* bible study which complements the preaching series. The text is identical to the web page Money Autobiography on the Giving in Grace website

A money autobiography

As well as reading and discussing the Bible passages *Study Exodus!* encourages group members to explore what is known as a “money autobiography”. The idea is simple - we just remember and think about our earliest money stories. Each one of us grows up getting messages about money and a money autobiography simply invites us to remember and think about them and how they might affect the way we think and feel about money today. What was your earliest memory of money as a child? Was money discussed in your family? Do you worry about money or feel guilty about what you have? There can be a whole range of questions that can be explored. Some we will share in the group, others we might tell our partners or closest friends, many we might record in a private diary or journal.

Why should it matter to develop a money autobiography? Pam Klainer is a “career coach” in the States. She works with people wanting to develop their business careers or manage the balance of home and life better. Pam is quite clear that money is the root of the problems that her clients bring to her: “in my experience, money is almost always the silent subtext to stories about work and career” By learning to tell a money autobiography we give a voice to what is silent; by thinking about the money messages we have received we can begin to understand our motivations, our anxieties, our hopes much better.

Nor is this confined to issues around work and career. Some 70% of couples experiencing relationship problems give money as the number one problem which they face. How helpful it would be to explore the different attitudes to and experiences of money that shape the behaviours of the couple and enable a common understanding. Recalling and reflecting on the money messages that are often buried very deep inside us is an enlightening and liberating experience. Finding freedom in this difficult, foundational and personal area of money often has a domino effect as we discover new freedom in other areas of our lives. This is no less true of our spiritual lives. When we are not listening to the hidden money messages within us we are able to hear the Bible’s teaching about money much more clearly. The voice of the Bible and the promise of blessing through giving it speaks of will not need to compete with other voices for our attention!

Dan R Dick is a well known author and speaker in the United Methodist Church in America. He defines a money autobiography as follows:

“A money autobiography is a reflection process on the role and influence of money and material possessions in our lives. It challenges us to explore the past to see how our attitudes, assumptions, and values concerning money and wealth were formed. The money autobiography provides a lens through which we examine how we manage money and how money manages us. It allows us the opportunity to wrestle with our needs, wants, and desires and helps us understand the lifestyle choices we make. It can even help us set some priorities and goals for the future. What we pursue says a lot about who we are, and the way we order our priorities says a lot about what we believe”.

A true story

Pam Klainer tells how a female business executive came to see her for help. Work dominated this lady’s life so much that her family was suffering. She knew it but she could not stop her inbuilt need and drive to keep working. Strangely enough this lady was already a multi millionaire due to an inheritance from her parents. But she would not allow herself to touch that money until she had built up a fortune all of her own.

Pam got her to write her money autobiography. Starting with her earliest memories of money the executive remembered and reflected upon how she had learned to think, feel and act around money. It turned out that her parents were self made millionaires and their money messages about making your own way in life were still dominating her thinking. Somehow it was wrong for this executive lady to use an inheritance to make her life easier. Once she realized this she was freed and enabled to work less and was planning to give some of her considerable wealth away to charity.

Many people are living by money rules, attitudes or experiences handed down by their parents. Many others are living by money messages from advertising and peer group pressure. A money autobiography helps to discover, examine and evaluate those messages.

Asking the questions

Dan R Dick provides an excellent introduction to a money autobiography and some carefully grouped questions to assist people in writing their own story. These are perfect for individuals who wish to write a money autobiography over a month with a question for each day. They can be found at www.gbod.org/stewardship. Click on the articles menu at the top and select other articles.

Preach Exodus!



We are grateful for permission from Dan R Dick to reproduce the questions and gladly acknowledge his work as the source