

Treasuring Who God Treasures
Special Focus Session
January 19, 2025

Session Passage: Exodus 1:16-17,22–2:10

Exodus 1:16-17

Connection to the Point. The Egyptian king did not value Hebrew lives.

Context. Jacob and his sons had moved to Egypt during the great famine when Joseph (one of Jacob’s sons) was in power (Gen. 46; Ex. 1:1-5). Over time, the Israelites had grown numerous (Ex. 1:7). A new Pharaoh, king of Egypt, feared the Israelites might rebel and join Egypt’s enemies, so he oppressed them. But in spite of Pharaoh’s efforts, the Israelites continued to multiply (vv. 8-14). Finally, Pharaoh ordered that all male Israelite babies were to be killed at birth (v. 16).

Hebrew midwives. The Hebrew word for *midwife* (*yalad*) literally means to bear young or to beget. In other words, they brought forth life. The midwife’s duty was to help the Israelite women give birth. The tasks of the midwife most likely included cutting the umbilical cord, washing the newborn baby, and wrapping the infant in cloths.

The two midwives mentioned are *Shiphrah* (“dawn” or “fair”) and *Puah* (“fragrant” or “splendid”). There is debate over whether there were only these two midwives or if these two were supervisors over all the midwives serving the Hebrews. What is not debated is the role these midwives played in the deliverance of the Hebrews. They were preserving the Israelite males one birth at a time.

Observe them as they deliver (v. 16). It would seem odd to tell a midwife to observe the birthing of a baby. That’s the very essence of what midwives do! Typically, though, a midwife cares for the mother as well as the health and well-being of the infant. Cutting the umbilical cord, cleaning the child, making sure the baby is breathing well, and everything else done is for the child’s benefit. But Pharaoh had another task in mind, a task that was more in line with what he perceived as the health and well-being of Egypt rather than that of the Hebrew babies—kill all the newborn Hebrew children who were boys. The purpose and nature of the midwives’ work would no longer be to promote life, but to decide who would live and who would die.

Son . . . kill, daughter . . . live (v. 16). Pharaoh ordered that Hebrew male babies were to be killed, while female babies were to be allowed to live. The male Hebrews were seen as a possible military threat to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, while the female Hebrews were not.

Feared God (v. 17). Many people today view a fear of God as a worshipful reverence and respectful obedience. While that is valid, many have also rejected the idea of being afraid of God. Though God is loving and kind, He also is holy and just. The Hebrew word for *fear* (*yare*) means to be afraid or terrified; in this context it means to fear God in the way that leads to being morally reverent. This fear of God is a motivating factor toward holiness. In fact, Proverbs 16:6 states that, “one turns from evil by the fear of the Lord.” In the context of Exodus 1:17, “To fear God does not mean being afraid of him in general but being afraid of the consequences of disobeying him . . . These women clearly feared what God could do to them after death more than the death the pharaoh could put them to.”¹ As Jesus warned, “Don’t fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). Through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, believers should be motivated to live holy lives out of gratitude for what God has done through Jesus to redeem us. However, in those times when temptation is strong, an understanding of how seriously God views sin can be an additional, powerful motivator to holy living.

Exodus 1:22–2:3

Connection to the Point. One Hebrew family rejected the Egyptian edict because they valued life.

Context. Scripture does not indicate how long this attempted infanticide went on. Eventually, the king of Egypt realized his orders were not being carried out. He summoned the midwives and asked them why they had let the Hebrew male babies live. The midwives told Pharaoh that the babies were being born before the midwives could get to the mothers who were giving birth. So Pharaoh instituted another plan. All the newborn Hebrew male babies were to be drowned in the Nile River (Ex. 1:18-22).

The Nile (v. 22). Ancient Egyptians viewed the Nile River as the source of Egypt’s life and fertility. The river’s annual inundation (flooding) deposited rich black silt along its banks which provided the Egyptians with fertile soil for farming. The annual inundation was an object of worship, embodied by the Egyptian god Hapi, the god of fertility. The worship of the god Hapi also involved casting offerings into the Nile River as a form of sacrifice. When Pharaoh ordered the male Hebrew babies to be thrown into the Nile he may have hoped

the Egyptian people, particularly the midwives, would see it as a sacrifice to Hapi and more willingly comply.

A man from the family of Levi married a Levite woman (2:1). Moses's parents were Amram and Jochebed (6:20). Amram was the grandson of Levi (one of the sons of Jacob) and Jochebed was Levi's daughter (vv. 16-20; Num. 26:59). That they feared God and not Pharaoh is evident by Hebrews 11:23, which states, "By faith Moses, after he was born, was hidden by his parents for three months, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they didn't fear the king's edict."

Beautiful (v. 2). In addition to *beautiful*, the Hebrew term (*tob*) can mean good (both in general and referring to moral goodness), well, pleasing, sweet, and attractive. God is described as being *tob* in Psalm 106:1 ("good"; where it is associated with His *chesed* ["faithful love"]); 145:9 ("good"; where it is associated with His *racham* ["compassion"]); and elsewhere. All children are beautiful because they are gifts from God (Ps. 127:3).

When she saw that he was beautiful translates a Hebrew idiom meaning "to care about," "to be fond of," or "to want to keep." Jochebed's actions were motivated by a mother's love for her child.

No longer hide him (v. 3). Keeping a growing baby hidden is a very difficult task. When they are hungry, they cry. When they need a diaper change, they cry. If something startles them or if they just want their mothers' comfort, they cry. Moses's mother had already hidden him for three months (v. 2). Perhaps he had almost been discovered during that time. Perhaps having a three-year-old brother (Aaron, 7:7) aided in distracting skepticism and suspicion. But at some point it would have been impossible to continue hiding Moses. Additionally, while Scripture does not indicate what type of work the Egyptians required of Hebrew women, if Moses's mother was required to serve the Egyptians it most likely would have been increasingly difficult to conceal her child and still accomplish her work.

Papyrus basket (v. 3). *Papyrus (gome)* an aquatic plant that once grew plentifully along the banks of the Nile River. The papyrus plant grows to be up to fifteen-feet tall and about as thick as a person's wrist. From papyrus the Egyptians invented a material that was used as writing paper. Strips of papyrus were pressed together to form sheets on which to write. In addition, papyrus was used to make sandals, baskets, sails, cloth, mats, cords, and even small boats.

The Hebrew word for *basket* (*tebah*) refers to something that is box shaped, such as a chest, ark, or basket. The term is used only in Exodus 2 and in the flood narrative of Genesis 6–9 where it refers to the ark Noah constructed and through which God delivered

Noah and his family from the flood. Similarly, God used the papyrus basket as an instrument of preserving Moses's life.

Asphalt and pitch (v. 3). *Asphalt* is primarily bitumen (a binding agent) that was found in many places throughout Egypt. *Pitch* is a general term for tarry substances and mixtures of tar. Both have excellent waterproofing characteristics. Additionally, this coating would have preserved the papyrus from deterioration, making the basket last longer as it floated in the Nile River. Jochebed used every resource available to her for the protection of her child.

The reeds (v. 3). A more generic term (*suph*) than the papyrus reed, this refers to the various types of plants growing along the banks of the Nile. The basket would have been fairly well hidden, but also easily retrievable for the daily feeding and care of the baby. If the baby in the basket were to be discovered (as he was) by an Egyptian, there would have been no way of determining who had disobeyed Pharaoh's order, and a random child in need would surely have evoked compassion from all but the most heartless of individuals.

Exodus 2:4-10

Connection to the Point. Treasuring a human life also means taking care of the individual.

His sister (v. 4). Moses's sister was named Miriam and his brother Aaron (Num. 26:59). While her age is not indicated, she was apparently older than both her brothers, the infant Moses and three-year-old Aaron (Ex. 7:7).

Stood at a distance (v. 4). This does not mean that Moses's sister was merely lingering about waiting to see what would happen. Like her father and mother, she took part in keeping her baby brother safe by watching over him from a distance. It has been suggested she may have been anywhere from six to twelve years old, and that her later interaction with Pharaoh's daughter likely indicates she was closer to twelve than six. She was young enough not to be working in the house or in the fields, and her presence at the Nile River would not have drawn undue attention. She was there to guard her baby brother and take whatever action was needed to keep him safe.²

Pharaoh's daughter (v. 5). It is not known how many daughters Pharaoh had, but likely he had many. Marrying daughters to other kings and princes was a common practice in the ancient Near East as a means of solidifying alliances with foreign powers.

Went down to bathe at the Nile (v. 5). Buildings in Egypt were constructed at a high elevation due to the annual flooding of the Nile River, so people had to go down to get to the Nile. That Pharaoh's daughter chose to bathe in the Nile rather than in a bathtub in the royal residence likely was due to the view of the Nile being sacred.

Servant girls (v. 5). The term used to identify these women (*naarah*) can refer to an unmarried young woman or girl; it also is used for a maid, an attendant in the service of a woman. Given the Egyptians' dislike for the Hebrews, these women were most likely Egyptians of a lesser rank serving their princess.

Walked along the riverbank (v. 5). The servant girls were present to guard and watch over Pharaoh's daughter, not to bathe. Hence they patrolled the riverbank.

Felt sorry (v. 6). The Hebrew term (*chamal*) means to spare or have compassion. Pharaoh's daughter certainly would have known of her father's decree to drown all the male Hebrew babies in the Nile, but that doesn't mean she necessarily agreed with it. It is much easier to think of such a command in the abstract, when the people affected are impersonal, unnamed, faceless slaves. But when Pharaoh's daughter opened the basket and came face to face with the crying little baby boy, and a helpless one at that, she was moved with compassion.

His sister said to Pharaoh's daughter (v. 7). While ultimately it was God who protected and delivered the baby Moses, one of the people He used was Moses's sister, Miriam, perhaps the unsung heroine in these events. Acting quickly and wisely, she approached the Egyptian princess and offered, **"Should I go and call a Hebrew woman who is nursing to nurse the boy for you?"** When Pharaoh's daughter agreed to Miriam's suggestion, not only was Moses reunited with his mother (v. 8); he was also no longer in danger due to the Egyptian king's edict.

Take this child and nurse him for me (v. 9). The agreement between Pharaoh's daughter and Moses's mother for her acting as a wet nurse for the princess entailed the wet nurse being compensated for caring for the child, but legal possession of the child remained with the princess.

So the woman took the boy and nursed him (v. 9). In the ancient world, young children were nursed for three to four years before they were weaned. Since Hebrews were held in very low esteem by the Egyptians, they most likely were not allowed to live in the royal quarters. Hence, Moses's mother probably took him home to care for him. Living with his birth parents for the first three to four years of his life meant Moses was exposed to Hebrew culture. Being so young, he would not have been able to have an intellectual understanding of his Hebrew heritage, but in those formative years he certainly was exposed to the Hebrew language, traditions, and day-to-day life as a Hebrew. During

this time, the princess doubtlessly spent time with the child. Also, given the closeness of Moses to Aaron and Miriam as demonstrated later in his life, when the time came for him to be given back to Pharaoh's daughter it was apparently not the end of Moses's contact with his family.

When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter (v. 10). When Moses was weaned, most likely sometime between three and four years of age, he was brought to Pharaoh's daughter and she adopted him as **her son**. Little is known about the Egyptian process of adoption. The details of how a formal adoption could have taken place without Pharaoh being aware are unknown. It is possible that the decree for infanticide had been rescinded by this time so having a Hebrew boy around was not quite as dangerous. It is also true that even the cruelest of tyrants often have a soft spot for their daughter's requests. Either way, Pharaoh's daughter adopted the baby as her own.

Moses (v. 10). Part of the adoption process was being given an Egyptian name. The Egyptian princess named the child *Moses*. Other than the midwives Shiphrah and Puah, this is the only proper name which appears in this narrative. More importantly, it is the first time the child in the basket was given a name in the passage. Surely his family had given the baby a name while he lived with them, but that name is not recorded in Scripture. In ancient times, the names of children were not selected before their births. Names were associated with the circumstances of a child's birth or with the hopes of who the child would become in life. The right to name someone or something was also seen as an exercise of authority over that individual or thing. When Daniel and his friends were taken into captivity in Babylon, the chief eunuch of King Nebuchadnezzar gave them Babylonian names as a sign that the king had authority over them, and this renaming was also doubtlessly part of the process of absorbing the four Israelites into Babylonian culture (Dan. 1:1-7). Bestowing a name also indicated possession—it wasn't until Moses became her son that Pharaoh's daughter named him.

The name *Moses* was a relatively common Egyptian name meaning "son" or "to beget a son." Pharaoh's daughter naming the child Moses was a play on words as the name sounds similar to the verb for "to draw out." This connected the baby with the circumstances surrounding the princess's discovery of the infant when she **drew him out of the water**.

1. Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 79.

2. *Ibid.*, 90.