

Lesson 1 | September 1, 2024

Pharaohs Persecute Israel

Study Text: Exodus 1:1 through 2:25

Central Truth: Recognize God's favor on His people and choose to obey Him.

Key Verse: Exodus 2:23

And it came to pass in process of time, that the king of Egypt died: and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage (KJV).

Years passed, and the king of Egypt died. But the Israelites continued to groan under their burden of slavery. They cried out for help, and their cry rose up to God (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will choose to stand firm in their faith despite persecution.
- Students will evaluate the consequences of sin and the benefits of godliness.
- Students will commit to faithful prayer, believing God hears and answers.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: Over the next few weeks, we'll be taking a closer look at some of the main characters in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Most of them crossed paths with the man who is traditionally acknowledged as the author of these books: Moses. You're probably familiar with the highlights of Moses' biography. He was pulled out of the Nile River as a baby and lived in Pharaoh's palace. He encountered God through a burning bush. He delivered the Israelites from slavery and led them through the wilderness for forty years. But Moses is famous for more than the things he did. He's also known for his close relationship with God.

Discussion Starter—One Question for Moses

Say: If you could ask Moses just one question about his experiences, what would it be? How do you think he'd answer? (*Example: What did God's voice sound like when He spoke from the burning bush?*)

Say: Moses was handpicked by God to deliver the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Moses' upbringing in the royal palace allowed him to be familiar with its customs and the people who lived there. Today we're going to take a closer look at the head of that royal family and the primary villain in Moses' story: Pharaoh.

The pharaohs, or kings of Egypt, who appear in Exodus 1 and 2 are likely Amenhotep I, Thutmose I, Thutmose III, and Amenhotep II. Scripture does not name or distinguish between individual pharaohs, instead grouping them under one collective name. In Exodus, Pharaoh is primarily responsible for the Israelites' oppression and enslavement. Moses' life was marked by Pharaoh's persecution of the Israelites. This

environment certainly would have influenced Moses' personality, his choices, and his reaction to God's call.

Part 1—Midwives Refuse Pharaoh's Evil Command Facing Hatred and Persecution

Exodus 1:15–16

Say: God's people aren't exempt from persecution. In fact, we're often challenged simply because we follow Him. When we face opposition because of our faith, we're called to stand strong. Our steadfast commitment to God testifies to His strength at work in us.

Play the Lesson 1 video featuring Tanis, Egypt. You can download it for free at radiantlifecurriculum.com/resources.

The Israelites were in trouble. God had blessed them in Egypt, multiplying their families “so greatly that they became extremely powerful and filled the land” (Exodus 1:7). But Pharaoh was threatened and enraged by this indication of God's favor. At his command, the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites, “hoping to wear them down with crushing labor” (verse 11). But no matter how cruelly they were treated, the Israelites continued to multiply and spread across Egypt because of God's blessing.

Verses 15–16 record Pharaoh's evil solution: He commanded that the midwives who aided the Israelite women during childbirth were to kill every male child at birth. With this decree, Pharaoh was altering the women's job description, demanding that they take life rather than preserve life. He was attempting to weaponize their gifts.

It should come as no surprise when we are also hated or challenged for our faith. God's favor on His children has always drawn attention. If someone hates Jesus, they will hate the truth of His witness in us. As Jesus told His followers, “If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first” (John 15:18).

But God has not left us defenseless. We have every tool we need to “resist the enemy in the time of evil” (Ephesians 6:13). When we wrap the belt of truth around our waists, strap on the breastplate of God's righteousness, walk in His peace, take up the shield of faith, put on the helmet of salvation, and wield His Word like a sword, we can stand our ground against any attack (verses 13–16).

Discuss

- Have you encountered hatred or opposition because of your faith? If so, how?
- How does your faith conflict with your culture?

Resource Packet Item 1: Dealing with Opposition

Most of us will never be truly persecuted for our faith, but some of us may encounter opposition or hatred because of it. Students will read the case study and answer questions to apply this lesson's biblical principles to daily life.

