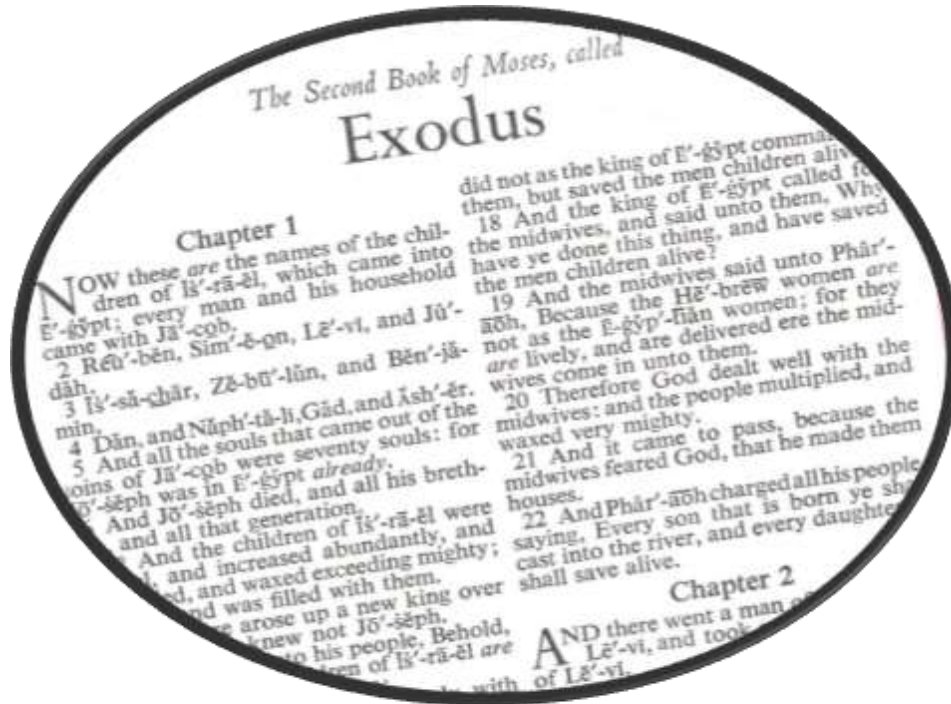


EXODUS – WEEK 11

MIRACLES AREN'T ENOUGH



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Exodus 17:1–19:15 – Miracles Aren't Enough.

After all they've been through, the Israelites still can't handle a minor trial. They grumble again, this time about water. Moses solves the immediate problem by getting water from a rock, but this incident at Meribah becomes scripture's quintessential failure of faith.

Moses slogs on but starts thinking he's hot stuff. God (and Jethro) shoot that down big time.

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Thank you.

Exodus 17:1–19:15 – Miracles Aren't Enough
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1 Exodus 17:1-7 (ESV)

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." And the LORD said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Oh no, not again. This one's going to cost them. That cost will become a great object lesson.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways." Therefore I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest." – Psalm 95:7b-11 (ESV)

This is also the example of unbelief used by the author of Hebrews to present the gospel in terms of believers entering God's rest.

For we have come to 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." ... 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. – Hebrews 3:14-15, 17-19 (ESV)

Seeing multiple miracles doesn't produce true faith. They believe in YHVH but don't have faith in Him.

They want to go back to Egypt.

As usual, the lesson here isn't about what a bunch of idiots the Israelites were; the lesson's about what a bunch of idiots we are. We believe – kinda, sorta. Something always seems to be holding us back.

And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" – Mark 9:23-24 (ESV)

True faith is supernatural. To grow your faith, you have to ask.

2 Exodus 17:8–16 (NKJV)

Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. So Moses said to Joshua, “Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.” So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword.

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD Is My Banner, saying, “A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.”

Notice that God didn't tell Moses to hold the staff up; it's his own idea. All the other times that Moses used the staff to perform miracles, he was following God's specific instructions.

So, what's he thinking this time? Moses doesn't predict anything about the effect of holding the staff up. That hints that he doesn't know what will happen next. As an old man, his role is not to wield a sword. It sounds like this is the best he could come up with.

But it turns out to be a great idea. Holding the staff up is much more than symbolic; its impact is total. So, guess what God does next? He tramples Moses's ego. Moses can't perform the simple task of holding up the staff. As brilliant and effective as Moses's idea is, he still ends up depending on others. This is the perfect setup for what will happen next – Jethro calling him out for not delegating.

Moses is about to get a crash course in humility. After all the hyper-humble whining when he argued with the burning bush, the pendulum has swung the other way. He's in danger of becoming full of himself.

This will be a recurring theme.

People are “glory stealers.” We bask in glory that is not ours. This is particularly bad with prayer. When God grants a prayer request, do you want others to know that you prayed for that? I do.

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.
– John 15:7 (NKJV)

This is complicated because answered prayer should be shared – that glorifies God – but at the same time wanting to be known for having effective prayers is poisonously prideful. How can we avoid that?

John 15:7 says that “abiding” Christians get their requests granted. It does not say that everyone else's prayers get denied. God can grant anyone's prayers. You can't take credit. Just thank and glorify Him.

3 Exodus 18:1-12 (NKJV)

And Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people—that the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt. Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her back, with her two sons, of whom the name of one was Gershom (for he said, "I have been a stranger in a foreign land") and the name of the other was Eliezer (for he said, "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh"); and Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God. Now he had said to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her."

