



## **Week 1: Slavery, the emergence of Moses, and the burning bush (Exodus 1-6)**

### **Day 1 - Exodus 1:1-1:21**

*<sup>1</sup> These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: <sup>2</sup> Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, <sup>3</sup> Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, <sup>4</sup> Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. <sup>5</sup> The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy. (Joseph was already in Egypt.) <sup>6</sup> Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. <sup>7</sup> But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.*

*<sup>8</sup> Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. <sup>9</sup> He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. <sup>10</sup> Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." <sup>11</sup> Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. <sup>12</sup> But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. <sup>13</sup> The Egyptians subjected the Israelites to hard servitude <sup>14</sup> and made their lives bitter with hard servitude in mortar and bricks and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.*

*<sup>15</sup> The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, <sup>16</sup> "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." <sup>17</sup> But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. <sup>18</sup> So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this and allowed the boys to live?" <sup>19</sup> The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." <sup>20</sup> So God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very strong. <sup>21</sup> And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.*

### **Understanding the reading:**

Exodus is a book about the identity of the Hebrew people. It narrates the transition between Genesis, where a **family** is laying claim to the Promised Land, to the time when **a people group, or a nation**, is laying claim. The story of the actual exodus from Egypt, around which this book is centered, impacts the identity of the Jews from that time until the present. When you think about the independence movements that we celebrate today (like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July in the United States or Bastille Day in France), the ongoing focus on their identity as people who God gave freedom to is understandable.

Exodus begins with a crisis of identity for the descendants of Jacob, the twelve tribes of Israel. In verse 8, we're told that "a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph." Joseph was the great-grandson of Abraham (the man with whom God made a covenant in Genesis 12 to the patriarch of the family who would receive the Promised Land). He was sold into slavery in Egypt, but rose up to eventually save the nation from ruin during a famine. He was heralded by the Pharaoh and others for saving them. But generations later, he has been forgotten. And so, his descendants are seen as a potential threat rather.

Pharaoh is able to paint Joseph's descendants as a threat by inciting fear among the Egyptians. It is a classic political strategy to solidify power by singling out a group of folks and calling them an enemy. Forcing them into slavery has the dual benefit for Pharaoh of neutralizing the threat of the Israelites and creating a sense of unity among the Egyptians.

He tries to further secure his position of strength and authority by having all of the Hebrew boys killed at birth. His plan is thwarted by the midwives Shiphrah and Puah. They refuse to obey and then lie to Pharaoh about it. It raises an ethical question for us as we read and reflect on their actions. Was it right for them to disobey Pharaoh? Was it okay for them to lie about it?

Scripture reminds us that we are to follow the laws of the nation in which we live ("render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's")... **unless** those laws are in express contradiction to God's law. Daniel refused to cease praying (Daniel 6:10). Peter and John refused to cease preaching the gospel (Acts 4:19-20). The midwives refused to bow to the pressures of the world and chose to honor their fear (respect) of God. The act in and of itself (in this case, disobedience and lying) doesn't pass or fail a litmus test of morality; rather, the situation dictates whether the act is immoral. You might notice that the Pharaoh's name is not recorded in Exodus 1, but the names of the midwives are. They were faithful to God, and so they are remembered and honored for their courage and integrity.

In the coming weeks, we'll learn more about the identity of the Hebrews as they're formed by their enslavement and their escape from Egypt, as well as God's response to their disobedience(s) and the covenant God makes with them. Their identity will also be formed by the law that God gives them, setting them apart from every other people group on earth.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. Spend a few minutes reflecting on how God has freed you from something. It could be an addiction or habit, a physical or mental illness, the need for control or approval, a consuming desire.
2. What are some ways you have been more obedient to the world around you than to God?
3. Can you think of acts that can be either moral or immoral based on the situation? What is the arbiter of morality in each situation?

## **Day 2 - Exodus 1:22-2:12, 3:1-6**

*22 Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live."*

*1 Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. 2 The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. 3 When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. 4 His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.*

*5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. 6 When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. 7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" 8 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. 9 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. 10 When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."*

*11 One day after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. 12 He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.*

*1 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. 3 Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up." 4 When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.*

### **Understanding the reading:**

Pharaoh's original edict to kill the Hebrew boys was issued to the midwives, but their explanation (see Day 1's reading) that the babies are born before they can get to them means that many of the babies survive. Pharaoh handles this by issuing an order to *all* the people. They are instructed to commit infanticide when they encounter a Hebrew boy. His paranoia is escalating, which previews how hard it will be for the Israelites to gain freedom from him.

When Moses is born, his mother puts him in a basket in the reeds on the bank of the river. There is a perfectly good word for "basket" in Hebrew, but that is not what is used here. The Hebrew word in verse 3 is *tevah*, which is the same word used to describe Noah's ark. The scripture writer wanted to remind the readers that the value of what was put into this miniature ark was like the value of creation that Noah put into his ark.