Instruments of Deliverance

Exodus 1:17–22

Say: Although the enemy of our souls is actively plotting against us, we can have peace knowing that God is for us. “Greater is he that is in [us], than he that is in the world” (1 John 4:4, KJV). God is above all. He sees all. He knows all. He has all power. When we put Him first and obey Him no matter what, we can experience His miraculous deliverance.

“Because the midwives feared God” (Exodus 1:17), they refused to obey Pharaoh's order and instead spared the Israelite babies' lives. In one of the earliest recorded examples of civil disobedience, the midwives' courage contrasts sharply with Pharaoh's cowardice. He commanded the women to kill innocents that he likely saw as a threat; they refused. He forced them to explain their failures (verse 18); they gave a false account. Relying on their expertise in childbirth, they fooled Pharaoh and thwarted his plan (verse 19).

Pharaoh intended to use the midwives as instruments of destruction, but God chose them to be His instruments of deliverance and salvation. As a result, “the Israelites continued to multiply, growing more and more powerful” (verse 20). Because the midwives' fear of God outweighed their fear of Pharaoh, God blessed them and “gave them families of their own” (verse 21).

Choosing to fear God above all else is not always easy. But Jesus taught His disciples, “Don't be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). The disciples later put His teaching into practice. When they were arrested in Jerusalem for teaching about Jesus, they told the high priest, “We must obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29).

Our commitment to God must take precedence over any threats or opposition leveled against us. He often uses ordinary people—like the midwives, the disciples, and us—as agents of change and deliverance. When we fear Him above anything or anyone else, He works through us in ways we could never imagine.

In the time that passed between verses 21 and 22 in Exodus 1, it is likely a new pharaoh rose to power. Desperate to limit the Israelites' power, he issued a command that every newborn boy should be thrown into the Nile River (verse 22). As we will see, even this unthinkable evil could not stop God's plan to deliver His people.

Discuss

- How have you seen God's deliverance at work in your life?

- What does it mean to “fear only God” (Matthew 10:28)?

Part 2—Pharaoh Seeks Moses’ Life Moses Responds to Injustice

Exodus 2:11–14

Say: Justice is one of the main themes of the Law that God would one day give the Israelites through Moses. But many years earlier, a series of incidents in Moses’ life show him provoking Pharaoh’s fury by seeking justice on his own.

The first several verses of Exodus 2 describe Moses’ birth and explain the miraculous way he was saved from drowning in the Nile River and then adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter. Verse 11 represents a significant time jump, depicting Moses visiting “his own people, the Hebrews” at the age of 40 (Acts 7:23). The Book of Exodus does not include many other details about Moses’ early life, although Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7 includes this interesting sentence: “Moses was taught all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was powerful in both speech and action” (verse 22).

Exodus 2:11 makes it clear that Moses knew he was an Israelite, although Scripture does not explain how he made that discovery. During a visit to an Israelite slaves’ worksite, Moses saw how badly the Egyptians treated the Israelites. When he witnessed one of his kinsmen being mercilessly beaten (the Hebrew word indicates potentially fatal abuse), Moses killed the Egyptian offender and buried his body in the sand. Verse 12 describes Moses “looking in all directions to make sure no one was watching.” Some interpret this to mean that Moses was checking to see if anyone nearby could advocate for the man being mistreated. It is also possible he was simply making sure there were no witnesses before killing the Egyptian.

For thousands of years, historians have debated whether Moses’ killing of the Egyptian was justified. Was he behaving righteously or rashly? All we know for certain is that Moses’ behavior is not condemned in this passage or elsewhere in Scripture (see Acts 7:24). In fact, this is the first of three incidents in Exodus 2 that are signposts on Moses’ path to be the deliverer of God’s people.