So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, bowed down, and kissed him. And they asked each other about their well-being, and they went into the tent. And Moses told his father-in-law all that the LORD had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had come upon them on the way, and how the LORD had delivered them. Then Jethro rejoiced for all the good which the LORD had done for Israel, whom He had delivered out of the hand of the Egyptians. And Jethro said, "Blessed be the LORD, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh, and who has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the LORD is greater than all the gods; for in the very thing in which they behaved proudly, He was above them." Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took a burnt offering and other sacrifices to offer to God. And Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God.

Jethro shows up late in the game but quickly becomes an important player. It's curious that his being absent from all the action in Egypt and crossing the Red Sea actually seems to help.

He is older and more mature, and he's some kind of priest, but he's only just now figuring out that YHVH is God. In some ways, he's not all that spiritually mature.

But Jethro hasn't lived under the rule of Pharaoh. Thus, his reaction to what God has done is normal and rational. This stands in stark contrast to how the Israelites act (and will continue to act).

That almost looks like Stockholm syndrome.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stockholm_syndrome

Stockholm syndrome might be the most puzzling of all our psychological quirks. Apparently everyone is susceptible, yet we can't imagine ourselves doing that. Surely we're above that kind of weakmindedness.

Except we're not. I don't know what I'd do in such an extreme situation. No one knows. That's what makes it so puzzling. How can we be so different from who (or what) we think we are?

The cold, hard truth is that we're weaker than we realize.

That's the point of all these Old Testament stories. They show the truth, without all the sugarcoating.

4 Exodus 18:13-27 (ESV)

The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?" And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God; when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws." Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone. Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God, and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do. Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace."

So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves. Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country.

As great as Moses is, his pride will be his undoing. He knows that YHVH is God, but he's still hot stuff – so hot that no one else can do anything. He has to carry the team.

Jethro doesn't fall for this baloney and calls him out on it. Moses, to his credit, listens and does the right thing. For now, the monarchy is nipped in the bud.

Pride is the black lining in every silver cloud; it threatens everything good. Pride lies at the heart of our sin. It's the attack from within that we can't get away from. So, how can we fight it?

By seeing it. The ugliness of pride is pretty curative, but we avert our eyes and trick ourselves in other ways so that we don't see it – or at least don't notice it. If only we could see it. But how?

Well, others see our pride (and notice it) just fine. So, if you can get into a relationship where someone else is willing to be honest with you, that'll help. That someone can be a good friend or your spouse. In fact, your spouse should be someone who gives and takes substantive criticism.

The other avenue is prayer. If you're up for some pretty tough lessons, ask God to show you your pride.

It's a painful sight. It takes courage to look.

5 Exodus 19:1-6 (NKJV)

In the third month after the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on the same day, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai. For they had departed from Rephidim, had come to the Wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness. So Israel camped there before the mountain.

And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.”

Wow, a kingdom of priests. Imagine what Israel might have been. The whole world would have been transformed by them as they ministered to all the nations.

But the promise is conditional – they must *obey My voice and keep My covenant*. They won't. This will become the main storyline of the entire Old Testament.

Israel will be repeatedly refined by trials as God pounds into them their dependence on Him. It's a single lesson taught from a hundred different angles.

But this kingdom of priests does finally come to pass. It's us. We are God's ministers to all the nations. The whole world is supposed to be blessed by us.

But are they? When non-Christians think of Christians, are they glad we're here? Often not, though the reasons vary and some (e.g. media bias) are just part of the playing field.

But notice the key given here to being a nation of priests – *“if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant.”* The doctrine of salvation by faith alone doesn't take this away.

To be a serious Christian, you have to be serious.

Think about that *“obey My voice”* part. Is there an area in your life that you are refusing to turn over to Him? Ask God to help you see it.

Note: this may not involve outright resistance to the LORD's leading. I had a recent failing where I simply didn't notice His voice. Part of *“obey My voice”* is *“hear My voice,”* or even just *“pay attention.”*

Is there a part of your life that you just assume God isn't interested in? Or is there a part that you are so confident you have right that you're not looking for His guidance?

That last one was my mistake.

6 Exodus 19:7-15 (ESV)

So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do." And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. And the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever."

When Moses told the words of the people to the LORD, the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain." So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people; and they washed their garments. And he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman."

The people have given the right response to the LORD's pronouncement of a new covenant and now He's going to give them a huge treat. They will get to hear the voice of God as he talks to Moses. What would you give to experience that, eh?

This requires some serious preparation/consecration. Since the temptation to get too close will be almost irresistible, the mountain must be fenced. Picture yellow police tape running all the way around the mountain. "DO NOT CROSS," it says, in big black letters. Anyone or anything that crosses the police line dies – no excuses, no appeals.

And everyone needs to wash up and get into their Sunday best. And no sex.

Focus.

We tend to forget what a privilege it is to be a Christian. God rescues us from the pit of our depravity and starts a relationship with us – as if we have something to offer. We start to grow and get in closer contact with Him. We're clueless but make progress.

Just marvel at the absurdity of grace. The potter turns ugly clay in to something useful. That's what potters do, but the clay is blessed.

We don't get selected by the potter because we're the clay that looks most like a pot; we're selected because transforming us would glorify Him.

How blessed is that?

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What's a difference between your faith now and your faith shortly after you became a Christian?
2. Are you humbled by answered prayer, or just encouraged?
3. What's the most interesting or surprising thing you have learned about human psychology?
4. What things do you refuse to delegate?
5. When have you failed to heed God's direction?
6. Are you comfortable obeying all rules?

Items for prayer: