

## *Moses – the Beginning*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

2<sup>nd</sup> in an eight-part series

April 14, 2024

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*Exodus 2:1–22 (NIV)*

Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman,<sup>2</sup> and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months.<sup>3</sup> But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile.<sup>4</sup> His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

<sup>5</sup>Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it.<sup>6</sup> She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said.

<sup>7</sup>Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?"

<sup>8</sup>"Yes, go," she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother.<sup>9</sup> Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him.<sup>10</sup> When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."

<sup>11</sup>One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people.<sup>12</sup> Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.<sup>13</sup> The next day he went out and saw two Hebrews fighting. He asked the one in the wrong, "Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?"

<sup>14</sup>The man said, "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "What I did must have become known."

<sup>15</sup>When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian, where he sat down by a well.<sup>16</sup> Now a priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came to draw water and fill the troughs to water their father's flock.<sup>17</sup> Some shepherds came along and drove them away, but Moses got up and came to their rescue and watered their flock.

<sup>18</sup>When the girls returned to Reuel their father, he asked them, "Why have you returned so early today?"

<sup>19</sup>They answered, "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds. He even drew water for us and watered the flock."

<sup>20</sup>"And where is he?" Reuel asked his daughters. "Why did you leave him? Invite him to have something to eat."

<sup>21</sup>Moses agreed to stay with the man, who gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses in marriage.<sup>22</sup> Zipporah gave birth to a son, and Moses named him Gershom, saying, "I have become a foreigner in a foreign land."

*What can be born out of a mid-life crisis?*

Moses stands as a giant among the people of God. The one chosen by God to lead the Hebrews out of slavery. The one to whom God reveals his name and

presents his covenant with Israel.<sup>1</sup> A giant. And we don't usually think of giants as having mid-life crises. Yet, that is exactly where we find Moses in today's passage from Exodus. The life he thought he had under control was about to be thrown into chaos.

### *A life under control*

To review from last week:

When the book of Exodus opens, we learn that the Hebrews (Abraham's descendants) are enslaved in Egypt and the current Pharaoh is making life exceedingly difficult and dangerous. Fearing the growing number of Hebrew slaves, Pharaoh had ordered the murder of all male Hebrew babies – including Moses. In order to save her baby, Moses' mother had placed the infant in a small waterproof basket and set him afloat on the Nile river, hoping that someone would save him. Someone did. And not just any someone, but the daughter of Pharaoh herself. Though she knew the baby was a Hebrew, she "took pity on him" and plucked him out of the water. Seeing all this, Pharaoh's sister sought out a woman who could nurse the newborn, finding Moses' mother -- of all people. When Moses was old enough to be weaned, his mother brought him to the palace where Pharaoh's daughter raised him as her own.

Terence Fretheim notes that ironies abound in Moses's story:

(1) Pharaoh's chosen instrument of destruction (the Nile) is the means for saving Moses. (2) As in 1:15–22, the daughters are allowed to live, and it is they who now proceed to thwart Pharaoh's plans. (3) The mother saves Moses by following Pharaoh's orders (with her own twist). (4) A member of Pharaoh's own family undermines his policies, saving the very person who would lead Israel out of Egypt and destroy the Dynasty. (5) Egyptian royalty heeds a Hebrew girl's advice! The princess may have been gently conned into accepting the child's own mother as a nurse, but her pity is clearly stated. (6) The mother gets paid to do what she most wants to do, and from Pharaoh's own budget (anticipating 3:22)! (7) Moses is educated to be an Israelite leader, strategically placed within the very court of Pharaoh. (8) The princess gives the boy a name that betrays much more than she knows (including a Hebrew etymology for an Egyptian name): what she has done for Moses, Moses will do for all the people of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

It's not hard to imagine what Moses' life was like in the palace. Being raised as a member of Pharaoh's household meant a life of privilege and luxury. It was a life beyond the imagining of Moses' fellow Hebrews who labored as slaves to their Egyptian masters. Moses' stepmother must have told him about the circumstances of his birth, though surely it was a secret held among the two of

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<sup>1</sup>Let's get straight what we mean by "Israel." "Israel" was the collective name of the twelve tribes descended from Jacob, Abraham's grandson. After spending a night wrestling with a stranger who turns out to be God, Jacob was given the name "Israel," which in Hebrew means something like "one who strives with God." From that time on, the name "Israel" would not only designate the ancestor Jacob, but also God's people, as in the twelve tribes of "Israel." Later, it would take on national or political meaning as well. Thus, David would be the king of Israel. Your reading of the Bible will be helped by keeping in mind that "Israel" sometimes refers to the covenant people of God and at other times refers to a political entity. This can get even more confusing when we remember that the David's kingdom of Israel splits in two after the death of his son, Solomon. The divided kingdoms were Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

<sup>2</sup>Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 37.

them and Pharaoh's sister. Still, I wonder how that knowledge affected Moses. Was he troubled by it? Did he simply accept his own "luck"? I'm actually a little inclined to the latter, for it seems that Moses lived just fine with the knowledge for forty years.

In our society, forty<sup>3</sup> is only approaching middle age but in Moses' world, where the average life span was fifty years or so for the privileged, forty was well into the late stages of middle age. Bearing in mind that forty is often a symbolic number in the Bible, Moses was certainly well along in his life when it was turned upside down.