In verse 1, we learn that Moses is not just a Hebrew, but a Levite. This pedigree means that Moses is from the tribe of priests, the ones who have special access to God. That will become very important when Moses leads the people and is the mouthpiece of God. Moses' identity as a Levite and a Hebrew will be held in tension with his identity as an Egyptian. Moses is raised in Pharaoh's palace,

which means he doesn't experience the hard labor of his people and the Bible doesn't give us reason to believe that Moses grew up knowing he was anything other than Egyptian. However, he clearly has a heart for the vulnerable and a conviction about justice. He intervenes to save the life of a Hebrew who is being beaten by an Egyptian – most people would turn away, and certainly an Egyptian prince would be excused from turning away. Moses' deliverance of the Hebrew slave foreshadows his deliverance of the Hebrew people.

Years later, when Moses is living in Midian and tending to his father-in-law's flocks, he notices a bush that is burning but not being consumed. The Bible doesn't make clear the reason that the bush isn't destroyed by the fire; scholars have debated about it for centuries. It may simply have been a test to get Moses' attention. It may also have been a metaphor for the Hebrew people. Philo, a Jewish interpreter living around the time of Jesus, posited that it symbolized Israel being oppressed but not destroyed.

Moses might have easily passed it by. Imagine if you saw a bush on fire. Would you stand there and stare at it long enough to notice that it was not being consumed or destroyed? Moses' response to seeing the burning bush – "I must turn aside and look..." – exemplifies a choice that we all get to make each day. Will I choose to see God and the divine and the miraculous in things around me? Or will I rush by and never notice?

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the British poet, wrote:

*Earth's crammed with heaven  
And every common bush afire with God  
But only he who sees takes off his shoes.*

The Midrash, which is a collection of commentaries written on the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) by rabbis between the years 400 CE and 1200 CW, notes that this first appearance that God makes to Moses – in a burning bush, not on a grand mountain, teaches that "no place is devoid of God's presence, not even a thorn bush." (Exodus Rabbah 2:5). Of course, the bush is not holy in and of itself; it's holy because God is there. When we bring God into a situation or place, it too becomes holy. We can pass through life without noticing or inviting God into our lives, or we can make the choice each day to live in the presence of the holy.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. When you witness injustice, is your inclination to turn away or to rush in to correct it? Why do you think that is?
2. In the spirit of noticing the burning bush, have you ever looked back and realized God was trying to talk to you but you missed it?
3. Do you think God has been trying to get your attention about anything lately?

### **Day 3 - Exodus 3:7-12, 4:10-12**

*<sup>7</sup> Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, <sup>8</sup> and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>9</sup> The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup> Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."*

*11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" 12 He said, "I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."*

*10 But Moses said to the Lord, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." 11 Then the Lord said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? 12 Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak."*

### **Understanding the reading:**

God heard the Israelite's *anah*. It is translated into English as "cry" but *anah* is more equivalent to a shrieking, scream of pain. Not simply weeping, but the worst sound that you can imagine. In that same verse, it says God "knew" their sufferings. The Hebrew word for knew is the same one that is used to indicate the "knowing" of one's spouse. It is intimate. God deeply and intimately identifies with the Hebrews. God hurts along with them. The God who created heaven and earth is also the God who cares about each person individually. The Hebrews had been waiting for more than 400 years for the covenant to be fulfilled.

God is freeing the Hebrews not just because of their pain, but also to fulfill the covenant that God made with Abraham. God is freeing them *from* something (slavery at the hands of the Egyptians), but more importantly, God is freeing them *for* something ("to bring them up out of the land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey."). As Christ followers, we know that Jesus frees us from bondage to sin *and* sets a new life before us.

God's two-fold mission is a declaration that God's purposes are better than Pharaoh's purposes or his gods' purposes. In the first few chapters of Exodus, Pharaoh demands that the Hebrews serve him. God says the Hebrews will worship God. In English, those look like different things. In Hebrew, the word *avad* is used for both. It means "work" *and* "worship." God will not allow the Hebrews to be forced to serve other gods, so God is setting up a situation in which war will have to be waged to get them back.

We can only imagine Moses' shock upon hearing this. "Finally! I'm not sure where God has been, but I am glad God is here now. And in the nick of time!" he might think. But then God says, "Now go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt." *What?* Moses responds just as we might as well: "Who am I that I should go?"

Have you asked this question about yourself before? Am I my marital status? Am I my job? Am I worth anything? Am I smart enough? Am I the sum of my past mistakes? Moses judges himself by his inability to speak eloquently and lists a number of reasons why he can't go. Instead of encouraging Moses with a list of his redeeming or qualifying traits, God says, "I will be with you." Essentially, Moses' qualifications don't come from his inherent traits but from God equipping him and being with him.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. Re-read Exodus 3:7-8. What is your impression of God from these verses? Do you feel like God sees *you*?
2. What are some ways you tend to rely on yourself instead of God?
3. Is there something you're waiting on God for right now? Spend a few minutes sharing your fears, hopes and frustrations with God about what you're waiting on.

#### **Day 4 - Exodus 3:13-15, 4:1-5**

*<sup>13</sup> But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" <sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.' " <sup>15</sup> God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.*

*<sup>1</sup> Then Moses answered, "But look, they may not believe me or listen to me but say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.'" <sup>2</sup> The Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff." <sup>3</sup> And he said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw the staff on the ground, and it became a snake, and Moses drew back from it. <sup>4</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, "Reach out your hand and seize it by the tail"—so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand— <sup>5</sup> "so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you."*

#### **Understanding the reading:**

After asking, "who am I?"... Moses asks, "who are you?"

