

1.

THE BIRTH OF MOSES

An Origin Story Fit for a Superhero

Moses was born to an Israelite woman named Jochebed during a tumultuous time for the Israelites in Egypt. The Israelites were descendants of Jacob, who was also known by the name of Israel. Jacob moved his entire family from Canaan to Egypt after his son Joseph acquired a position of power under the Egyptian pharaoh and saved the entire region from a seven-year famine. Things went well for Jacob's family in Egypt for decades. But eventually, as Jacob's descendants become more numerous and the remembrance of Joseph's deeds was lost to history, the Egyptian pharaoh came to see the Israelites, or Hebrews, as a threat.

Pharaoh forced the Israelites into hard labor and put them to work building new cities. As their population continued growing, he ordered two Hebrew midwives to kill all Israelite baby boys as they were being born. When the midwives deceived Pharaoh to avoid killing any babies, Pharaoh ordered all Israelite baby boys to be thrown into the Nile River.

Moses was born during this time. His mother hid him as long as she could to protect him. When she could hide him no longer, she placed him in a basket and set him in among the reeds near the riverbank. There he was discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, who raised Moses as her own. Though he was Hebrew, Moses grew up as Egyptian royalty. Moses' older sister offered to find for Pharaoh's daughter a Hebrew woman who could nurse the baby. The nursing job, of course, went to Moses' mother, allowing her to be a part of her child's life.

Exodus 2:1-10, which tells us about Moses' birth, doesn't mention God. But God's hand is nonetheless at work in the story. We see God in the courage of Moses' mother, who took desperate measures to protect her son. We see God in Pharaoh's daughter, the foreign princess who rescued Moses and raised him as her own. And we see God in Moses' sister, who found a way to keep the family together. Even amid the discord and uncertainty, God is present and active.

A Land of Pyramids

The first thing that comes to mind when many people think of ancient Egypt is pyramids. Some even assume that the Israelite slaves were responsible for building these pyramids. In reality, the Egyptians built their pyramids long before the time of Moses. But pyramids and other great monuments were part of the Egyptian environment in which Moses and the other Israelites lived.

In Egyptian belief, the pyramids served as vehicles that would take the Egyptian pharaohs—along with their families, servants, and possessions—into the afterlife. Some historians have suggested that Egyptians believed the pyramids even propelled the pharaohs to the realm of the gods. These magnificent structures signified that the Egyptians looked upon their leaders with reverence, the type of reverence that the Israelites reserved for their God.

Moses was born into a nation of slaves but grew up in the household of a ruler who was revered like a god. He belonged to two peoples that were at odds with each other. But God had big plans for him.

Session 1 Activities

Opening Activity: Word Association (10 minutes)

Supplies: a markerboard or large sheet of paper, markers

Divide a markerboard or large sheet of paper into three columns. Title the first “Ancient Egypt”; title the second “Moses”; and title the third “The Exodus.”

Have participants name the first thing that comes to mind when they hear “Ancient Egypt.” Record these in the first column. (It is fine if some answers are repeated.) Do the same with “Moses” and “The Exodus.”

With these terms in mind, divide into teams of three or four. Have each team answer each of the following questions:

1. What is something that you know for sure about Moses and the story of the Israelites’ escape from Egypt?
2. What is one question that you have about Moses and the story of the Israelites’ escape from Egypt?

Over the next six sessions you will learn about several different aspects of Moses’ life and of the ancient Israelites’ saga. More importantly, you’ll discover how God was at work in these ancient stories and how the lessons they teach us apply to our lives and faith today.

Opening Prayer

Lord, guide us during our time together today and throughout this study. Open our minds and hearts so that we might understand what you have to say to us through the story of Moses and the ancient Israelites. Thank you for the wisdom and example of our ancestors in faith and for this time we have to learn about them. Amen.

Pyramid Contest (10 minutes)

Supplies: assorted sets of materials for building pyramids

Divide participants into groups of three or four. Challenge each group to build a pyramid, with each group using a different set of materials. One group

could have paper cups, another could have drinking straws, and another children's building blocks. Give each group two minutes to construct a pyramid from the materials provided. After two minutes, judge the pyramids and declare two winners: one for the highest pyramid and one for the strongest and sturdiest.

The first thing that comes to mind when many people think of Egypt is pyramids. The Great Pyramids are the best known landmarks in Egypt and are among the best known in all the world. Discuss:

- What do you know, or think you know, about the Egyptian pyramids?
- Which of these things are you certain of? Which are you not sure about?

Many people mistakenly are under the impression that Hebrew slaves built the Great Pyramids in Egypt. This idea has been reinforced by movie portrayals of Moses' story, such as *The Prince of Egypt* and *Exodus: Gods and Kings*. But there is no historical evidence that Hebrew slaves, or slaves of any kind, built the pyramids. The pyramids most likely were built by a workforce of farmers during the flood season when farming wasn't possible. By the time of Moses, the pyramids probably had been standing for a thousand years.

Even though the ancient Israelites weren't responsible for building the pyramids, the presence of the pyramids tells us about the Egyptian culture in which God's people lived. The pyramids were believed to function as "resurrection machines," guiding pharaohs and others buried in them into the afterlife and even to godly status. Discuss:

- People today who visit the pyramids in Egypt stand in awe of their size, their durability, and the precision with which they were built. How do you think the ancient Israelites reacted when they first encountered the Egyptian pyramids?
- What do the pyramids tell us about how the Egyptians viewed their leaders?
- How was this view of the Egyptian pharaoh at odds with the faith of God's people?

