

The Birth of Moses

Devotional Reading: [Acts 7:17–29](#)

Background Scripture: [Exodus 1:15–2:10](#)

Exodus 2:1–10

¹ Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.

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

⁸ "Yes, go," she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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."



Key Text

She became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months.

—Exodus 2:2

God's Exceptional Choice

Unit 2: Out of Slavery to Nationhood

Lessons 5–9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Retell the account of Moses' infancy.
2. Explain how an injustice was avoided.
3. Make a concrete plan to act in response to an identified or potential injustice.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Operation Varsity Blues
- B. Lesson Context

I. Unique Response (Exodus 2:1–4)

- A. Hidden at Home (vv. 1–2)
- B. Sheltered in the Stream (vv. 3–4)

II. Unexpected Rescue (Exodus 2:5–10)

- A. Daughter's Discovery (vv. 5–6)
The Power of Papyrus
- B. Sister's Suggestion (vv. 7–9)
A Fish Out of Water
- C. Son's Significance (v. 10)

Conclusion

- A. Aggressive Compassion
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Ahmose *Ah-mohs.*

Amram *Am-ram.*

Jochebed *Jock-eh-bed.*

Mesopotamia *Mes-uh-puh-tay-me-uh.*

Miriam *Meer-ee-um.*

Midianites *Mid-ee-un-ites.*

Pithom *Py-thum.*

Rameses *Ram-ih-seez.*

Thutmose *Thut-mo-se.*

Pharaoh *Fair-o or Fay-roe.*

Introduction

A. Operation Varsity Blues

For many teenagers, the college admission process is the culmination of their many years of hard work. High school students spend years preparing in hopes of being accepted into their dream college or university. Entrance exams, scholarship essays, amateur athletic camps, and local community service all factor into the process, on top of a student's course load and GPA.

However, for other teenagers, the college admissions experience is all about their family's money and connections. In 2019, a scandal rocked the college admission world, revealing the ways that people were unjustly and illegally working the college admission process for their children. An FBI investigation—named Operation Varsity Blues—revealed that dozens of parents conspired to lie, bribe, and cheat in order to get their children into elite colleges and universities. By doing so, other students who had worked hard and earned their spot would be denied admission.

Evidence of life's injustices is all around us. When faced with these realities, the people of God are to respond with boldness and trust in the God who will, in his time, set injustices right

B. Lesson Context

Centuries before the events of this lesson's Scripture text, God had promised Abraham, a nomadic herdsman from Mesopotamia, that his descendants would be numerous ([Genesis 15:5](#), see [lesson 1](#)). One such descendant, Joseph ([25:24](#)), was removed from his ancestral land and taken to Egypt. Through God's power and directives, Joseph ended up in a position of high regard in service to the Egyptian pharaoh ([41:41–57](#)).

Ultimately, Joseph brought his extended family to live with him in Egypt ([Genesis 50:22](#); [Exodus 1:1–5](#)). His descendants would become the Israelites. Centuries later, they “were exceedingly fruitful ... multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with

them” (1:7). God’s promise of numerous descendants had become a reality.

Jacob’s descendants would be in the land of Egypt for a total of 430 years (see [Exodus 12:40](#)). Eventually, a new pharaoh came to power, and was concerned regarding the growth of the Israelite population (1:8–10).

The exact identity of the pharaoh in question is unknown. The construction of cities Pithom and Rameses ([Exodus 1:11](#)) has led some scholars to estimate that the pharaoh in question was Rameses II (approx. 1290–1224 BC). He oversaw vast construction projects and kept numerous slaves, realities that align with the first chapters of Exodus.

However, Scripture describes how Solomon began construction on the temple 480 years after the Israelites left Egypt (1 Kings 6:1). This timing would place the exodus at approximately 1447 BC, outside of the reign of Rameses II (compare [Exodus 12:40–41](#); [Galatians 3:17](#)). Specific details regarding the exact timing of the exodus and the pharaoh involved may never be recovered.

The pharaoh in question saw the growing presence of Israelites as a threat. To suppress their increase in number and to exert power over them, the pharaoh established hard labor for the Israelites and placed slave masters over them ([Exodus 1:11–14](#)). The pharaoh’s oppressive treatment intensified in his declaration that “every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile” (1:22).