The second incident took place the very next day when Moses intervened in a fight between two Hebrew men. Trying to make peace, Moses asked the aggressor, “Why are you beating up your friend?” (verse 13). The man’s angry response indicated that he knew Moses had killed an Egyptian the day before. If Pharaoh found out what he had done, Moses likely knew he would be executed.

Discuss

- Do you think Moses’ killing the Egyptian was an act of justice? Discuss how this incident likely impacted Moses’ path to leadership (see Acts 7:24–25)?

Resource Packet Item 2: Ordered Steps

Moses was not the only biblical character who endured hardship only to end up right in the middle of God's will. Students will review the stories of Sarah, Joseph, Esther, and others to observe how God used their circumstances to fulfill His plan.

Moses Flees from Pharaoh

Exodus 2:15

Say: It wasn't long before Moses learned that the body buried in the sand wasn't so secret after all. The news had spread all the way to Pharaoh's court. Moses was in serious trouble.

When Pharaoh discovered what had happened, he "tried to kill Moses" (Exodus 2:15). The penalty for murdering an Egyptian was death, not to mention the fact that Moses had sided with the Israelites, likely making him a traitor to Pharaoh. Moses chose to flee from Egypt. He headed east "and went to live in the land of Midian," a region in the Sinai Peninsula that was inhabited by the descendants of Abraham's son Midian (Genesis 25:1–2). Moses would spend the next forty years with the Midianites, even marrying one of the daughters of Reuel (*RHOO-el*; called Jethro in Exodus 3–4), a tribal leader of Midian.

Moses' meeting with his future wife is the third incident in Exodus 2 that helped establish his course as leader. After escaping through the desert, Moses had sat down near a well, which was a common resting place for strangers and travelers. When Reuel's seven daughters visited the well to water their father's sheep, some other shepherds chased them away. Moses defended the women and drew water for their flocks. Not long after they brought Moses home to meet their father, Moses settled with Reuel's family and married his daughter Zipporah (*Zip-POH-ruh*).

Moses had certainly been afraid when he left Egypt (verse 14), and he was probably discouraged, aimless, and worried by the time he reached Midian. Life in Egypt had been comfortable, even luxurious, but that was all over. Where would he live? How would he survive? Would Pharaoh send soldiers after him? Although Moses probably didn't realize it, God's plan was steadily unfolding in his life regardless of the detours and challenges. He was building relationships and learning lessons he would need when the time came to lead Israel from bondage.

God's children also live under the canopy of His purposes. When we're misunderstood or persecuted, or when our plans are derailed and it seems like God's favor has been lifted, we should remember Moses. Collapsing at that Midianite well, dusty and exhausted, he was situated perfectly for the next phase of God's plan.

Discuss

- Why do you think Moses chose to flee from Pharaoh rather than trying to explain his actions?
- How have you seen God's plans at work in your life during times of hardship?

Part 3—People of Israel Cry Out to God

Cry Out to God

Exodus 2:23

Say: When you pray, you can have complete confidence that God hears your prayers. But that doesn't mean you're guaranteed to get the answer you want, right when you want it. Part of serving God is trusting His goodness and timing. For the Israelites, that meant years of waiting. God had informed Abraham that his descendants would be enslaved for four hundred years (Genesis 15:13)

Exodus 2:23 marks a scene change and time lapse in the narrative. Cutting away from the account of Moses' exile and family life in Midian, the text tells us that the Israelites were still burdened by slavery in Egypt. Although "years passed, and the king of Egypt died," the Israelites found no relief under the new Pharaoh (possibly Amenhotep II). Realizing that only God could save them, they "cried out for help." At the same time that God was preparing Moses to lead the Israelites, He was allowing the people to realize how desperately they needed deliverance.

It can be difficult to keep praying when God does not immediately respond. Maybe you have a financial need, a prodigal child, or a health concern. Or maybe you're praying for a war to end and justice to prevail. Sometimes we keep praying about certain needs for years, holding tightly to faith that God will intervene. Regardless of how long it takes, we should keep praying as David did: "At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love answer me in your saving faithfulness" (Psalm 69:13, ESV).