The Backstory (5 minutes)

Supplies: Bibles are optional

Moses was born into a world where the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, and his crowning achievement was freeing his people from slavery. But how did they end up enslaved in the first place? We can find the answer to this question in the Book of Genesis and the story of Joseph. Ask:

- What do you know about Joseph (the Joseph in the Old Testament, not Jesus' adoptive father)?
- What would you like to know about him?

Read aloud the following paragraphs:

Joseph is perhaps best known for the colorful coat that his father, Jacob, gave him. Joseph was his father's favorite son, and his ten older brothers were jealous and resentful. At first plotting to kill Joseph, his brothers instead sold him into slavery. Joseph ended up in Egypt. Thanks to his ability to interpret dreams, Joseph worked his way out of slavery and eventually—after being wrongly convicted and imprisoned—became one of Pharaoh's top advisors.

Joseph secured his advisory role when he interpreted a dream of Pharaoh's that involved seven fat and seven slender cattle. The dream told Joseph that there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. By interpreting this dream, Joseph was able to guide Egypt through the seven-year famine and was even able to provide food for other nations in the region. From Canaan, Joseph's brothers traveled to Egypt seeking food. In Egypt, they appeared before Joseph, not knowing he was their brother. After some back-and-forth and trickery, which you can read about in Genesis 42–45, Joseph moved his entire family to Egypt—his father Jacob, his brothers, and their families. Joseph's family prospered in Egypt until their descendants became so numerous that a new pharaoh regarded them as a threat.

Discuss:

- What do you know about how your family came to live in this community or this country? What circumstances led them here?

- How might God have been at work in the story of Joseph and his family?
- How has God been at work in the story of your family, bringing them to where they are today?

Moses: The Origin Story (10 minutes)

Supplies: Bibles, a markerboard or large sheet of paper, markers

Most great heroes have an interesting origin story. Moses is no different. Read aloud Exodus 1:8-14, 22. Discuss:

- Why did Pharaoh feel threatened by the Israelites?
- What did he do in response?

Then read aloud Exodus 2:1-10. Discuss:

- How did Moses survive the killing of the Hebrew baby boys?
- What do these verses tell us about God?

Brainstorm a list of popular heroes from literature, movies, or comics who have well-known origin stories. (For example: We know that Superman and Supergirl were sent to earth to escape the destruction of Krypton; Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia were twins separated at birth.) List these heroes on a markerboard or large sheet of paper.

Look over your list of heroes and identify similarities between their origin stories and Moses' origin story. (For instance: Many heroes were raised by someone other than their parents; many grew up in a culture where they didn't quite fit in.) Discuss:

- Why do you think heroes' stories have so many elements in common?
- What do these stories tell us about things we look for or expect in our heroes?
- What does the story of Moses' birth and early life tell us about Moses and what we can expect from him?

Midwives to the Rescue (5 minutes)

Supplies: Bibles

Before Pharaoh ordered all the Hebrew baby boys thrown into the river, he had another plan. Read aloud Exodus 1:15-21. (Note: A midwife is a person who delivers babies.) Discuss:

- What instructions does Pharaoh give the midwives?
- What did the midwives do in response to these instructions?

Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives, were dishonest with Pharaoh when they told him that Hebrew women were so strong that they gave birth to babies before the midwives could get to them. Scripture tells us that God blessed them because of what they did to protect the Hebrew babies. Discuss:

- Do you think that Shiphrah and Puah were right to lie to Pharaoh? Why or why not?

Read Exodus 20:16. This command not to testify falsely or bear false witness, which God did not give to the Israelites until many years after Shiphrah and Puah lied to Pharaoh, is often interpreted as “Do not lie.” Discuss:

- Would you say that lying is always wrong? Why or why not?
- In what situations, if any, might dishonesty be justified?
- How would things have happened differently if Shiphrah and Puah had been honest? Was there a way they could have been honest *and* saved the Hebrew babies?
- How did God respond to the midwives’ actions? What, if anything, does this tell us about whether it’s ever okay to be dishonest?

Closing Activity: Where Was God? (10 minutes)

Supplies: a candle that can easily be passed from one person to another

Often in the Bible’s opening books we see God intervene directly in the lives of God’s people. God speaks directly to leaders to give them instructions and works miracles to save and protect—and even to punish—the people of

Israel. But in the Scripture passages we looked at for this session, God doesn't appear to be a major player. In the story of Joseph, which tells us how God's people ended up in Egypt, God never speaks directly to Joseph nor does God perform any supernatural feats. While we know that Shiphrah and Puah served God and that God rewarded them, God isn't even mentioned in the story of Moses' birth and rescue on the banks of the Nile.

Though we don't see miracles or read direct quotations from God in these Scripture passages, God is very much at work in them. Spend a minute reflecting on how God is present in the stories you studied as a part of this session. (For example, maybe you see God in the courage of Moses' mother or in the events that brought the people of Israel to Egypt.)

Gather in a circle and light a candle. (You will need a candle that can easily be passed from one person to another.) Pass the candle around the circle. When participants hold the candle, they should name one way they see God at work in the Scripture passages and stories you read and discussed during this session. It's fine if some examples are repeated.

After the candle has gone all the way around the circle, have one person hold the candle while the group closes in prayer. (Use the prayer below or one of your own.)

Closing Prayer

God, thank you for this time we've had together to learn about and reflect on the life of Moses and the story of God's people. Open our eyes so that we can see how you are at work in our lives and in the world around us, just as you were at work in the lives of the Israelites and Moses' family. Remind us of your presence when we encounter hardships and challenges. And give us the strength and courage this week to listen for your word and do your will in all circumstances. Amen.