Few movies even aspire to the grandeur of Cecil B. DeMille’s “The Ten Commandments.” The sets, the costumes, and the performances all operate on a massive scale. Charlton Heston imbues Moses with an earnest faith that commands each scene. Yul Brynner’s regal Rameses proves a formidable foe. The state of the art special effects continue to make audiences wonder, “How did they do that?”

In promoting the film, DeMille provided replicas of the commandments to cities and courthouses around the nation. These images have been protected and contested ever since the film debuted. Families have gathered around the television set for annual screenings of The Ten Commandments. Now, Paramount provides a spectacular three DVD edition, containing the 1923 silent version as well as the lush and moving 1956 Technicolor feature.

This study guide is built around the key scenes from Moses’ life captured in the 1956 film. It moves from the movie into the biblical sources, inviting audiences to reflect on what this powerful story continues to communicate.
DRAWN OUT OF THE WATER

**Background:** As the book of Exodus begins, the Hebrew people are oppressed, serving as slaves to Egyptian rulers. The Pharaoh fears a rebellion by the Israelites he has held in bondage. What if the Hebrews became so numerous that could lead an uprising or join with Egypt’s enemies? To preserve his power, Pharaoh condemns the next generation of Hebrew children to death.

So what would a loving Hebrew mother do? She hid her baby for as long as possible. She built a papyrus basket and placed the boy amongst the reeds of the Nile.

**Watch:** Drawn out of the water

In The Ten Commandments, Pharaoh’s daughter, Bithiah, has prayed for a son. She finds a baby floating in a basket. Her servant Memnet finds a cloth that identifies him as a Levite. But Bithiah adopts him as her own. She names him Moses. She anticipates a bright future for her adopted son, declaring his name shall outlive the pyramids.

**Read:** Exodus 2:1-10

It is interesting to note that when endangered, Moses was placed in a papyrus basket to preserve his life. This floating ‘ark' echoes the ark which brought Noah through the storm. The name Moses (or Moshe) is derived from the Hebrew word "Mashu", meaning "to draw". Moses is drawn out of the Nile, out of danger, into a life with a higher purpose. He will bring the Hebrews through the storm, through the river, drawn out of Egypt into the Promised Land.

**Questions:**

What storms or threats have you faced? How did God draw you out of such troubled waters?
THE BURNING BUSH

**Background:** When Moses' true Levite roots are discovered, he is banished from Pharaoh's court, and cast out into the wilderness. His character is forged in the desert, not in plenty but in need. Moses restarts his life by getting married and becoming a shepherd. Stripped of all his former privilege, Moses is able to see and hear God more clearly than ever before.

**Watch:** The Burning Bush

Moses sees a bush burning on the summit of Mount Horeb. The fire burns, but the bush is not consumed. He leaves his wife behind, climbing up to investigate. Approaching this wonder, Moses hears the voice of God. He is urged to take off his shoes on such holy ground. Moses takes the cries of the Israelites before God. He pleads their case and receives a call to fix the situation, to lead his people out of bondage. God reveals his holy name. Moses is transformed by this close encounter with the Almighty.

**Read:** Exodus 3

While Moses and the Hebrews had long worshipped the Creator God by the name “Elohim,” they had never experienced such a personalized encounter with the divine. God calls out Moses by name. And he is urged to keep his distance, to pause in such a sacred place. This is the same God revealed throughout the history of Israel, worshipped by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

God acknowledges the pain and suffering of Israel. The prayers of an oppressed people have been heard. And now Moses is called to return to Pharaoh and lead the Hebrews out of Egypt to worship on the same holy mountain.

But what will compel the Israelites to follow? God reveals his holy name, “I AM THAT I AM.” God is beyond the bounds of time. And so the ancient God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob promises to lead his people into the future. They are called out to worship God. But will Pharaoh let them go?

**Questions:**

Have you been in the presence of God? What heights do you need to scale to hear from God?

