

O N E

EXODUS 1 -4

Wanted: A Deliverer

The little girl who defined "radio" as "television without pictures" didn't know what she was talking about. I grew up in the Golden Age of Radio, and I can assure you that as I listened, I saw many vivid and exciting pictures—right in my own imagination. Television doesn't let you do that. And the stories on radio went on and on, day after day, always leaving us wondering, "What will happen next?"

The Old Testament is God's "continued story" of His great program of salvation that He announced to Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:15) and to Abraham (12:1-3). That explains why the Hebrew text of Exodus begins with the word "and," for God is continuing the story He started in Genesis.¹ God's wonderful story finally led to the coming of Jesus to earth and His death on the cross, and it won't end until God's people go to heaven and see Jesus on the throne. What a story!

The theme of Exodus is *deliverance*, and you can't have deliverance without a deliverer. That's where Moses comes in, the great liberator, legislator, and mediator.

1. The deliverer needed (Ex. 1:1-22)

The Jewish rabbis call Exodus "the Book of Names" (or "These Are the Names") because it opens with a list of the names of the sons of Jacob (Israel) who brought their families to Egypt to escape the famine in Canaan (Gen. 46).² God used Israel's experiences in Egypt to prepare them for the special tasks He gave them to accomplish on earth: bearing witness to the true and living God, writing the Holy Scriptures and bringing the Savior into the world.

Blessing (Ex. 1:1-7). During the years Joseph served as second ruler in Egypt, his family was greatly respected; and even after Joseph died, his memory was honored in the way the Egyptians treated the Hebrews. God kept His covenant promise to Abraham by blessing his descendants and causing them to multiply greatly (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:5; 17:2, 6; 22:17). By the time of the Exodus, there were more than 600,000 men who were twenty years and older (Ex. 12:37; 38:26); and when you add the women and children, the total could well be nearly 3 million people, all of whom descended from the original family of Jacob. God certainly kept His promise!

But a new Pharaoh wasn't happy with the rapid multiplication of the Jewish people, so he took steps to control it.

Step #1—Afflicting the adults (Ex. 1:8-14). God had told Abraham that his descendants would go to a strange country and there be enslaved and mistreated, but He had promised that He would set them free by His power at the right time (Gen. 15:12-14). God compared Egypt to a smoking furnace (v. 17; see Deut. 4:20) where His people would suffer, but their experience in that furnace would transform the Israelites into a mighty nation (Gen. 46:3).

During the centuries the Jews had been in Egypt (15:13; Ex. 12:40-41), they had seen many Egyptian dynasties come and go; but who was the new king who was ignorant of Joseph and his family and tried to destroy "the people of the

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children of Israel"?³ The 17th Dynasty, the Hyksos,⁴ were foreigners and "strangers" in the land as were the Jews, so they were probably sympathetic with Israel; but the 18th Dynasty was Egyptian and their rulers expelled foreigners from the land. This may have been the dynasty that began the persecution of the people of Israel.

Why would the Egyptians want to make life miserable for the Jews? Israel was a source of blessing in the land, as Joseph had been before them (Gen. 39:1-6), and they weren't causing trouble. Pharaoh's stated reason was that the presence of so many Jews was a security risk: since the Jews were outsiders, if there were an invasion, they would no doubt ally themselves with the enemy. However, whether Pharaoh realized it or not, the real cause was the conflict announced in 3:15, the enmity between the people of God and the children of Satan, a conflict that still goes on in the world today.

No people in recorded history have suffered as the Hebrew people have suffered, but every nation or ruler that has persecuted the Jews has been punished for it. After all, God's promise to Abraham was, "I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you" (12:3, NKJV). God kept that promise in the way He dealt with Egypt and Babylon in ancient days and Stalin and Hitler in modern times. God is long-suffering as He sees nations persecute His chosen people, but eventually His hand of judgment falls on the oppressors.

The Egyptian taskmasters "worked them ruthlessly" (Ex. 1:13, NIV), forcing the Jewish slaves to build cities and work in the fields. But the blessing of God caused the Israelites to continue to multiply, and this frightened and enraged their captors even more. Something else had to be done to keep Israel under control.