God's response is enigmatic: "I am who I am." There is no tense in Hebrew whatsoever, so this could mean: I am who I was, I am who I will be, I will be who I need to be, I will be who I should be, I can be who I can be, and so on.

"I am who I am" doesn't put God in a box. It is a way of telling Moses that God will never be limited. This is God's name forever and God's title for all generations. *Humans* cannot limit God. And yet... humans still tried to limit God. That is something the Hebrews did and it's something we do too.

The names we call people shape our understanding of them. When you meet someone, you find out their name and, likely, what they do for a living immediately. It helps you understand them. "I am who I am" implies that we can understand God by what God does. God is the savior and deliverer of the people. So God is the God who saves.

Moses is thinking ahead to when he will meet the Hebrews (will they remember him as the baby who was raised in Pharaoh's household?) and to the day that he has to confront Pharaoh. He wants more than just a hard-to-understand reference to God. God could have said, "that's all you get." But God grants to Moses the ability to turn his staff into a snake as a way of proving Moses is telling the truth.

#### **Questions for reflection:**

1. What would be your first question to God if you were tasked with the same thing as Moses?
2. How does what we call God shape how we understand or imagine God?

#### **Day 5 - Exodus 5:10-14, 5:22-6:8**

*<sup>10</sup> So the taskmasters and the supervisors of the people went out and said to the people, "Thus says Pharaoh: I will not give you straw. <sup>11</sup> Go and get straw yourselves, wherever you can find it, but your work will not be lessened in the least." <sup>12</sup> So the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. <sup>13</sup> The taskmasters urged them on, saying, "Complete your work, the same daily assignment as when you were given straw." <sup>14</sup> And the Israelite supervisors whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them were beaten and were asked, "Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?"*

*22 Then Moses turned to the Lord and said, "O my Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? 23 Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people."*

*1 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh: indeed, by a mighty hand he will let them go; by a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land."*

*2 God also spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the Lord. 3 I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name 'The Lord' I did not make myself known to them. 4 I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they resided as aliens. 5 I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians have enslaved, and I have remembered my covenant. 6 Say therefore to the Israelites: I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. 7 I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. 8 I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord."*

### **Understanding the reading:**

Pharaoh cannot be blamed for holding his ground. He doesn't know the God of the Hebrews. And the Pharaoh in whose household Moses was raised has passed away. From his perspective, he's being threatened by a couple of foreigners from Midian who don't even have an army to back them up. What kind of king would he be if he rolled over in the face of this unknown, untested threat from these two brothers? And so, he responds harshly to the Hebrew people. He takes away their straw and holds them to an unmeetable standard.

Moses sees this and wonders why God has been so silent toward the Hebrews for so long. He is frustrated that God has called him into this mission and then hasn't seemed to do anything to make it smoother or easier. "Why did you send me?" might as well be, "this is a disaster of your making, and I don't know why I got sucked into this." Moses' concerns are similar to Job's: "Why does the Almighty not set times for judgement? Why must those who know him look in vain for such days?" (Job 24:1)

After Moses expresses his anger, God's response is important. Instead of chastising Moses for his lack of trust and willingness to go, God looks forward and tells Moses about the success that is going to happen. The people of Egypt are going to see God's power. But equally as important, the Hebrews will see it and believe. They've waited for 400 years for salvation. They may need to be convinced or re-convinced of the good news.

When we are disappointed or feeling discouraged, it's tempting to cry out "How long, O Lord?" God can handle our cry and doesn't diminish or discourage them. But as faithful people, we know that God hasn't ever abandoned us. Even Job acknowledged the time would come when "God drags away the mighty by his power... he may let them rest in a feeling of security, but his eyes are on their ways." (Job 24:22-23)

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. What promises does God make to the people in chapter 6?
2. What does God's response to Moses tell you about God's character?
3. What gives you confidence that God is with you even when it feels like God isn't working?

**Video discussion questions:**

1. Why is Moses so reluctant to act as God's chosen instrument to bring the Israelites out of Egypt? Were his excuses justified? How did God resolve or mitigate them? What are some of the excuses we typically offer when God calls us?
2. What are the "little g" gods that you serve instead of God?
3. Have you experienced holy discontent? If so, have you been led to act on it?
4. Do you think your soul still enough that you would notice if God was trying to get your attention? Would you notice that the bush is not being consumed?
5. What are the distractions or habits in your life that have caused you to go out into the wilderness and prevented you from paying attention when the Holy Spirit is trying to tell you something? How can you redirect your attention? What are some actionable steps you might take?
6. Keeping in mind Moses' response to God's call, how do you define who you are? Where do you put yourself on the continuum that Tom described -- on one end, believing that you can do everything and are responsible for the world, and on the other end, a sense of overblown humility that becomes complacency?
7. Moses wants to know who God is. How would you describe God?
8. What was your biggest takeaway this week?

**Prayer requests and other notes:**