

p 11 WEEK 2: ISRAEL'S OPPRESSION AND MOSES' EARLY LIFE

Exodus 1:1–2:25

The Place of the Passage

The first two chapters of Exodus set the stage for the rest of the book. As Israel expands into a great nation, fulfilling God's promise to Abraham (Gen 12:2), Pharaoh oppresses them and seeks to curtail their growth. The birth of Moses is presented as the climactic, ironic reversal of Pharaoh's oppressive attempts, hinting that Moses will be a key means by which God will rescue his people. The notice at the end of chapter 2, that "God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (Ex. 2:24), prepares us to see God act further on his promises to the patriarchs and bring Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

The Big Picture

Although Pharaoh oppresses Israel, God's promises of Israel's growth and deliverance from Egypt begin to take shape.

p 12 Reflection and Discussion

Read through the whole passage for this study, Exodus 1:1–2:25. Then review the shorter passages below and write your answers to the following questions. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 145–147; also available online at www.esvbible.org.)

1. Israel's Multiplication (1:1–7)

In Genesis, God created humanity in his "image" (Gen. 1:26–27), which means that humans were designed to serve as God's royal representatives on earth. In the ancient world, the presence of a king's "image" (usually a statue) represented the reign and authority of that king. God then commanded humanity to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (v. 28), which shows that they were to represent God's kingship to the ends of the earth. In light of this, what does Exodus 1:7 imply about Israel's purpose as a nation? How does Exodus 19:5–6 elaborate upon this idea?

2. Israel's Oppression (1:8–22)

The theme of Israel "multiplying" continues in Exodus 1:8–22, though now this multiplication occurs in the context of oppression. The Hebrew men are presented here as unstoppable reproductive despite oppressive working conditions (vv. 8–14), and the Hebrew women are

unstoppably reproductive due to the midwives' disobedience of Pharaoh's oppressive decree concerning childbirth (vv. 15–22). Given the background of Genesis 1:28 for Exodus 1:7, how might Genesis 3:16–17 shed light on what is going on here?

p 13 In this passage we see that God's covenant promises for his people are ironically accomplished in the midst of oppression. What are some other biblical examples of this?

In Exodus 1:16 and 1:22, Pharaoh specifies that each Hebrew "son" (and not simply "boy") must be killed. Read ahead in Exodus 4:22–23. Against whom is Pharaoh setting himself up here in chapter 1? What might this imply about those who oppose the church today?

3. Moses' Birth (2:1–10)

The Hebrew word for the "basket" in which Moses is placed (Ex. 2:3) occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament only to describe Noah's "ark" (Genesis 6–9). In what other ways does Noah's life foreshadow Moses' life?

Exodus 1:8–22 presented two ironic reversals of Pharaoh's decrees. What ironies do you see in Exodus 2:5–9? Through this pattern, how is Moses presented in the story of his birth?

p 14 The name "Moses" seems to be related to the Egyptian word for "son" (e.g., Pharaoh *Thutmose*), but it also sounds like the Hebrew verb meaning "to draw out" (Ex. 2:10). Given Pharaoh's decree in 1:22, what is ironic about this double meaning of Moses' name?

4. Moses' Flight (2:11–25)

Since Moses grew up in Pharaoh's household, away from the slave labor, some Israelites likely viewed him as more Egyptian than Hebrew. However, the text twice refers to Israel as "his people" (Ex. 2:11), and Moses even kills an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew (v. 12). Then, when he arrives in Midian, although the women refer to him as an Egyptian (v. 19), he names his son "Gershom," saying, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land" (v. 22). Based on these observations, what is this section emphasizing?

In Exodus 2:24–25, God is the subject of four successive verbs ("God heard ... God remembered ... God saw ... and God knew"). Why do you think the text repeats "God" as the subject here? What do you think it means for God to "remember" his covenant with the patriarchs?

p 15 Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to reflect on the *Personal Implications* these sections may have for your walk with the Lord.