Despite this oppression, God blessed Jacob’s descendants. Because of the shrewdness of Hebrew women (see [Exodus 1:15–20](#)), more Hebrew boys survived infancy than the pharaoh intended. This lesson highlights the response of several women to the pharaoh’s unjust declaration. A seemingly small event—the birth of a child and his upbringing—served as the way by which God provided a just response to an unjust situation.

I. Unique Response

([Exodus 2:1–4](#))

A. Hidden at Home (vv. 1–2)

1. Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman,

A later genealogical account provides the names this *man* and his wife: Amram and Jochebed ([Exodus 6:20](#)). Both were from the lineage of Levi (see [Numbers 26:57–59](#)). After the people left Egypt, descendants of Levi would become priests ([Exodus 28–30](#)) and religious leaders ([Deuteronomy 10:8–9](#)) for the Israelites.



Moses:

From Protected to Protector

Sheet 5—Fall 2022, *Adult Resources, Standard Lesson Quarterly* Curriculum

Photo © Getty Images

Lesson 5

Visual for [Lesson 5](#). Conclude the lesson by asking the class how Moses was both protected and a protector for God's people.

2. 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.

The survival of the woman's son would be in doubt, considering the cruel decree from the pharaoh ([Exodus 1:22](#); see [Lesson Context](#)). The text before us does not speak to the birth order of this child. Later texts indicate the presence of an older brother, Aaron ([7:7](#)), and an older sister ([2:4](#), below).

The description of the *child* as *fine* could speak to a variety of attributes. The underlying Hebrew word is elsewhere translated as “good”—a descriptor of God's intentions in his creation ([Genesis 1:4](#), [10](#), [12](#), etc.). In this sense, the word could be describing how this child fulfilled God's plans. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, translates that same Hebrew word into a greek word that is used in the New Testament to describe the child as not being “ordinary” ([Acts 7:20](#); [Hebrews 11:23](#)).

The word could also be describing the health of the child (compare [1 Samuel 9:2](#)). However, physical appeal or beauty is not a measure for God's call on a person ([16:7](#), see [lesson 9](#)).

The child faced the infanticide of the pharaoh's tyrannical declaration of [Exodus 1:16](#). The fact that

a nursing mother could hide her child for *three months* implied her ability to avoid long hours of outdoor labor described in [Exodus 1:13–14](#). The author of Hebrews reflects on the actions of the child’s parents: “By faith Moses’ parents hid him for three months ... because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king’s edict” ([Hebrews 11:23](#)).

What Do You Think?

How should believers respond to human laws that contradict God’s moral law?

Digging Deeper

How do [Exodus 1:15–21](#); [Esther 3:12–4:17](#); [Daniel 3](#); [6](#); [Romans 13:1–7](#); and [Titus 3:1](#) inform a believer’s response to civil obedience or disobedience?

B. Sheltered in the Stream (vv. 3–4)

3. 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.

After three months, the baby could *no longer* stay hidden. The time had come for his parents to deal with the unjust realities of the pharaoh’s command.

Ironically, the child’s mother did follow the letter of the law of the pharaoh: she *did* cast her son into the river (compare [Exodus 1:22](#)). However, she did so in a manner that allowed for the child’s survival, thus going against the *spirit* of the pharaoh’s law.

The underlying Hebrew word translated as *basket* appears in one other Old Testament narrative: to refer to the ark of Noah ([Genesis 6–9](#)). In the verse before us, the basket was built to hold a small child; it was like a small ark. In both instances, God provided for his people through a kind of ark. Just as an ark saved Noah and his family from the waters of a flood, this “ark” would save a child from waters of the river.

The child’s mother built the basket using common materials found in the region of the Nile River delta. Bulrushes of *papyrus* would have been obtained from the marshy wetlands of the river delta (compare [Job 8:11](#)). These were also used in the construction of seafaring vessels ([Isaiah 18:2](#)).

In order to seal the basket, the child’s mother *coated* the basket *with tar*—a sticky substance used in construction (see [Genesis 11:3](#)). Here, the substance served to bind the papyrus reeds together to form the vessel. *Pitch* was added as a waterproofing agent, fit to keep the interior of water-borne vessels and their passengers dry (compare [6:14](#)).