Step #2—Killing the Jewish boys at birth (Ex. 1:15-21). If

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this plan had succeeded, Pharaoh would have wiped out the Hebrew people. The future generation of men would be dead and the girls would eventually be married to Egyptian slaves and absorbed into the Egyptian race. But Genesis 3:15 and 12:1-3 said that God would not permit such a thing to happen, and He used two Jewish midwives to outwit Pharaoh.⁵

This is the first instance in Scripture of what today we call "civil disobedience," refusing to obey an evil law because of a higher good. Scriptures like Matthew 20:21-25; Romans 13; and 1 Peter 2:11 admonish Christians to obey human authorities; but Romans 13:5 reminds us that our obedience must not violate our conscience. When the laws of God are contrary to the laws of man, then "[w]e ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). You see this exemplified not only in the midwives but also in Daniel and his friends (Dan. 1; 3; 6) and the apostles (Acts 4-5).⁶

Were the midwives lying to Pharaoh? Probably not.⁷ The babies were born before the midwives arrived because Shiphrah and Puah had told their assistants to be late! God blessed the two leading midwives for putting their own lives on the line in order to save the Jewish nation from extinction. However, He honored these two women in a strange way: He gave them children at a time when it was dangerous to have children! Perhaps all their children were daughters, or perhaps God protected their sons as He protected Moses. However, this blessing from God shows how precious children are to the Lord: He wanted to give these two women His very best reward, so He sent them children (Ps. 127:3).

Step #3—Drowning the male babies (Ex. 1:22). When Pharaoh discovered he'd been deceived, he changed his plan and commanded all his people to see to it that the Jewish male babies were drowned in the sacred Nile River. Pharaoh's police couldn't check up on every Jewish midwife,

but the Egyptian people could keep their eyes on the Jewish slaves and report when a boy was born. But one boy would be born that Pharaoh couldn't kill.

2. The deliverer born (Ex. 2:1-10)⁸

Amram and Jochebed were Moses' parents (6:20), and while the Exodus text emphasizes the faith of the mother, Hebrews 11:23 commends both the father and the mother for trusting God. Certainly it took faith for them to have normal marital relations during that dangerous time when Jewish babies were being killed. Moses became a great man of faith, and he learned it first from his godly parents. Amram and Jochebed already had two children: Miriam, who was the oldest, and Aaron, who was three years older than Moses (Ex. 7:7).

From the very first, Moses was seen to be "no ordinary child" (Acts 7:20, NIV; see Heb. 11:23),⁹ and it was evident that God had a special purpose for him. Believing this to be true, the parents defied Pharaoh's edict and kept their son alive. This wasn't easy to do since all the Egyptians were now Pharaoh's official spies, watching for babies to be drowned (Ex. 1:22).

Jochebed obeyed the letter of the law when she put Moses in the waters of the Nile, but certainly she was defying Pharaoh's orders in the way she did it. She was trusting the providence of God and God didn't fail her. When the princess came to the Nile to perform her religious ablutions, she saw the basket, discovered the baby, and heard him cry; and her maternal instincts told her to rescue the child and care for him.

God used a baby's tears to control the heart of a powerful princess, and He used Miriam's words to arrange for the baby's mother to raise the boy and get paid for it! The phrase "as weak as a baby" doesn't apply in the kingdom of

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God; for when the Lord wants to accomplish a mighty work, He often starts by sending a baby. This was true when He sent Isaac, Joseph, Samuel, John the Baptist, and especially Jesus. God can use the weakest things to defeat the mightiest enemies (1 Cor. 1:25-29). A baby's tears were God's first weapons in His war against Egypt.

The princess adopted Moses as her own son, which means that Moses had a favored position in the land and was given a special education for service in the government (Acts 7:22). In the Egyptian language, Moses means "born" or "son" and sounds like a Hebrew word that means "to draw out" (of the water). Years later, his name would remind Moses of the God who rescued him and did great things for him in Egypt. On more than one occasion, Moses would rescue his people because he trusted the Lord.

3. The deliverer prepared (Ex. 2:11-25)

Moses spent his first forty years (Acts 7:23) serving in the Egyptian bureaucracy. (Some students think he was being groomed to be the next pharaoh.) Egypt seems the least likely place for God to start training a leader, but God's ways are not our ways. In equipping Moses for service, God took several approaches.