Gospel Glimpses

A MERCY-LOVING GOD. These opening chapters of Exodus mention God in only two places: when the midwives spare the Hebrew boys (1:17–21) and when God hears the Israelites’ groaning in their slavery (2:23–25). In the first case, God rewards the midwives for mercifully sparing the Israelite children; in the second case, God mercifully looks upon his people as they groan in their slavery. Although Exodus contains many laws and commands that God will require his people to obey, the book starts off with a focus on God’s supremely merciful character. It is only after he has lavished mercy on his people that God gives them commands. This mercy of God is reflected elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., in the provisions for forgiveness in Leviticus), but it is most evident in the cross of Jesus. Just as God looked at the plight of Israel in slavery to Egypt and was moved to rescue them, so he saw the plight of our slavery to sin (John 8:34) and rescued us.

UNEARNED RELATIONSHIP. Exodus states that the reason God rescued Israel was his faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (2:24; 6:5). This covenant was founded on God’s grace, as Abraham did nothing to earn this special relationship with God. Furthermore, when Israel was suffering in their slavery, it is not clear that they cried out *to God* for help; the text simply says that they “groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help,” and that this cry “came up to God” (2:23). This ambiguity further emphasizes God’s initiative in coming to their rescue and in establishing a relationship with them. Although neither Abraham nor Israel deserved God’s relational commitment, he nevertheless bound himself to them and promised to bless them (Gen. 12:2–3). Similarly, those who come to God through faith in Jesus do nothing to merit this saving relationship; God in his grace always takes the first step in bringing us to himself.

Whole-Bible Connections

FRUITFULNESS AND MULTIPLICATION. At creation, humanity was commissioned to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28). This command was repeated to Noah (Gen. 9:1, 7), and God promised the patriarchs that he would enact this multiplication for them (Gen. 17:1–6; 22:17; 26:4; 28:3– p 16 4). We see this promise fulfilled initially in this passage (Ex. 1:7), but God’s law makes it clear that the continual fulfillment of this promise is contingent on the people’s obedience (Lev. 26:3, 9; Deut. 7:12–13). As time passes and Israel proves unfaithful, God judges them and sends them into exile; yet hope still remains that in the future God will “bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply” (Jer. 23:3). The New Testament depicts this promise being fulfilled through the word of God, which is “fruitful” and “multiplies” (Acts 6:7; 12:24; Col. 1:6), bringing salvation to sinners and resulting in the “fruitfulness” of good works and in “multiplication” of the knowledge of God (Col. 1:10).

IRONIC REDEMPTION. This passage presents the birth of Moses—who will be the human instrument of God’s salvation of Israel—as the climax of a series of ironic reversals of oppression. This pattern of God ironically bringing redemption through oppression can be traced as far back as the promise of Genesis 3:15, where God declares that the seed of the woman will triumph over the seed of the serpent, but will do so while being oppressed (“he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel”). This ironic pattern reaches its apex in the cross of Christ, in which

salvation unto life is achieved through suffering unto death (2 Cor. 13:4), and it continues as the church grows despite the persecutions brought against her (e.g., Acts 8:3–4; Rev. 12:10–11).

Theological Soundings

CIVIL GOVERNMENT. In Exodus 1:15–21, the midwives disobey Pharaoh’s decree to murder the Hebrew children and are blessed by God for doing so. Although Scripture commands us to “be subject to the governing authorities” (Rom. 13:1; see also Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13–15), and says that “whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed” (Rom. 13:2), such subjection is not warranted when the governing authorities command believers to violate God’s standards. In Acts 5, when the council of the Sanhedrin interrogates the apostles concerning their violation of the command to stop teaching in Jesus’ name, the apostles reply, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

COVENANT. God is moved to act on Israel’s behalf because of the covenant he made with their ancestors (Ex. 2:24–25). In Scripture, covenants are a central means by which God interacts with humanity and brings about his redemption. After Adam broke his covenant with God by disobeying him (see Hos. 6:7), God made a series of covenants with Noah (Gen. 9:8–17), Abraham (Gen. 15:7–20; 17:1–14), Israel (Exodus 19–24), David (Ps. 89:1–4; 2 Sam. 7:8–16), and Jesus (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20) to restore humanity’s fractured relationship with him. Since Jesus is the perfect Mediator of the new covenant (Heb. 12:24), those who come to him in faith are secure in their forgiveness.

p 17 Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Exodus 1:1–2:25 for your own life today. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Exodus 1:1–2:25

p 18 As You Finish This Unit ...

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you continue in this study of Exodus. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on some key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.