Notably, the Israelites continued crying out to the one true God rather than turning to the gods of the Egyptians. Likewise, we should remain steadfast before the Lord, keeping our eyes fixed on Him instead of looking for alternate solutions or simply giving up in despair. "Understand, therefore, that the Lord your God is indeed God. He is the faithful God who keeps his covenant for a thousand generations and lavishes his unfailing love on those who love him and obey his commands" (Deuteronomy 7:9). Because of that faithfulness and His covenant promise to Abraham, God was about to answer the prayers of His people in Egypt.

Discuss

- Why do you think God does not always answer prayers right away?
- What is something you're continuing to pray for, even though God hasn't answered yet?

Resource Packet Item 3: Praying the Scriptures

Students will read several biblical prayers and consider how they can incorporate Scripture into their own prayers.

God Hears You

Exodus 2:24–25

Say: God is able to hear every word from His children. He is never too distracted, never too busy, never too upset to listen. As David wrote, “The eyes of the Lord watch over those who do right; his ears are open to their cries for help” (Psalm 34:15; see 1 Peter 3:12).

God was not indifferent to the Israelites’ suffering. He “heard their groaning” (Exodus 23:24). He knew exactly how to bring about the deliverance they so desperately needed. The following chapters in Exodus describe the miraculous ways God forced Pharaoh’s hand to set the Israelites free, but it all started in verse 24 when God “remembered his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

God cannot accidentally forget like we do, so there is no need for Him to remember in the same sense people remember things. But just as God chooses to forget some things—for example, “I will not remember your sins” (Isaiah 43:25, ESV)—He chooses to remember other things (see Genesis 8:1; 30:22; Acts 10:31; Revelation 16:19). And throughout Scripture, when God remembers, He acts. Note the series of verbs in Exodus 2:24–25 that describe God’s reaction to the Israelites’ groaning: God heard, God remembered, God looked down, and God knew the time was right for deliverance. In the very next verse, the narrative shifts back to Moses tending sheep in Midian where he is about to receive God’s call to bring the people of Israel out of Egypt.

When our prayers seem to go unanswered, we should remember the people of Israel crying out in Egypt. Just as God heard their prayers, He hears ours. And just as He answered them when the time was right, He will answer our prayers too. God exists beyond our perception of time, and we can trust that He will fulfill every promise in His Word. “At the right time, I, the Lord, will make it happen” (Isaiah 60:22).

Discuss

- Describe an unusual occurrence of God’s perfect timing you have experienced.
- God was acting on the Israelites’ behalf long before they ever realized it. How does that affect your willingness to keep praying, even when it seems like God isn’t responding?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Persecution is nothing new. God’s people have always been targeted by powerful people who refuse to serve Him. But God never leaves His people on their own. He heard the prayers of the Israelites and delivered them from slavery and Pharaoh’s vengeful anger. And He hears our prayers, delivering us from the slavery of sin. If we remain faithful to Him, we will enter the ultimate Promised Land and live in peace with Him forever.

Living It Out Ministry in Action

- Identify an area where you may feel pressured to keep quiet about your faith. Make a list of ways you can share the gospel in that setting.
- Choose an issue that you have been praying about for a long time. Continue praying and fasting for a breakthrough.
- Intercede for Christian brothers and sisters around the world who are currently being persecuted for their faith in Jesus.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

A Midwife Saves Benjamin.

Genesis 35:9–21

Tuesday:

Ordaining and Guarding God's Officers.

1 Kings 19:8–18

Wednesday:

King Hezekiah Cries Out.

2 Kings 20:1–11

Thursday:

The Holy Spirit Gives Vision.

Acts 9:8–19

Friday:

Unconditional Contentment.

Philippians 4:10–13

Saturday:

Joy in Trials.

James 1:1–5