



## Week 2 - Everlasting Love

Bible Reading: Exodus 2:1 to 3:12

TEACH - Content to help inform a sermon or small group

### Introduction

- The story of Moses is an impressive example of just how much of God's 'infinitely more' a person can experience if they're available and obedient.
- It's got everything: dramatic encounters with the divine, miracles to silence the most talented of sorcerers, the leadership of a tribe the size of a small nation, the instigation of a whole new culture, the dream of a promised land, not to mention gushing rocks and parting seas. But those things only began for Moses when he was already 80 years old.

### Exploration

In Week 1 we looked at Paul's beautiful description of God's love in his letter to the Ephesians. That description uses four words: 'wide, long, high and deep' - Paul's attempt to sum up the infinite, limitless, boundless love which cascades through our lives from beginning to end.

#### 1) God's loving presence

- If the 'infinitely more' we crave is an adventure with God to change the world - and there's no reason it shouldn't be - it's worth knowing that it's going to take time.
- Moses had already walked thousands of miles with God, both literally and metaphorically, before they had that meeting in the Midianite desert. Moses had faced near-certain death as a baby, but had the wealth and privileges of a royal palace for his foster-home.

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- He had murdered a man in his zeal for justice, meaning he had to flee his homeland, but his flight had landed him in Midian, where he found a welcome, a family and a job. He had crested many highs and plummeted to many lows before he ever got wind of that calling to lead his own people to freedom.

## 2) Gratitude and thankfulness

- In Moses' story, the word 'long' is particularly relevant. The everlasting love of God had stretched right across the years, holding him, steering him, restoring him and preparing him. God didn't just turn up when it was time for the Exodus to begin. God had been with Moses for the long haul, and though their relationship still had a very long way to go, Moses already had plenty of stories to tell of everlasting love and unfailing faithfulness.
- If we want to experience more of God in our lives, we will need to learn the art of looking back in gratitude. It's generally true that those who know the greatest joy in the present and the greatest hope for the future are those who also show the greatest gratitude for all that God has done for them so far. Where gratitude is thin on the ground, so are contentment and faith.
- Looking back in thankfulness is choosing to acknowledge the long, everlasting love of God in our lives, and it opens us up to expecting even greater things in the future.
- Gratitude may be spontaneous when we feel joyful, but it's an art well worth developing for every season of life. There are several different types to practise:
  - **Long-range gratitude** - looking right back over our lives and remembering the moments when we've been aware of God's everlasting love.
  - **Daily gratitude** - stopping regularly to call to mind the many blessings which everlasting love has scattered throughout our day.



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- **Hopeful gratitude** - choosing to look at bad situations through the lens of gratitude, trusting that everlasting love will do its work in the end.

### 3) Living and learning

- Long before he was a miracle-worker or a spiritual leader, Moses was a freedom fighter. It had got him into trouble in his younger years, when his anger had driven him to murder a slave-driver. That act alone would have disqualified him from any further involvement in the battle to see the Israelites released from slavery.
- Yet that's exactly where God picked up with him at the burning bush. God didn't get the Exodus under way when Moses was young and full of zeal, presumably because there were things he needed to learn first. But 80 years of life's ups and downs had done their work, and now he was ready.
- The steel forged in Moses' heart through those years would give him the resilience to stand firm through every one of Pharaoh's mood swings, every plague, every seeming disaster in the wilderness, every Israelite grumble and every one of the extra 40 years he had to wait with them before they could enter the land.
- Just as you can't pour a litre of water into a thimble, so we can't ask for God's 'infinitely more' and expect to receive it all straight away. We need to grow. As we walk with God, letting everlasting love do its work in us, we become more and more mature. We learn from our experiences, we recognise our mistakes and we change our ways. And it's that commitment to discipleship that prepares us for the things God is going to call us to in the years to come.
- As we grow in maturity we can develop three particular habits:
  - **Look back** - taking time to think back over the things that have happened to us, noticing our reactions, emotions and choices.



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- **Listening to God** - allowing the voice of everlasting love to speak to us about our experiences, being open to hear both encouragement and correction.
- **Learning lessons** - thinking about the insights we've gained from looking and listening, and then choosing how we want those insights to shape our lives in the future.

## Conclusion

- Our world needs mature Christians - people who are doing the hard work and the heart work of discipleship. The things Moses learnt in those decades of maturing made him ready to answer God's call to set over a million people free from slavery.
- Let's commit to the journey of learning, because it's preparation for the Kingdom exploits which God will call us to in years to come.



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## REFLECT - questions for discussion/small groups

### Personal

- Moses was saved from death because his mother hid him in a basket made of papyrus, or 'bulrushes' (KJV). Do you have a 'bulrush story', a memory of a situation where God hid you and kept you safe from danger?
- How could you practise gratitude more often throughout the day? Are there creative ways you could make thankfulness more of a habit?
- Do you ever feel yourself sliding into negativity? What is most likely to make that happen? What are the circumstances which are most likely to turn you from gratitude to despondency?
- Have you ever had an encounter where you've sensed God calling you to something?
- When was the last time you learnt a lesson that changed how you live?
- Is God calling you to something new? Look back and notice the things which have happened over the years to prepare you for this moment.