How would you describe God? What names describe his glory?
LET MY PEOPLE GO

Background: Moses packs up his family and returns to Egypt as a man on a mission. God has equipped him with an array of attention getting powers. His shepherd staff is turned into a snake. But will this alter Pharaoh’s heart? Moses also insists that he is not a sufficient spokesman to rally the Israelites. So God sends Moses’ brother Aaron to accompany him, to guide the people out of Egypt.

Watch: Let my People Go

Moses comes before Rameses to win the Israelites’ freedom. He makes a forceful request on behalf of God, “Let my people go.” But Rameses refuses to acknowledge Moses’ God or his authority, “The slaves are mine.” To demonstrate the power of the Hebrews’ God, Aaron turns Moses’s staff into a snake. Pharaoh’s magician, Jannes repeats the feat, but Moses’s snake consumes them. Does this compel Pharaoh to soften his heart and release the captives? No, Pharaoh adds to the Hebrews’ burden, withdrawing the straw to make bricks and insisting they meet the same quota.

Read: Exodus 5—Exodus 6:1-8

The rallying cry, “Let my people go” has animated all kinds of demonstrations across the centuries. From America’s Civil Rights movement to the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, “Let my people go” communicates volumes about the heart of God. But what happens when the people aren’t let go. The Israelites were angry at Moses for increasing their workload. His appeal to Pharaoh resulted in a cutback on their supplies for brick making. So the burden falls upon God to restore their faith, to offer reassurances tied to his covenant promises. Things may get better in the long term, but only after they get worse in the short term. So protestors from Moses to Martin Luther King are challenged to keep the people’s eyes on the prize—freedom!

Questions:

Where have you seen people striving for freedom?
How can you stand in solidarity and support for those captives who still need to be released?
RELEASE OF THE CAPTIVES

**Background:** A series of plagues fails to weaken Rameses’ resistance. Pharaoh’s heart was repeatedly hardened. And so the most horrible of plagues ensues. Just as the first-born Hebrews had been sentenced to death years before, so now the Egyptians’ first born sons will perish under a plague. But the plague will Passover the sons of Israel—only if their homes are marked by sacrificial blood.

**Watch:** Release of the captives

Moses enters Pharaoh’s court. With his only son dead, a broken and despondent Rameses mourns. He is inconsolable. Pharaoh complains that Moses was, “Saved from the Nile to be a curse upon me.” He admits, “You have defeated me Moses. Go out from among us, you and your people. I set you free.” But Moses reframe the source of their release, “The power of God has freed us….Lord God with a strong hand thou has brought us out of bitter bondage.” And so Moses exits in triumph.

**Read:** Exodus 12:17-42

The Festival of Unleavened Bread will commemorate Israel's deliverance out of Egypt. Never has being “passed over” been such a cause for celebration. Why unleavened bread (which we call matzo)? The Hebrews had to rush out of Egypt. No time to add yeast or let bread rise. Given clearance by Pharaoh, they had to spring into action, a mass exodus unparalleled in history. After more than 400 years in Egypt, the Israelites pull up stakes and head out, back to the land promised to Abraham several years prior.

Rameses and Egypt are so eager to see the Israelites exit that they bestow their wealth upon the Hebrews. Egypt is plundered as God had promised beforehand. All in all, more than 600,000 men and their families left Egypt after four centuries of oppression. That is a long time to wait for freedom.

**Questions:**

Have you ever celebrated a Passover Seder meal? What a great opportunity to understand the significance of matzo and the various memorial rituals.

What significant moments in your spiritual journey can you commemorate and celebrate?
THE PARTING OF THE RED SEA

Background: Israel does not get to enjoy its new found freedom for long. God guides his people via a pillar of fire through the desert. But the ever-duplicitous Pharaoh changes his mind about the release. He wants his subjugated people back. Perhaps he thinks waging war will be easily. Surely the Israelites will be no match for the mighty chariots of Egypt, right?

Watch: The Parting of the Red Sea

Queen Nefretiri dares Pharaoh to rise up in revenge, to bring back a sword bearing Moses blood. Pharaoh rises to her challenge, arming himself and giving chase to the Israelites. The Egyptian army finds the Hebrews hemmed in by the sea. But as Moses raises his hands, a pillar of fire holds back the Egyptians. And the Red Sea parts in one of the most vivid miracles in cinematic (and biblical) history. The Israelites rush across to safety.

