

# Worship *and the* Exodus: Understanding Who God Is



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week’s Study:** *Exod. 3:1–15; 12:1–36; 20:4, 5; 32:1–6; 33:12–23.*

**Memory Text:** “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me” (*Exodus 20:2, 3, NKJV*).

In speaking to the woman at the well, Jesus said, “You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews” (*John 4:22, NKJV*). Imagine worshipping what you do not know. In a sense, that is what almost all the world has done, or perhaps is doing now—worshipping what they do not know. When you see someone bowing down and worshipping a block of stone, thinking it will answer their prayers, you are seeing people worshipping what they do not know. That is, they are worshipping what they think can bring them salvation but cannot. In a more modern context, people who make gods out of power, money, fame, and self are, likewise, worshipping what they do not know. They are worshipping that which cannot save them.

In the immediate Christian context, the question for us could be: do we know what we are worshipping? Do we know the Lord whom we praise and honor with our mouths? Who is He? What is His name? What is He like?

This week we will look at early accounts of the children of Israel and how their encounters with the Lord reveal to us more about the nature and the character of the God we profess to serve and worship. After all, what sense does it make to worship what we do not know?

*\*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 9.*

## Holy Ground

It would be one thing for Moses, living in the wilderness, to see a bush burning. That itself might not be such a remarkable event; he probably had seen things like that before. What he had most likely never seen before, however, was that the burning bush was not consumed: it kept burning and burning. At that moment, Moses knew that he was seeing a “great sight,” something remarkable, even supernatural.

**Read Exodus 3:1–15. What foundational elements of true worship can be seen in these verses?**

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Right from the start, we see here something of the holiness of God and the attitude with which we need to approach Him. It was God who told Moses to take off his shoes, for this was holy ground. The Lord was making clear the distinction between Himself—the Lord—and Moses, a sinner in need of grace. Reverence, awe, and fear—these are the attitudes that are crucial it is for us in order to engage in true worship.

Another important point is the God-centeredness of this experience. Moses’ first response to God was, “Who am I that I should go?” The focus was on himself—his needs, his weaknesses, and his fears. Soon after, however, he shifts from himself to God and what God would do. How crucial it is that all worship centers on the Lord, not on ourselves.

That leads to another crucial element in worship: that of salvation and deliverance. The Exodus from Egypt has stood symbolically for the salvation we all have in Christ (*1 Cor. 10:1–4*). God was not appearing to Moses just to make Himself known; He was appearing to him in order to let him know of the great work of deliverance that He was going to do on behalf of the children of Israel. In the same way, Jesus did not come to this earth merely to represent God and help us know more about Him. No, Jesus came to die for our sins, to give His life as a ransom, to die on the cross the death that we deserve. Through His death, of course, we know more and more about the character of God, but in the end Christ came to pay the penalty for our sins and thus give us true deliverance, the deliverance symbolized in part by what the Lord did for Israel when He freed the nation from Egypt.

**How much time do you spend thinking about the Cross and the deliverance we have been given through Jesus? Or do you spend more time thinking about other things, things that cannot save you? What are the implications of your answer?**

## *The Lesson in Brief*

► **Key Text:** *Exodus 20:2, 3*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Contrast the feelings and behaviors of the worshipers gathered around the image of the calf with the feelings and behaviors of those worshipers at the foot of Mount Sinai.

**Feel:** Offer humble worship to God, sensing His ruling majesty, creative power, and holy righteousness.

**Do:** Honor the God of the Exodus, respecting and responding to His expectations for worship.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: Respect or Revelry?**

**A** Why was it so important for God to demonstrate who He was with fire, thundering words, and earthquakes at Mount Sinai?

**B** What distinguishes the reverent celebration of God's delivering power from the hedonistic revelry Israel displayed around the image of the calf? How did Israel fall into this type of false worship?