#### *A life turned upside down*

One day, Moses sees an Egyptian overseer beating a Hebrew slave and Moses seemingly snaps, killing the overseer. But why, after so long a time, does Moses identify with his fellow Hebrews? Why does he care so much that he is willing to kill an Egyptian to save a Hebrew slave from a beating? Perhaps this is how it is with our "mid-life crises." We reach a point in life when so much of what we have assumed about ourselves and our world is called into question. It would be foolish to speculate too long about Moses' motivations, but his aims are clear. He will stand up for the Hebrews, or at least for one.

When Moses kills the Egyptian, he knows exactly what he has done. He tries, unsuccessfully, to cover up the murder but word gets out and Moses has to flee. So he heads out into the land of Midian. You could hardly imagine a less hospitable place. One day Moses is sitting by a well, perhaps reflecting on how he possibly ended up in such a place, when he comes to the aid of seven sisters and marries one, Zipporah.

After all this, we are told that God heard the cries of the Hebrews and remembered his covenant with Abraham. "God looked upon the Israelites and God took notice of them" (Exodus 2:25). And Moses would soon see a bush that burned without being consumed.

Fretheim challenges us to go a bit deeper with this story, in light of God's absence from the account and the fact that Moses was raised as an Egyptian, not a Hebrew.

Moses' sense of justice has been learned, not from his Hebrew heritage, but from his *Egyptian upbringing* (cf. Acts 7:22!). This is a significant testimony to God's work in creation among those outside the community of faith. This, combined with the absence of God talk in the narrative, again roots this perspective, this activity, and these personal characteristics in a theology of creation. There the value of human life and the giftedness of individuals are given special prominence, becoming the basis for actions taken on behalf of others. By his actions Moses furthers the creational work

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<sup>3</sup>The writer of Exodus tells us that Moses had his mid-life crisis when he was "grown up" (Exodus 11:1). In Acts 7:23, we learn that Moses was forty when he killed the Egyptian. Later in Acts 7, we learn that Moses was eighty when God came to him at the burning bush (Exodus 3). You may be wondering why all this is in the New Testament book of Acts. Most of Acts 7 is devoted to a long speech made by the disciple Stephen in his own defense before the Jewish leaders. Stephen relates the long history of Israel in the hopes that the leaders will see that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's story and hope. The leaders do not repent and Stephen is stoned to death, making him the first Christian martyr. The man who would become known as the apostle Paul was present at Stephen's stoning, fully approving and holding coats for those who wanted to throw stones.

of God in giving life and blessing. To say that “there is very little here of the hero of faith who decides for God” (Childs, p. 43) is to miss this point. Moses’ sympathies for those less fortunate and his active response on their behalf anticipate God’s will as expressed both in saving action (14:13, 30; 15:1–2) and in written statute (22:21–27). Once again, an ethic grounded in a theology of creation serves as an important basis for both redemption and Torah.<sup>4</sup>

### *God’s purposes*

Before Moses goes over to check out the burning bush (Exodus 3, next week), there is no mention that Moses was the least bit aware of God nor that he had any real comprehension of what it meant to be a Hebrew. He was simply playing life’s cards as they were dealt him. Even the bush is, at first, only a curiosity.

Perhaps this is how it is with God. We so often look for God’s “big stuff” that we fail to appreciate that God works through the ordinary events of our lives. Just because we don’t see God at work doesn’t mean that he is idle. It is impossible to pull apart God’s workings in this story from those of Pharaoh, Moses’ mother, Pharaoh’s daughter, and the rest. We probably shouldn’t try, but simply acknowledge and proclaim that God’s good purposes will continue to roll forward. Certainly, I, for one, have my own mid-life crisis story to tell about God and his surprising purposes.

### *The Basics of Moses’ Story*

When the book of Exodus opens, Abraham’s descendents (through Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s twelve sons) have been enslaved in Egypt for several hundred years. Sometime around 1500–1300 BC, Moses is born, is raised in the Pharaoh’s house, murders an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Hebrew, and disappears into the desert. There, he marries and tends to his flocks.

One day, Moses sees, in the distance, a bush that is burning, yet is not consumed by the fire. When he investigates, Moses is confronted by God who tells Moses that he is to deliver the Hebrews from Egypt. It is in this meeting that God reveals his name to Moses, YHWH, which means “I am” or “I am who I am.” Moses resists and offers up some reasons why he isn’t the right guy, but God presses on. Thus, Moses, with the help of his brother, returns to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Hebrews. As you’d expect, the Pharaoh resists, and relents only when God sends death to all the first-born of Egypt. Death passes over the homes of the Hebrews who have marked their doorways with the blood of a lamb. After the final plague, the Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go, but then changes his mind and chases after them. God parts the Red Sea (or “sea of reeds”) to let the Hebrews pass, but the Egyptian army is drowned when they follow the Hebrews into the sea.

God then leads the Hebrews into the desert and after a few months, they arrive at Mt. Sinai where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments and the rest of the covenant. Moses leads them to the edge of the land God has promised them. They send spies into Canaan to check things out and, being terrified by what they see, the Hebrews turn back. Rather than trusting in God, they trust in their own judgment. God is angry with them and tells them that they will not enter the Promised Land until all of that generation die. Even Moses will never enter Canaan. Thus, the Hebrews wander aimlessly in the wilderness for forty years. The book of Deuteronomy is largely Moses’ final speech to the new generation of the Hebrews, who will soon begin their

<sup>4</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 45.

# Scott Engle's Bible Classes

## **Monday Afternoon Class**

Current study: *2 Corinthians*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

## **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

Current study: *Acts*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

## **Scott's Sunday Class**

Current series: *Resurrection: The Claim, The Significance, and The Evidence*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel.** Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.