Read: Exodus 14

Pharaoh has yet another change of heart, from resignation to revenge. He doesn’t want to lose thousands of servants after all. Rameses leads 600 chariots in pursuit of the Israelites. The Hebrews panic, complaining that they’ve been led into the desert to die. But Moses offers reassurance. And God challenges him to raise his hand and part the sea. As the seas were divided at creation, so God empowers Moses to make a path for the multitudes to pass through. While the Israelites reach the far side, the Egyptian army is swept up by the sea.

Questions:

What is the most miraculous scene you’ve ever witnessed?
When have you seen God intervene in a desperate situation?
THE GOLDEN CALF

**Background:** While the Israelites anticipation was great when Moses ascended the mountain, his long, 40-day stay caused anxiety amongst the masses. The Bible goes into great detail about all the teaching and instructions Moses received, including specifics about building an ark, offering of sacrifices, and constructing a temple. God was giving guidelines to direct the Hebrews way of life for hundreds of years. And yet the people’s faith faltered after just forty days. They longed for a more material way to represent and worship God. They fell back on old, idolatrous habits, fashioning a golden idol.

**Watch:** The Golden Calf

When Moses fails to return from Sinai after 40 days, the Hebrews lose faith. Aaron urges them to remain steadfast. But Dathan suggests they return to Egypt for food. He urges the Israelites to build a golden calf as an idol to lead their way back to Egypt. Perhaps Rameses will have mercy on them, with the calf buying his forgiveness.

**Read:** Exodus 32:1-14

While the movie points to Dathan as the instigator of the Golden Calf, the biblical record is even more shattering. The people figure Moses is out of the picture. So who or what will go before them? Moses’ brother, Aaron, urges the people to take off their gold rings. They are fashioned into a golden calf who is given credit as “your gods who brought you up out of Egypt.” God burns with anger at such idolatry.

How could Israel have such a short memory? After four hundred years of bondage in Egypt, they lose hope after just forty days of waiting for Moses?

Yet Moses pleads with God to spare this stiff necked people. Moses puts the incident in context. Wouldn’t the Egyptians mock God and his people, brought to the desert only to be destroyed? God must remember and honor his covenant, made with Abraham, to make Israel a mighty nation. The Lord relented.

**Questions:**

When have you lost faith after a month of waiting, wondering, and hoping?

What kinds of idols have we made? We may not have forged a golden calf but have we placed faith in building a career, finding a romance, or developing a reputation?
THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

**Background:** With Egypt far behind them, the Israelites camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai. A holy cloud settled over the mountain. Just as Moses received his call from God atop a mountain, so in a remote and lofty place, he hears the voice of God again. The Hebrews are called to consecrate themselves, to make sacrifices, to keep their distance from the glory of God. For a direct encounter with God can be utterly overwhelming.

**Watch:** The Ten Commandments

Having ascended Mt. Sinai, Moses witnesses God’s creation of the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. A pillar of fire forges the commandments of God in the mountain. The voice of God booms out his edicts. Moses holds on tight, nearly consumed by the power on display.

**Read:** Exodus 20:1-21

The initial commandments deal with our relationship with God—making the Lord central to our lives and society. Note how seriously God opposes any form of idolatry. Clearly, we are prone to replace God with more material idols. A basic way to keep God in the center of our lives is by keeping the Sabbath. We may need to work six days to keep our families or communities fed but the seventh should be set aside for worship. It renews our faith to step back, to realize that God is the ultimate provider, not merely our sweat.

The second half of the commandments deal with our relationships with each other. How do we construct a civil society? We must not murder, lie, steal, or covet things that belong to our neighbors. Such basic laws continue to guide our culture. We must honor our parents, remembering where we came from, celebrating those who provided for us. These ten commandments provided the structure we continue to need today.

**Questions:**

The finest cinematic special effects circa 1956 are employed to recreate a miracle. If you were directing the movie, how would you portray the splendor of God and the forging of the foundational ten commandments?

Which commandments are the toughest to keep?