**C** How might similar temptations for us arise, and how do we guard against disrespectful and false worship?

**II. Feel: God Is Deserving of Worship**

**A** How did God present Himself to Moses and Israel, as He taught them how to worship Him?

**B** What emotions and behaviors arise from a recognition of God's glory, power, and righteousness?

**III. Do: Majestic Ruler, Almighty Deliverer**

**A** What images and concepts of God are important to keep in mind as we approach Him in worship?

**B** How do we express our devotion in an intimate, yet respectful, manner?

► **Summary:** While God personally delivered Israel from Egypt and showed Himself in many concrete ways to His people, He required deep acknowledgment and respect of His holy, transcendent nature.

## The Death of the Firstborn: Passover and Worship

**“That ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the LORD’S passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses. And the people bowed the head and worshipped”** (*Exod. 12:27*).

The Hebrew word translated as “worshipped” in the above verse comes from a root that means “to bow down” or “to prostrate oneself.” The word itself almost always appears in a verb form that intensifies the meaning or that gives the idea of repetition. One almost can imagine a person bowing up and down, up and down, in reverence and awe and gratitude. Indeed, considering the context, that is not hard to see.

**Read** the story of that first Passover night, in Exodus 12:1–36. How is the gospel, which should be at the center of all our worship, revealed in these verses?

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Unless covered by the blood, the children of Israel would face the loss of their firstborn. For them, the firstborn (usually meaning the oldest son) had special privileges and responsibilities, only to later be replaced by the Levites (*Num. 3:12*). Israel itself was deemed the Lord’s “firstborn” (*Exod. 4:22*), indicative of its special relationship to the Creator. In the New Testament, Jesus has been called the “firstborn” (*Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18*).

Though the firstborn were spared here, in reality Christ “the firstborn” was to die, a death symbolized by the blood placed over the doors of the houses. This act stands as a powerful representation of the substitutionary death of Jesus. He died so that the “firstborn,” in a sense all God’s saved people (*see Heb. 12:23*), would be spared the death they deserve.

**In Egypt the people had obeyed their masters out of fear; now they would learn that true worship flows from a heart filled with love and gratitude to the One who alone has power to deliver and save. How can you learn to better appreciate and love the Lord? How does sin tend to dampen that love?**

## *Learning Cycle*

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### ► **STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** True worship is characterized by the awareness and acknowledgment of the infinite greatness of God and our aspiration to know Him better. The true worshiper will refuse to accept substitutes for God, also known as idols.

**Just for Teachers:** Emphasize the contrast between God and the things in our lives that we might be tempted to put above God.

*Idol.* All of us are familiar with the word. If we are students of the Bible or listen to those who are, we know the word refers to an image of a false god. Some cultures and religions thought that the power resided in the image itself; others that it was a focal point through which the god in question manifested himself or herself to the worshiper. But the important point is that the idol is, or was, a human artifact that had no true significance outside of the imagination, superstitions, or misconceptions of its maker.

Yet, the word *idol* is used in other ways. It is used in the titles of popular television shows in a number of countries. Someone whom one admires very much is frequently referred to as “my idol.” Of course, it is just a figure of speech, or meant ironically—one would hope. But the reality is that the world does encourage us to place our adoration and trust in things that are as temporal and passing as we are. And while we are not exactly encouraged to worship them, some of the emotion around these things and people certainly looks and feels a lot like worship. It can be argued that this dampens the desire and inclination to worship God authentically.

In the book of Exodus, we see the mighty acts of God, the only being worthy of worship. We also see the human tendency to substitute other things for God and the confusion and sadness that result.

**Consider This:** What is necessary in order to maintain the proper attitude toward God and a correct realization of who and what He is? How can the things of this world siphon away the reverence and worship we should reserve for God alone? How can we keep our priorities in order?

### ► **STEP 2—Explore**

**Just for Teachers:** Emphasize the contrast between a true attitude of worship, as seen in Moses’ experience at Mount Horeb (*Exod. 3:1–15*), and that which characterizes the worship of false gods (*Exod. 32:1–6*).