In the harsh desert climate, *the Nile* River served as a key component of daily Egyptian life. The river provided water for drinking ([Jeremiah 2:18](#)), bathing ([Exodus 2:5](#)), irrigating ([Isaiah 19:7](#)), and livestock ([Genesis 41:1–4](#)). The river provided sustenance for daily life in general, and God would use the Nile to provide for Moses’ life specifically.

Amid the slow moving, marshy waters of the river’s *bank*, she *put* the papyrus basket *among the reeds*. By placing the basket here, the reeds provided protection and concealed the basket. She would have to trust that God would protect her son.

4. His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

We learn that the child had a *sister* (Miriam; [Numbers 26:59](#)). At this point in the narrative, specific details about her life are unknown. In this instance, she *at a distance* of the basket to keep an eye on her brother and take note of his eventual outcome: survival or death.

What Do You Think?

When, if ever, might it be better for a believer to wait and see God's provision before addressing a situation?

Digging Deeper

In what ways does this absolve a believer from action? In what ways does it not?

II. Unexpected Rescue ([Exodus 2:5–10](#))

A. Daughter's Discovery (vv. 5–6)

5. 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.

The pharaoh would have had many partners, "wives," and children. The relative power of any one child in the pharaoh's kingdom would have depended on the importance of that child's mother to the pharaoh. This *daughter* of the pharaoh may or may not have been a powerful woman in her father's kingdom (see [Lesson Context](#)). In any case, she was far more powerful than Moses' family—for better or worse.

Surely a royal princess would have more appropriate locations *to bathe*—including royal bathhouses. Her motivations for bathing at *the Nile* are not obvious. Perhaps she was following the example of her father (see [Exodus 7:15](#)).

Most importantly, she noticed *the basket floating among the reeds* of papyrus. Whether the child's mother and sister intended for him to be found by Egyptian royalty is unknown. The pharaoh's daughter was faced with a problem: abide by her father's commands regarding the treatment of Hebrew sons, or not.

The Power of Papyrus

Have you considered the importance of papyrus? The plant flourishes in marshy areas like the lands surrounding the Nile River. On first glance, the tall, reed-like plant may not seem to be a valuable natural resource. However, the ancient Egyptians maximized the plant's use.

The plant's husk would be peeled, and the remaining parts would be cut into thin strips. The strips were flattened and left to dry under the sun. The resulting sheets, similar to modern paper, were used for writing. But the use of papyrus was not limited to the creation of paper. Ancient texts speak to its use in making shoes, in decorating buildings, and even during the mummification process.

If not for the papyrus basket and the papyrus rushes, the baby might have been killed. This insignificant plant protected this child through God’s saving plan. What “insignificant” part of your daily life has God used to advance his plan? Are your eyes open to noticing it?

—T. Z. S.

6. 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.

Given that the previous verse refers to the pharaoh’s daughter, “her attendants,” and her “female slave,” the antecedent of *she* who *opened* the basket is unclear. Even if the pharaoh’s daughter was not the specific individual who opened the basket, she would have been aware of the resulting interaction. Like any other 3-month-old child, *the baby ... was crying*—perhaps he was startled, fearful, or even hungry.

Despite the ethnic and cultural differences between the child and the princess, a natural response to a vulnerable child is evident. Her privilege and position of power did not diminish her sense of compassion for the child. She recognized the child’s ethnicity, whether because of his circumcision (see [Genesis 17:10–13](#)) or assumed heritage based on his abandonment. The recognition of their cultural differences did not prevent her from feeling *sorry for* the child and helping *him*.

Throughout the Old Testament, calling an individual a *Hebrew* often came from a Gentile person ([Genesis 39:14, 17; 41:12; Exodus 1:15–16; 1 Samuel 14:11, 21](#)). Other times, the title was used in regard to the people’s experience of slavery ([Deuteronomy 15:12; Jeremiah 34:9, 14](#)).

What Do You Think?

What apparent need in your community fills you with a sense of compassion to respond?

Digging Deeper

What is one action step that you can take to help address this need?

B. Sister’s Suggestion (vv. 7–9)

7. Then his sister asked Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?”

From her outpost, the child’s *sister* appeared. Her appearance presented a conundrum: why would *Pharaoh’s daughter* listen to this strange girl? Further, why choose a nurse from *the Hebrew women* when Egyptian nurses were available?