Education. "And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22, NKJV). What did that involve? Egypt had a highly developed civilization for its time, particularly in the areas of engineering, mathematics, and astronomy. Thanks to their knowledge of astronomy, they developed an amazingly accurate calendar, and their engineers planned and supervised the construction of edifices that are still standing. Their priests and doctors were masters of the art of embalming, and their leaders were skilled in organization and administration. Visitors to Egypt today can't help but be im-

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pressed with the accomplishments of this ancient people. The servant of God should learn all he can, dedicate it to God, and faithfully serve God.

Failure (Ex. 2:11-14). Though some people were confused about his racial identity (v. 19), Moses knew that he was a Hebrew and not an Egyptian, and he couldn't help but identify with the plight of his suffering people. One day he made a courageous decision to help his people, even if it meant losing his noble position as the adopted son of the royal princess (Heb. 11:24-26). The pleasures¹⁰ and treasures of Egypt faded from view as he saw himself helping to liberate God's chosen people.

It's possible that the Egyptian officer wasn't just disciplining the Jewish slave but was beating him to death, because the Hebrew word can mean that, so when Moses interfered, he was probably saving a man's life. And, if the Egyptian officer turned on Moses, which is likely, then Moses was also defending his own life.

But if Moses was planning to free the Hebrews by killing the Egyptians one by one, he was in for a shock. The next day he discovered that the Egyptians were only part of the problem *because the Jews couldn't even get along with each other!* When he tried to reconcile the two Jews, they rejected his help! Even more, he learned that his secret was out and that Pharaoh was after his life. There was only one thing to do and that was to flee.

These two incidents reveal Moses as a compassionate man who was sincere in his motives but impetuous in his actions. Knowing this, you would never suspect that later he would be called "the meekest man on the earth" (Num. 12:3). Moses' failure to help free the Jews must have devastated him. That's why God took him to Midian and made him a shepherd for forty years. He had to learn that deliverance would come from God's hand, not Moses' hand (Acts 7:25;

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Ex. 13:3).

Solitude and humble service (Ex. 2:15-25). Moses became a fugitive and fled to the land of the Midianites, relatives of the Jews (Gen. 25:2). True to his courageous nature, he assisted the daughters of Reuel, the priest of Midian (Ex. 2:18), and this led to hospitality in their home and marriage with one of the daughters, Zipporah, who bore him a son.¹¹ Later, she would bear another son, Eliezer (18:1-4; 1 Chron. 23:15). Reuel ("friend of God") was also known as Jethro (Ex. 3:1; 18:12, 27), but Jethro ("excellence") may have been his title as priest rather than his given name.¹²

The man who was "mighty in word and deed" is now in the lonely pastures taking care of stubborn sheep, but that was just the kind of preparation he needed for leading a nation of stubborn people. Israel was God's special flock (Ps. 100:3) and Moses His chosen shepherd. Like Joseph's thirteen years as a slave in Egypt and Paul's three years' hiatus after his conversion (Gal. 1:16-17), Moses' forty years of waiting and working prepared him for a lifetime of faithful ministry. God doesn't lay hands suddenly on His servants but takes time to equip them for their work.

God's delays aren't evidence of unconcern, for He hears our groans, sees our plight, feels our sorrows, and remembers His covenant. What He has promised, He will perform, for He never breaks His covenant with His people. When the right time comes, God immediately goes to work.

4. The deliverer called (Ex. 3:1-4:17)

Moses spent forty years serving as a shepherd in Midian (Acts 7:23; Ex. 7:7), and during those many days and nights in the field, he no doubt meditated on the things of God and prayed for his people who were suffering in Egypt. It's significant that God calls people who are busy: Gideon was threshing grain (Jud. 6), Samuel was serving in the tabernacle

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(1 Sam. 3), David was caring for sheep (17:20), Elisha was plowing (1 Kings 19:19-21), four of the apostles were managing their fishing business (Mark 1:16-20), and Matthew was collecting taxes (Matt. 9:9). God has nothing good to say about laziness (Prov. 24:30-34; Matt. 25:26-27; 2 Thes. 3:10-12).

What Moses saw (Ex. 3:1-4). God can take an insignificant bush, ignite it, and turn it into a miracle; and that's what He wanted to do with Moses. Some see in the burning bush a picture of the nation of Israel: they are God's light in the world, persecuted but not consumed. But the burning bush was also a picture of what God had planned for Moses: he was the weak bush but God was the empowering fire (19:18; 24:17; Deut. 4:24; Jud. 13:20; Heb. 12:29); and with God's help, Moses could accomplish anything.