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## No Other Gods

Imagine the scene: Mount Sinai is enveloped in a thick cloud, quaking with thunder, lightning flashing, trumpets blasting. The people tremble. Smoke fills the air because the God of Israel has descended in fire upon the holy mount (*Exod. 19:16–19*). There, amid the cloud and the smoke, He reveals Himself in awful grandeur. Then the voice of their Deliverer proclaims the first four commandments, all of which are directly linked to worship.

**Focus** on Exodus 20:1–6. What important points about worship can we take from those verses?

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The Ten Commandments begin with God’s reminder to the children of Israel of their deliverance. Only the Lord, the true God, the only God, could have done that for them. All other gods, such as the gods of Egypt, were false gods, human creations unable to save or deliver anyone. These “gods” also demonstrated selfish, demanding, and often immoral, character traits that reflected their human origin. What a contrast to the Lord, the loving and self-sacrificing Creator and Redeemer. Thus, after centuries of being immersed in the crude polytheism of a pagan culture, the children of Israel needed to know their Lord and God as the only God, especially now as they were entering into the covenant relationship with Him.

**How** does that background help us to better understand what the Lord said to them in Exodus 20:4, 5? Also, how can we take the principle seen there and apply it to ourselves today?

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Ellen G. White wrote, “Whatever we cherish that tends to lessen our love for God or to interfere with the service due Him, of that do we make a god.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 305. Ask yourself: What, if any, are the gods in my life that compete for my affections, my time, my priorities, or my goals? What are they, and how can I remove them?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Bible Commentary****I. “I AM has sent . . . you”** (*Review Exodus 3:1–15 with your class.*)

God first showed Himself to Moses in a very ordinary object: a bush. A bush that happened to be on fire. In such a dry area bushes must have caught fire quite often. Fire was nature’s way of clearing dead vegetation to make room for live vegetation. But Moses immediately noted something that was not so natural and usual: the bush was not being consumed. It was a living insult to the laws of thermodynamics, which even the ancients must have understood intuitively. Having gotten Moses’ attention, the Lord would now work in a special way with His servant.

God created bushes, as well as fire, and He created the laws governing the relationship between the two. But God is greater than these laws. God can, if He so chooses, override them completely, which He obviously did.

Moses was familiar with the way things usually were: bushes burned. But in this instance he saw two natural phenomena behaving in unnatural ways, ways that indicated that God was present. God had popped up in the middle of His creation, and strange things were happening. The natural response was worship. Moses had to be told to remove his shoes, but he did not have to be told to prostrate himself.

When we worship today, it is usually a scheduled event. It is rarely a spontaneous explosion of the presence of God, such as Moses experienced. We go to church at the same time every week. Or we set aside a time for personal or family worship. It is easy, even with the best intentions, to allow worship to become just another routine. But we should always remember that true worship is where we meet God in the midst of ordinary reality and recognize that, perhaps, it is not so ordinary after all. Worship reminds us that God is at the center of ordinary reality and that this reality—and we ourselves—are utterly dependent on Him.

**Consider This:** How does God show Himself in your daily life? What are the ways in which you honor and thank Him for His presence?

**II. The Golden Calf** (*Review Exodus 32:1–6 with your class.*)

When one looks at the story of the golden calf, it is easy to assume that the Israelites were simply appropriating the gods of the adjacent pagan cultures and abandoning Yahweh. Such would seem to be suggested in

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## “These Be Your Gods . . .”

**Read** Exodus 32:1–6 and answer the following questions:

**1. What event, what catalyst, first opened the way to this powerful expression of false worship? What lessons should we as Seventh-day Adventists take from it?**

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**2. What was this false God made of, and what does that say about how fruitless this kind of worship is?**

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**3. How did their worship of this statue contrast to their worship of the Lord?**

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They “rose up to play”; they “have corrupted themselves”; they “have turned aside quickly” (*Exod. 32:6–8*). Hardly seems to reflect the awe and reverence that marks true worship, does it?

