

Summing Up Exodus

A Great and Foundational Book

The book of Exodus is a grand book.

It is a book of history, recording historical events that have formed the identity of the nation of Israel even down to this day.

It is a book of law and instruction.

It contains drama and story, tradition and sociology.

It has folk song and hymns.

It is a book that has formed the basis of Western jurisprudence and the underlies the practice of much Jewish and Christian religious practice.

We are introduced to tabernacles, priests, and cult.

The foundations of Temple, Synagogue, and Christian assembly are laid.

Our understanding of God is significantly enlarged as we see him in action as deliverer, lawgiver, judge, and confidant.

Not only all of this.

For in the book of Exodus we meet Moses and Pharaoh.

We meet the nation of Israel, where prior to this the Old Testament predominantly concentrated on individuals such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Exodus is the book where God gives a nation great and glorious gifts...

A special name...

A special deliverance...

Special guidance...

A special covenant...

Special worship...

Special mercy...

The ideas and people we meet in the book of Exodus are foundational for all that follow in the Bible.

The event of the Exodus was celebrated in hymns and poetry.

It was made part of memory in story.

It was celebrated in annual feasts and fasts.

It was inscribed into the memory and psyche of God's people throughout history.

It has taken us three years to work our way through the book of Exodus.

In the first year, we spent most of our time looking at the first 13 chapters.

We watched God hear the cries of his people, remember them, call Moses, and then deliver them out of Israel through some amazing signs and wonders.

In the second year, we spent most of our time looking at the nation in the wilderness and then at God bringing them to the base of Mount Sinai where he spelt out the covenant to them and began to give them his law.

In the third year, we concentrated on God's giving of the ten commandments.

We went through each of the commandments one by one and then moved on to some of the other laws that followed.

And this year we have wrapped up the final 15 chapters of the book.

We have seen how God ratified the covenant.

How he gave Moses instructions about how to build the tabernacle.

How Israel engaged in the most horrific idolatry.

And how God forgave, renewed the covenant, and then gifted them with his presence.

I don't know about you, but I've learnt some great things over these past three years.

Some of the things I've learnt will stick with me all my life.

I've learnt things about God.

And things about how to live with God.

So... tonight we reach our final talk on Exodus.

And in this sermon I'm meant to sum up the book and give some reflection on its meaning for us as God's people in the 21st Century.

Now the problem with this is that the book of Exodus is not only referred to or alluded to throughout the Old Testament.

It is also one of the most often quoted books in the New Testament, only to be beaten by the books of Psalms and Isaiah.

Jesus and the New Testament authors often refer to the ideas and characters we find in Exodus.

And their use of these ideas and characters is very broad.

So what I thought I would do tonight is to turn to a passage in the New Testament that has one of the most extended discussions of these ideas and characters.

It is a great passage because it takes the story of the book of Exodus and applies it to us as individuals and as a congregation.

It doesn't really operate as a summary of the book of Exodus.

Nevertheless, it does guide us in applying the book of Exodus to our modern lives.

Let's have a look at Hebrews 3-4 together.

Hebrews 3:1-4:13

Hebrews 3:1-6

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed

him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope. (ESV)

In the book of Hebrews, the writer spends a lot of time comparing Jesus to Old Testament institutions or people.

His constant cry is that Jesus surpasses everything and everyone that went before him.

In this chapter, he takes the figure of Moses and compares him with Jesus.

His main point in verses 1-6 is that Jesus is greater than Moses in the same way that a builder of a house is greater than the house.

What he means is that Moses was one of the people of God.

He was a good and faithful servant amongst the people of God.

But Jesus was the Son of God.

He was not one of the people of God.

Rather, he was the creator of all things, including the people of God.

Jesus is in a totally different league to Moses.

Jesus is far, far, far greater than Moses.

Hebrews 3:7-19

With this as background, let's move on to Hebrews 3:7-19.

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years.

Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.'

As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.' ”

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said,

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief. (ESV)

The book of Hebrews is arranged around a number of key passages of Scripture from the Old Testament.

Here the writer quotes one of those key passages – Psalm 95.

He makes the point that the story of book of Exodus applied to a whole host of people throughout history.

It applied to the original people in Exodus.

It applied to the people who sang Psalm 95 together.

It applied to the people who read the original book of Hebrews.

And, by implication, it applies to those who read the book of Hebrews today.

And this message has one short, strong point – ‘Do not harden your hearts.’

Now, as readers of the book of Exodus we know what it means to harden your heart.

It means to be like Pharaoh or the Israelites.

It means to see or hear about God and not take it on board.

To see or hear about God and passively not believe it or actively rebel against it.

In these last two weeks we have heard how the nation of Israel turned to idolatry just after God had revealed himself to them and promised them his enduring presence.

Well, this story was repeated again and again throughout Israelite history.

It was repeated when the Israelites arrived at the promised land.

Although God had shown himself to be their God...

Although he had dwelt among them...

Although he had cared for them and protected them...

Although he had and to have provided everything they needed...

They did not trust him.

They showed their true colours – they were hard in heart...

They were people whose disposition was to go astray in their hearts...

They were people who did not know God's ways.

The point being made is a very potent one.

The ancient people of Israel had been people who had seen one of the grandest events in recorded history – the delivery of an entire nation out of slavery without a weapon being wielded.

They had seen his glorious revelation of himself on Mt Sinai and at the giving of the law.

And they had watched his forgiveness and practical care for them in the wilderness.

But they still had no idea about what made him tick, what he was like, and how they should obey him.

And the end result is that God pronounced judgment – they would not enter God's rest.