What Moses heard (Ex. 3:5-10). God spoke to Moses and assured him that He was the God of his fathers and that He felt the suffering of the Jews in Egypt. He was now ready to deliver them out of Egypt and lead them into the Promised Land, and Moses would be His chosen leader.¹³ God's statement "Behold, I will send you" must have astonished Moses. Why would God choose a failure?

What Moses did (Ex. 3:1-4:17). Moses should have rejoiced because God was at last answering prayer, and he should have submitted to God's will saying, "Here I am! Send me!" But instead, he argued with the Lord and tried to escape the divine call to rescue Israel from slavery. In Egypt, forty years before, Moses had acted like the impetuous horse and rushed ahead of God, but now he is acting like the stubborn mule and resisting God (Ps. 32:9). Moses gave five reasons why he couldn't accept God's call.

(1) *"I'm a nobody" (Ex. 3:11-12).* What Moses thought of himself, or what others thought of Moses, really wasn't important. God had spoken and that was all Moses needed

for assurance that he was the right man for the job. Had forty years of shepherding so extinguished the fire in his soul that he didn't think he could serve the Lord? Why was he looking at himself instead of looking by faith to the Lord? "I will be with you" is all the assurance God's servants need in order to succeed Gosh. 1:5; Isa. 41:10; 43:5).

(2) *"I don't know Your name"* (Ex. 3:13-22). As the representative of God, Moses had to be able to disclose His character to the Jewish people. Of course, God's name "Jehovah" had been known centuries ago (Gen. 4:26) and was familiar to the patriarchs (14:22; 15:1; 25:21-22; 28:13; 49:18). What Moses asked was, "What does Your name mean? What kind of a God are You?" God explained that the name Jehovah is a dynamic name, based on the Hebrew verb "to be" or "to become." He is the self-existent One who always was, always is, and always will be, the faithful and dependable God who calls Himself "I AM."¹⁴ Centuries later, Jesus would take the name "I AM" and complete it "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), "I am the light of the world" (8:12), "I am the true vine" (15:1), and so on.

The eternal God knows the end from the beginning, so He was able to tell Moses exactly what would happen when he returned to Egypt (Ex. 3:16-22). The elders of Israel would accept Moses as their leader and believe that God was about to deliver them. The king of Egypt would resist God's message and suffer the terrible judgments of God. The people of Israel would be delivered from the land and spoil the Egyptians and thus receive the wages they hadn't been paid during their years of slavery.

(3) *"The elders won't believe me"* (Ex. 4:1-9). "They will not believe" really means "I do not believe." Moses was concerned about his credentials before the Jewish elders, so God gave him three signs to convince the elders that he was truly God's chosen servant. "The Jews require a sign"

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(1 Cor. 1:22). From now on, Moses will experience God's power and work miracles.

(4) *"I'm not a fluent speaker"* (Ex. 4:10-12). Moses completely missed the message of God's name and God's miraculous power. "I AM" is all that we need in every circumstance of life, and it's foolish for us to argue, "I am not." If God can turn rods into serpents and serpents into rods, if He can cause and cure leprosy, and if He can turn water into blood, then He can enable Moses to speak His Word with power.¹⁵ Moses was making the mistake of looking at himself instead of looking to God (6:12). The God who made us is able to use the gifts and abilities He's given us to accomplish the tasks He assigns to us.

Was Moses manifesting an attitude of pride or true humility? Forty years before, he felt perfectly adequate to face the enemy and act on behalf of his people, but now he's backing off and professing himself to be a worthless failure. But humility isn't thinking poorly of ourselves; it's simply not thinking of ourselves at all but making God everything. The humble servant thinks only of God's will and God's glory, not his or her own inadequacy, success, or failure. Moses was clothing his pride and unbelief in a hollow confession of weakness.

(5) *"Somebody else can do it better"* (Ex. 4:13-17). "O Lord, please send someone else to do it" (v. 13, NIV). Moses calls Him "Lord" and yet refuses to obey His orders (Luke 6:46; Acts 10:14). Most of us understand that attitude because we've made the same mistake. If God isn't Lord of all, He isn't Lord at all.