The mixed multitude (Egyptians who had chosen to accompany Israel in the Exodus or were married to Hebrews) no doubt influenced the people and demanded of Aaron the form and style of worship familiar to them. When Joshua heard the noise from below, he came to Moses suggesting that there was war in the camp. But Moses, having lived in the royal court of Egypt, knew all too well what those noises were. He probably recognized the sounds of licentious revelry—the dancing, the loud music, the singing, shouting, and general confusion that marked their idolatrous worship (*Exod. 32:17–22*).

When they worshiped the true God, they did so in humility and reverence. Now, worshipping before this calf of gold, they behaved like animals. They had “changed their glory into the image of an ox” (*Ps. 106:20, NKJV*). It does seem to be a principle of human nature that we rise no higher than that which we worship or revere.

**Notice how quickly and easily they compromised truth in their worship. Notice how quickly the local culture came in and turned them away from the true God. How can we make sure that we, in our own worship, do not fall into the same trap?**



Learning Cycle CONTINUED

the passages (*vss. 1, 4*) in which the people are said to have asked Aaron to make gods for them and then praised these objects as the gods who brought them out of Egypt. But we also have verse 5, in which Aaron refers to the impending festival as “a festival to the Lord” (*NIV*), literally Yahweh.

Taken together, all this suggests that at least some of the people thought that while still honoring Yahweh they could have gods similar to those of their neighbors. They would have this riotous pagan orgy, but by dedicating it to the Lord, they would somehow make it acceptable to God.

So, what we really observe in these passages is not so much open apostasy as it is syncretism. Syncretism is the combining of often mutually contradictory religions or belief systems, many times on the basis of political expediency, personal taste, or whim. As with many morally or theologically dubious notions, rationalizations for syncretism are easy to come by.

For example, consider what might have been going on in Aaron’s mind. Moses seemed to have disappeared without a trace, and without his charismatic leadership, the people’s loyalty to Yahweh was flagging. Their faith was of the “what-has-He-done-for-me-lately?” variety. Aaron, at one level, was probably terrified of mutiny. At the same time, he was too loyal or timid to abandon Yahweh outright. *Why not*, he might have thought, *give the people enough of what they wanted to keep them in the fold in the event Moses returned?* It was settled, then. He would give them only one false god, though they asked for many; and he would make that false god Yahweh’s friend, his sidekick.

If the flawed reasoning behind this rationale was not obvious from the beginning, it certainly must have become so when the festivities commenced. Aaron and the others soon discovered that there was no such thing as a little false worship. Mixing a little pagan worship with “a festival to the Lord” resulted in a pagan festival, just as it would have if they had simply set out to abandon Yahweh and embrace paganism. Just as poison mixed with food masks the poison but doesn’t change its nature, false worship mixed with true worship equals only false worship.

**Consider This:** What are the results of attempting to marry worship of the true God with elements that are incompatible, or even contradictory? Why do we attempt it?

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## “Show Me Your Glory”

In the golden calf experience, the people of Israel had broken their covenant with God; they had taken His name in vain by their sinful and false worship. Moses pleaded with God on their behalf (*Exod. 32:30–33*). Because of their terrible sin, God commanded His “stiff-necked” people to remove their ornaments so that He might “know what to do” to them (*Exod. 33:4, 5*). To those who, in humility, repented, the removal of their ornaments was a symbol of their reconciliation with God (*Exod. 33:4–6*).

**Read Exodus 33:12–23. Why did Moses ask what he did of the Lord? What did Moses want to learn? Why did he believe that he needed these things?**

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Moses’ desire to see God’s glory was not one of curiosity or presumption but came from a deep heart hunger to sense God’s presence after such blatant apostasy. Though Moses had not partaken of their sin, he was impacted by it. We do not live in isolation from other members of our church. What impacts one impacts others, a point we should never forget.