The point that the writer is making is that while God is longsuffering and forgiving, there is an end point.

This was true in the Old Testament with the ancient people of God and was true for those to whom Psalm 95 was written.

And it was true for those to whom the book of Hebrews was written.

And it is true for us in the modern world who read Exodus, Psalm 95 and Hebrews.

With this in mind, let's turn to Hebrews 4:1-13

Hebrews 4:1-13

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said,

“As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest,’ ”

although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” And again in this passage he said,

“They shall not enter my rest.”

Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted,

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (ESV)

In Hebrews 4 the writer develops his theme some more by concentrating on the idea of rest.

Now, when we read the Old Testament the idea of rest is a very rich one.

It is often used to refer to God's gift of the promised land.

Living in the promised land was about rest from wandering, rest from enemies, and rest from struggle.

But the writer of the Hebrews makes a number of points about rest.

First, God's rest was a much greater idea than just the promised land.

After all, Genesis 2:2 talks about God resting.

So, God's rest was something that existed long before the people of God entered into the promised land.

Second, God's rest must be greater than just the promised land because God still talks about rest in Psalm 95.

God was still urging people to enter his rest in Psalm 95 and therefore also in the first century.

His argument reaches its pinnacle in verse 9 where he says...

So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

I want you to notice this verse.

It not only says that there remains a rest to enter.

He also says how you enter it.

You enter it by resting from your works as God rested from his.

In other words, you enter God's rest by hearing and obeying God's gracious word about Jesus Christ.

By believing in Jesus and his work for us.

By trusting in his sacrifice alone to bring us to God.

The work we are to do is to make every effort to accept Christ's work on our behalf.

Listen to verse 11...

*Let us therefore **strive** to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.*

And this rest of being in God's presence and receiving God's gift starts now and continues to eternity.

It is entered now by faith.

But it also remains in the future.

The rest we have in Christ is a rest prepared by God, given by God, and shared with God.

It is what the book of Exodus was all about.

It is about living in the eternal presence of God – seeing his face and enjoying his favour.

Exodus, Hebrews, and Us

I want to close today's talk by reflecting on what we learn from Hebrews about the Exodus.

You see, it is clear that the writer of Hebrews thought that Exodus is for us.

First, Hebrews 4:12 makes clear that he saw Psalm 95 and therefore the book of Exodus as being the word of God for us.

The Old Testament Scriptures are the word of God – living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword.

They expose us before God with whom we have to do.

Second, the writer of the Hebrews appears to have seen a parallel between Exodus and the Christian existence.

In some way, the story of Israel in Exodus corresponds to the story of God's people in Christ.

As the Israelites have experienced a great delivery, so too have we who have come to know Christ.

As they have entered God's blessings and yet are still on a journey to the promised land, so we have already entered God's presence but are still on a journey.

As they are assaulted by dangers of faith, so we too are confronted by danger and threat.

With these similarities in mind, let's see if we can sum up what the writer to the Hebrews wants to say to us.

Now, I've put it under two headings.

You see, I think he wants to say things to us as individuals.

And I think he wants to say things to us as a congregation of God's people as well.

Let's have a look at what he says to us as individuals first.

To us as individuals

I want you to notice the thrust of Hebrews 3-4.

What is the point that sits behind the chapter?

It is a point that sits behind every chapter in Exodus as well.

The point is that we are humans.

And the story of the Bible is that humans are sinful.

That is, humans are inclined to do their own thing, their own way, without God.

They are prone to forgetting God's greatness and grace.

And this is even true when we have seen the greatest greatness and greatest grace God has to give.

It is even possible for those who have seen and experienced God's great deliverance in Christ to fall away from it.

You see, sin so easily deceives us.

It so easily hardens us against God.

It requires a daily choice, a daily decision to follow Christ.

Every day we need to actively choose that we will share in Christ and persevere.

Being a Christian does not exempt us from taking care to believe in God and to trust in Christ.

It is a daily, hourly, minute-by-minute decision.

Constantly we are confronted with it.

We have heard God's word.

We have listened to his great promise.

We have seen what he has done for us in his Son, Jesus Christ.

And we have received his warning about what happens to those who turn away.

And so we can respond in two ways.

We can turn away in unbelief and disobedience.

We can choose to be ignorant of what God has done and therefore choose to have a sinful, hard heart.

Or we can turn in faith, sharing in Christ and holding firm to our confidence in him.

This is a choice that we must make as individuals.

To us together

However, it is not enough for each person to just care for themselves.

We are also to care for each other.

We are to encourage each other each day until the last day.

You see, sin so easily deceives us.

It so easily hardens us against God.

It requires a daily choice, a daily decision to follow Christ.

Every day we need to actively choose that we will share in Christ and persevere TOGETHER with each other.

Being a Christian does not exempt us from taking care to believe in God and to trust in Christ ourselves.

But it also does not exempt us from taking care to encourage our brothers and sisters Christ to believe in God and to wholly trust in Christ.

This also is our daily task.

As we corporately hear the Scriptures read and hear God's word...

As we listen to his great promise.

As we apprehend what he has done for us in his Son, Jesus Christ.

As we receive his warning about what happens to those who turn away.

We must turn to each other.

And we must urge each other not to turn away in unbelief and disobedience.

We must encourage each other not to have sinful, hard hearts as individuals or as a congregation.

We must goad each other to share in Christ and to hold firm our confidence in him.

You see, the things written in Exodus were written for our instruction.

And they were not just written for our personal edification and encouragement.

They are directed to us today.

And they are directed to us corporately.

Let us hear together.

And let's encourage each other while it is still called today lest any of us be hardened by sins deceitfulness.