In His anger, God appointed Aaron to be the spokesperson for Moses, but Aaron wasn't always a help to his brother. It was Aaron who cooperated with the people in making the golden calf (Ex. 32), and Aaron and his sister Miriam were critical of Moses and his wife and brought trouble to the

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camp (Num. 12). There's the suggestion in Exodus 4:14 that in accepting Aaron, Moses was confusing the Old Testament ministries; for Aaron was to be the priest and Moses the prophet. When God in His anger gives us what we selfishly want, that gift rarely turns out to be a blessing (Num. 11:33; Hosea 13:11). One of the most painful judgments God can send is to let His people have their own way.

Subsequent events proved that Moses was very capable of speaking God's words with mighty power, both to his own people and to the king of Egypt. As the history of Israel unfolds, you find Moses delivering some eloquent messages in the power of the Lord. The Book of Deuteronomy records his magnificent farewell speech.

The lesson is plain: God knows us better than we know ourselves, so we must trust Him and obey what He tells us to do. When we tell God our weaknesses, we aren't sharing anything He doesn't already know (Jud. 6:15; 1 Sam. 9:21; Jer. 1:6). The will of God will never lead you where the power of God can't enable you, so walk by faith in His promises.

5. The deliverer sent (Ex. 4:18-31)

When you've lived in a place for forty years, how do you go about packing up and moving elsewhere, especially when you're going to a place of danger? The text describes five encouragements God gave Moses as he sought to obey the will of God.

His father-in-law's blessing (Ex. 4:18). Moses couldn't leave without first informing his father-in-law and receiving his permission and blessing. However, there's no record that Moses told Jethro of his meeting with Jehovah and his call to deliver the people of Israel from bondage. All he told Jethro was that he wanted to visit Egypt to see if his family was still alive.

The promises of God (Ex. 4:19-23). As Moses stepped out by faith, God spoke to him and encouraged him. God told

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Moses not to be afraid to return to Egypt because his enemies were dead. Then He assured Moses that He would enable him to do the miraculous signs but that Pharaoh would only harden his heart and thereby invite more judgments from the Lord. Before Moses even arrived in Egypt, he knew he had a battle on his hands. It wouldn't be easy to convince Pharaoh to let his Jewish slaves go free.

God also assured Moses of His special love for Israel, His firstborn son (Jer. 31:9; Hosea 11:1). In the ancient world, the firstborn in every family had special rights and privileges, and God would see to it that Israel, His firstborn, would be redeemed and rewarded, while the firstborn of Egypt would be slain. God was reminding Moses that he was the servant of a great God who knew what He would do. The key to victory was faith in the Lord.

Zipporah's obedience (Ex. 4:24-26). Moses had neglected to circumcise his second son, Eliezer, and God struck Moses down with an illness that could have taken his life. We get the impression that when Moses had circumcised Gershom, his firstborn, Zipporah had been appalled by the ceremony and therefore had resisted having Eliezer circumcised. Moses let her have her way and this displeased the Lord. After all, Moses couldn't lead the people of Israel if he was disobedient to one of the fundamental commandments of the Lord (Gen. 17:10-14). Even if the Jews didn't know it, God knew about his disobedience, and He was greatly displeased.

The servant of the Lord must be careful to "manage his own family well" (1 Tim. 3:4, NIV) if he expects to enjoy the blessings of the Lord; for "[i]f anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (v. 5, NIV)

Aaron's arrival (Ex. 4:27-28). At Horeb (another name for Mt. Sinai; 19:10-11; Deut. 4:10), Moses met his elder brother Aaron who would be his companion and associate for the

next forty years. When it comes to serving the Lord, two are better than one (Ecc. 4:9). Jesus sent out His disciples in pairs (Mark 6:7) and God called Paul and Barnabas together to take the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 13:2). In spite of his faults, and we all have a few, Aaron ministered along with Moses and became the founder of the priesthood in Israel.

The nation's faith (Ex. 4:29-31). Moses had expressed fear that the Jewish elders wouldn't believe his message or accept his leadership, but they did, and so did the rest of the nation when they saw the demonstration of God's power in the signs. On hearing that God was concerned for them and was about to rescue them, they bowed in grateful worship. Worship is the logical response of God's people to God's grace and goodness.

This was the lull before the storm. God was about to declare war on Egypt and Pharaoh, and life for the Jews would become more difficult before it would get better.