Look carefully at Exodus 33:13. Moses says to God that he, Moses, wanted to “know Him.” Despite all that the Lord had done, Moses still sensed his own need, his own weakness, his own helplessness, and thus, he wanted a closer walk with the Lord. He wanted to know better the God upon whom He was so dependent. How interesting that, centuries later, Jesus said, “ ‘And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent’ ” (*John 17:3*). He wanted to see the glory of God, something that would make him realize even more his own sinfulness and helplessness and, hence, his utter dependence upon the Lord. After all, look at what Moses had been called to do; look at the challenges he had to face. No wonder he felt this need to know God.

Here, too, we come to a crucial point about worship. Worship should be about God; it should be about us in humility and faith and submission, seeking to know more about Him and His “way” (*Exod. 33:13*).

**How well do you know the Lord? More important, what choices can you make that will enable you to know Him better than you do? How can you learn to worship in a way that will give you a better appreciation of God and His glory?**

Learning Cycle CONTINUED▶ **STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** Use the following questions to emphasize the importance of knowing God and of seeking to know God as a key element in worship. Stress how true knowledge of what and who God really is precludes idolatry, or the worship of gods of our own making or imagination.

**Thought Questions:**

- ❶ What does it mean when we say we fear God? Is it fear in the sense that we are afraid of God? Explain. Is there some sense in which we should be afraid of God? Why, or why not?
- ❷ Why do you think the people of Israel had such short memories of what God had done for them? What might this have said about how they approached God in worship and in their daily lives?

**Application Questions:**

- ❶ In Exodus 3:1–15 we witness Moses' initial reluctance to do what God asks of him. But when he worships, he recognizes that God has sufficient power to use him in an effective way. How can worship of God give us confidence?
- ❷ Our God is a big God. There are many valid ways to worship Him. How can we discern which ways are compatible with what the Bible tells us is correct and spiritually honest worship and which ways compromise or contradict the spirit of true worship? How can we be sure that our views on the subject are not derived merely from our opinions, or even prejudices?

▶ **STEP 4—Create**

**Just for Teachers:** This lesson emphasizes the God-centeredness of true worship. The following activities are intended to encourage your class members to center their lives on worship and to derive their priorities and sense of self from the true knowledge of God gained thereby.

Ask your class members: In what ways have they experienced what they regarded to be a true miracle or anything that conveyed to them the message that they could approach life in a spirit of godly confidence?

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “The Law Given to Israel,” pp. 303–314; “Idolatry at Sinai,” pp. 315–330; “Satan’s Enmity Against the Law,” pp. 331–342, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; Pss. 105:26–45; 106:8–23.

“Humility and reverence should characterize the deportment of all who come into the presence of God. In the name of Jesus we may come before Him with confidence, but we must not approach Him with the boldness of presumption, as though He were on a level with ourselves. There are those who address the great and all-powerful and holy God, . . . as they would address an equal, or even an inferior. There are those who conduct themselves in His house as they would not presume to do in the audience chamber of an earthly ruler. These should remember that they are in His sight whom seraphim adore, before whom angels veil their faces. God is greatly to be revered; all who truly realize His presence will bow in humility before Him.” —Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 252.

“True reverence for God is inspired by a sense of His infinite greatness and a realization of His presence. With this sense of the Unseen, every heart should be deeply impressed. The hour and place of prayer are sacred because God is there. . . . Angels, when they speak that name, veil their faces. With what reverence, then, should we, who are fallen and sinful, take it upon our lips!” —Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 48, 49.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Discuss these aspects of God’s character: His nearness to us—and His greatness, majesty, and holiness. Theologians refer to these two concepts as His Immanence and Transcendence. Think of ways in which these two important truths about God can be emphasized and balanced in our worship services.
- 2 What lessons can we learn from the tragic story of Israel’s worship of the golden calf and the serious consequences of worshipping false gods (visible or invisible)? What are some of the idols that are commonly worshiped in your society? What lessons do you see in this story for the church today, for us who have been waiting a long time for the Lord to come?
- 3 What about our worship services? How can they better help us to sense the majesty, the glory, and the power of God? Or do they tend to bring God down to our own level?
- 4 What does it mean to know the Lord? If someone were to ask you, “How do you know the Lord?” how would you respond? In other words, how can a human being come to know God personally?