### Community

- Is gratitude and thankfulness a regular part of your worship together? If not, how could you make sure you do more of it?
- Learning life lessons is easier for individuals than for communities. Think of a difficult situation your corps or centre has been through. What happened? What do you think God was saying to you at that time? Did you need to make any changes as a result of what happened?
- Moses was a freedom-fighter. Who is God calling you and your community to fight for at the moment? Is your mission and ministry bringing people to freedom?



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**ENGAGE - Interactive ideas for prayer, worship and mission**

- Ask people to bring their journals (see Week 1). Invite a few people to read highlights of the times they've sensed God's love at work in their own lives or in the lives of others.
- Create a gratitude flower. Cut out a circle and write on it 'Things I'm thankful for'. Distribute petal-shaped pieces of paper in different colours and pens. Ask people to write on the petals the things they are grateful for. Glue or tape the petals around the circle.
- Blindfold three volunteers and give each one paper and a pen. Ask them to draw different things such as a banana, a house, a person. Once they're done, ask them to remove their blindfolds and show their drawings to everyone. While they might have drawn slightly better without the blindfold, remind people that things in life may not always turn out right or the way we expect, and that it is important to learn from our mistakes to continue to grow.
- Encourage people to try 'Seven days of thankfulness' over the coming week, taking a photo each day of something they're thankful for and posting it to social media. You may want to create a hashtag and share the photos during worship the following week.
- Write a communal psalm:
  - Print off plenty of A5 sheets with the word 'For' at the top, then three blank boxes down the page, and the words 'We thank you, Lord' at the bottom.



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- Split people into groups of three, give each group a piece of paper and ask each member to write something they're thankful for in one of the boxes. They should only write one word or a short phrase.
- Ask each group to nominate a spokesperson. Invite each one to read their sheet of paper aloud. The result is a sort of communal poem, made up of lines like: 'For sunshine, chocolate cake and going on holiday, we thank you, Lord.'
- Hold a 'celebration meeting'. Invite someone from each of the groups/activities the corps/centre is involved in to share a bit about what they're seeing God do through the ministry of that group. You could also invite representatives from groups who aren't part of the community but who use your building, so they can come and talk a bit about the work they're involved in.
- Encourage everyone to get involved in some 'active appreciation' during the week, visiting different businesses, agencies and organisations for the sole purpose of saying 'thank you' to those who make your community a better place. Some might like to make cards or take boxes of chocolates as gifts - anything to show your appreciation for the work they do.



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## PRAY - Prayer liturgies for different contexts

### Words of faith

Lord, you have always given bread for the coming day;  
and though I am poor, today I believe.

Lord, you have always given strength for the coming day;  
and though I am weak, today I believe.

Lord, you have always given peace for the coming day;  
and though of anxious heart, today I believe.

Lord, you have always kept me safe in trials;  
and now, tried as I am, today I believe.

Lord, you have always marked the road for the coming day;  
and though it may be hidden, today I believe.

Lord, you have always lightened this darkness of mine;  
and though the night is here, today I believe.

Lord, you have always spoken when time was ripe;  
and though you be silent now, today I believe. Amen.

(Taken from the Evening Prayer office of the Northumbria Community)

<https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/offices/evening-prayer/>

### A confession

*Thank you, Lord, for all your goodness through the years of yesterday.*

We confess that we so quickly forget all you've done for us, often being slow to say 'thank you'.

**Lord, have mercy.**

*Thank you, too, for present mercies, and your blessing on our way.*

We confess that we so often complain about our circumstances instead of acknowledging your blessings.

**Lord, have mercy.**



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*Thank you, Lord, for sunlit pathways; thank you, too, for byways rough.*

We confess that we so easily stop trusting you when the way gets rough.

**Lord, have mercy.**

*Thank you for the fruitful summers; also for the winters tough.*

We confess that we so readily give up in the winter times, losing heart and losing hope.

**Lord, have mercy.**

*Thank you, Lord, for wayside roses, even for the thorns beside;*

We confess that we so willingly go our own way, often being slow to learn from our mistakes.

**Lord, have mercy.**

*Thank you for the prayers you granted, and for those that you denied.*

We confess that disappointment so swiftly hardens our hearts when our prayers seem to fail.

**Lord, have mercy.**

*Thank you, Lord, for precious comfort in the hours of grief and pain.*

We confess that we so desperately long for healing, yet we hide our wounds from you.

**Lord, have mercy.**

*Thank you for your precious promise: life eternal we shall gain.*

We confess that we so rarely look forward to eternal life and the infinitely more you have in store for us.

**Lord, have mercy.**

Forgive us, Lord, and renew us by your grace:

Give us grateful hearts to praise you, open hearts to trust you and expectant hearts to receive all that you long to give us,

Through your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Adapted by Lyndall Bywater from SASB 395)



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### A Celtic blessing

May the road rise to meet you, may the wind be always at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face. May the rain fall softly upon your fields until we meet again, and may God hold you in the hollow of his hand.