In ancient cultures a mother did not always have the ability to nurse and care for her child. In this case, a nurse was chosen to help both the child and the mother (compare [Genesis 24:59](#)). Powerful women might acquire a nurse to avoid the inconveniences of motherhood. However, the precise motives of the pharaoh’s daughter desiring a nurse is unknown. In any case, if she was not recently pregnant, she could not have nursed the child.

This interaction linked the child’s sister and mother with the Hebrew midwives—women who

saved vulnerable babies ([Exodus 1:15–17](#)). Further, this text speaks to the resilience of the child’s family as they made efforts to survive under hostile and unjust conditions.

By asking whether a Hebrew may *nurse the baby*, the pharaoh’s daughter was placed in a difficult position. Would she resist the pharaoh’s tyranny and take pity on the child and the Hebrew woman who stood before her? Or, instead, would she follow the dehumanizing practices of her powerful father?

8. “Yes, go,” she answered. So the girl went and got the baby’s mother.

The irony of *the baby’s mother* sending him away, and then having the chance to nurse him would not have escaped the text’s audiences. The vulnerable slave woman outwitted the imperial, death-bent system that desired the death of her son. Even more ironic was that this was achieved through the daughter of the very man who instituted the death decree. Audiences of all eras can appreciate the cleverness of the Hebrew women in this narrative.

9. 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.

The attention of *Pharaoh’s daughter* turned to the mother of *this baby*. Whether the pharaoh’s daughter suspected the true identity of this woman is unknown. By telling the baby’s mother to *take ... him* could indicate that the pharaoh’s daughter was filled with compassion and desired that the baby boy return to his people.

Because Moses’ mother trusted God, she was rewarded. Not only would she raise her own child, but she would be given pay out of the royal coffers to care for him. She would provide for her family, all while she preserved her son’s life.

What Do You Think?

What needs do you see in your community that are too challenging for you to tackle alone?

Digging Deeper

Who will you recruit to assist you in this regard?

C. Son’s Significance (v. 10a–b)

10a. When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh’s daughter and he became her son.

Not only did Jochebed provide for his emotional well-being, but perhaps in understanding of the God of his ancestors. This same God would one day appear to him and direct him (see [Exodus 3:4–4:17](#)).

However, the child’s time with his mother had a limit. At a prescribed time, unstated by the text, his mother *took him* to the royal house. The text does not explain the means by which *Pharaoh’s daughter* adopted the child. The fact that no one else is mentioned as *he became her son* highlights the moral courage of these two women in the midst of an oppressive system.

As young Moses grew, he would live in the house of the pharaoh, away from his own people (see [Exodus 2:11](#); [Acts 7:23](#)). The longer he remained in the pharaoh’s household, the more familiar he

became with the cultural mores of the Egyptians. At times he was assumed to be an Egyptian (see [Exodus 2:19](#)).

What Do You Think?

How might you “adopt” a young person from your community with the intention of listening to their possible plight?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take regarding the appropriate action in response to your active listening?

A Fish Out of Water

Have you ever had a “fish out of water” experience? I sure did when I moved to California. Before the move, I had lived my entire life in the midwestern United States. I had a certain perspective on life—all based on the midwestern culture.

After the move, I was ill-prepared for the cultural change. The West Coast culture felt faster and more tense than I was familiar with. After some time, the differences were too much for me to handle. I was ready to move back to a more comfortable culture. I wondered whether my discomfort was based on biblical principles or was a matter of preference.

Moses lived among three different cultures: the Israelites, the Egyptians, and the Midianites (see [Exodus 2:11–25](#)). God used each culture to shape him for future work. Are you attentive to how God might use different cultural contexts—even ones that you feel ill-prepared to handle—to shape you to better serve him?

—C. R. B.

10b. She named him Moses, saying, “I drew him out of the water.”

At last, the name of this child is revealed. Undoubtedly the child’s birth mother had given him a name. The text only tells us the name he was called by the pharaoh’s daughter: *Moses*. The meaning and history of the name is unclear.

As he was given this name by an Egyptian, we can assume connections to the Egyptian language. The Egyptian word for “son” sounds similar to his name. (This name can be seen in the endings of other Egyptian names like Ahmose and Thutmose.)

The name could have connections to the Hebrew language. A Hebrew word indicating being drawn *out of* and rescued from *the water* also sounds like the name (see [2 Samuel 22:17](#); [Psalm 18:16](#)).

Despite these uncertainties, the child’s name provides theological significance. Moses was rescued from certain death, and with God’s guidance, he would rescue his people from future dangers (see [Exodus 6:1](#); [13:3](#)).

Conclusion

A. Aggressive Compassion

The story surrounding Moses' birth and upbringing triggers more questions than answers. One of the biggest unknowns concerns the motives of the pharaoh's daughter and her desire to help. Scripture does not indicate whether she feared God or not.

Despite her connection to the governing power, she was not overcome by its brutal demands. She was a beneficiary of the same system that allowed the pharaoh to act oppressively. But she managed to defy her upbringing and provided a just response to an unjust situation.

However, the real heroines of this story are the child's mother and sister. They took great risk to protect Moses. They trusted that God would see their response to the injustice and provide a way out. Their bold actions gave way to the bold actions from the daughter of Egyptian royalty.

God provides justice where injustice reigns. He invites his people to reflect his character by taking bold (and sometimes risky) steps to protect and care for vulnerable individuals. The justice that God requires of his people is not hypothetical—it is active and embodied.

B. Prayer

God of justice, we ask that you strengthen our compassion to respond to the vulnerable members of our community. Show us how we might be instruments of your justice and peace to those who experience injustice. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Reflect God's just character by responding to your most vulnerable neighbors.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Before class, write the following continuum on the board:

Easy 0 1 2 3 4 5 Difficult

Explain that you will give the class several decisions, and students will decide the level of difficulty to make the decision. Students will indicate the decision's difficulty by holding a piece of paper with the corresponding number from the continuum.

Ask the class to consider the following decisions: 1—Your neighbor needs some flour. 2—A friend requests your help for their move. 3—Your church wants you to oversee a special offering for a local

charity. 4—Your pastor asks you to go on an overseas mission trip. 5—You have been nominated to lead a local citizens’ group to address a neighborhood concern.

After the activity, ask volunteers to share what factors made making the decision easy or difficult. Lead into Bible study by saying, “Today we will look at the story of a family that was faced with a difficult decision. God used their response to accomplish great things for a whole nation.”

Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [Exodus 2:1–10](#). Divide the class into three groups, designating them: **Jochebed Group**, **Miriam Group**, and **Pharaoh’s Daughter Group**. Distribute handouts (you prepare) to each group with the following questions for small-group discussion:

Jochebed Group: 1—How did Jochebed deal with the danger of having a son? 2—Why do you think she created a “papyrus basket” ([Exodus 2:3](#)) for her son? 3—What do her actions teach us about justice and compassion?

Miriam Group: 1—What dangers were possible for Miriam as she approached the pharaoh’s daughter? 2—How did Miriam help ensure that her brother would continue to live instead of dying as the pharaoh had decreed? 3—What do her actions teach us about justice and compassion?

Pharaoh’s Daughter Group: 1—How did the actions of the pharaoh’s daughter oppose her father’s decrees? 2—How did her adoption of Moses show God’s plan to deliver his people? 3—What do her actions teach us about justice and compassion?

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “An Unforgettable Day” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated.

After calling time for either exercise, have groups present their findings for whole-class discussion.

Into Life

Transition by saying, “Moses’ mother, his sister, and the pharaoh’s daughter were all faced with complex and unjust situations. In their own way, they each responded with justice and compassion. As God’s people, we are to honor him and be used to enact his justice in the world.”

Write on the board: *Situations That Require Justice and Compassion*. Ask the class to work in pairs to determine possible answers to the header. Challenge pairs to include individual and global injustices that they believe God wants his people to address. After no more than five minutes of discussion, ask pairs to state their answers. Write responses on the board.

Based on the responses, discern one situation of particular concern for the class. Through whole-class discussion, ask what steps your students can take to address the perceived injustice. (You might appoint a group of students to provide an all-class response for the next class period. If you do so, allow time in the next class session to discuss and make a plan based on the presented suggestion.)

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Decisions, Decisions” activity from the activity page. Because of the personal nature of the activity, students may wish to complete this as a take-home.