

# BASKET CASE

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## Wild (Part 1) | Exodus 1 & 2

### Exodus is OUR Story

I am excited to be starting with you today a multi-month study of the biblical Book of Exodus. As the title of our series suggests, this book we're going to explore is WILDLY important and you and I will gain so much from walking through it together. Before we plunge into the actual text today, let me just say a few things by way of introduction.

This is a BIG book. We are not going to be able to walk through it verse-by-verse as we often do, so I encourage you to read the text in advance. We'll publish the readings on our website and you'll get a lot more from this study if you do that work. We've broken down the big book into bite-sized chunks, so it's doable.

We've also put together some STUDY GUIDE SHEETS to give you some extra handles on the content we'll explore. You can pick up those sheets each week or find them online. They'll be useful for personal reflection or for conversation with others.

Finally, don't miss an episode of this study. Why do I say that? Well, let me suggest three reasons at the start, and then return to a fourth at the end, with due credit to my friend Mike Woodruff for some of these insights.<sup>1</sup> Again, I promise that we'll get to the biblical text for this morning but I want to introduce this series by explaining why understanding the Book of Exodus so deeply matters.

First of all, understanding this book matters because the story of Exodus is OUR story. Let me invite you to think about that. Have you ever tried to build a peaceful, predictable, altogether pleasurable, perfectly patterned life for yourself – like all the advertisers suggest is possible if you try hard enough or spend well enough? How's that project going?! I wonder about that because my own life has been pretty non-linear and unpredictable and often confounding. It's been full of deep disappointments, and agonizing suspense and sudden surprises. It's been crammed with conflicts and choices and challenges. I've been wrecked and redeemed, broken and blessed in ways I could never have imagined or designed. Maybe it's been that way or is that way for you, because despite all our attempts to tame or domesticate it, life is WILD.

The Book of Exodus trains us for this reality. It teaches us to expect the unexpected and to not give up when things are bad and to keep trusting God when the trail twists and turns or reaches an apparent dead end. The stories of Exodus read like Bear Grylls meets Lara Croft meets Indiana Jones meets River Monsters meets Naked & Afraid. As we'll discover, the journey of God's people in Exodus is WILD.

But Exodus is OUR story in another sense too. It doesn't just mirror our individual pilgrimage through life; it is the storyline from which emerged so many of the communal values that undergird much of life today. When secular people blithely

mention having a “burning bush” experience or a “mountaintop” moment, they are drawing – consciously or not – from the stories of Exodus. When African slaves or sex-trafficked people have dreamed of “escaping Egypt” they have been channeling Exodus. When grateful people speak of receiving a good like “manna from heaven” or exhausted people speak of reaching “the Promised Land” of retirement, it’s the concepts of this book from which they are pulling. The moral convictions that we should not murder or steal or commit adultery or bear false witness or covet or dishonor our parents did not just arise spontaneously. They came from the book of Exodus. Pretty WILD.

### **Exodus is an Endurance Guide for Hard Passages**

This book is also worth our careful study because Exodus is an endurance guide for the hard passages of life. By nature, I’m a fairly resilient person. I wake most mornings feeling reasonably optimistic about the day. I tend to get back up and into the game when I’ve been knocked down. But when I think about a group of people who eat my lunch when it comes to personal resilience and positive contribution over a really long period, I think of the Jewish people. My friend, Mike, points out that though the Jewish people constitute only 0.2 percent of the world’s population in almost every field from science and medicine to arts and economics, “they punch way above their weight.” On a planet where most companies don’t make it more than 30 years and most nations don’t survive more than 200 years, the Jewish people have endured as a cohesive, contributing nation despite brutal attempts to wipe them out for 3,000 years.

What’s been their secret? Many scholars point to THIS BOOK as a big part of the answer. As an identity-shaping and character-defining document, the Book of Exodus outstrips even *Plato’s Republic* and the *Declaration of Independence* in its influence. It has been for the Jews the spiritual story that has helped ground and guide them through almost unimaginably difficult exiles, persecutions and holocausts. So, if you are looking for a resource to strengthen the vision and values you need to endure the hard passages, the bleak wilderness periods of your life, this book is going to be of timely and treasured help to you.

### **Exodus is an Epic Introduction or Re-Introduction to God**

Wheaton College president, Phil Ryken, calls Exodus an epic tale of “fire, sand, wind and water.”<sup>2</sup> It’s not surprising that Hollywood has made multiple movies from the stories in its pages. But more importantly, Exodus is an epic introduction to the magnificent heart, the awesome power, and the mysterious providence of the very great GOD.

Let me be as blunt as I can be: Exodus will reintroduce you to God. If you’ve become a bit unclear about his character, or his capacity to transform life, or the creative methods he might use to advance his purpose in YOUR life, this book is for you. There’s ONE MORE reason to study it that I’ll touch on at the end, but let’s jump into the story, shall we?

## God's People Suffer & Long for a Savior

If you open up in your Bible to Exodus chapter 1, you'll see that Exodus is the sequel to the amazing story of Joseph, the Jewish slave who became chief-of-staff to the Pharaoh of Egypt – the greatest superpower of the second millennia B.C. As we covered in a series entitled, JOE, a few years back, God used a series of calamities to shape a somewhat spoiled and selfish kid into a virtuous and valiant leader who rescued not only the families of his eleven brothers but also a couple of million Egyptians from the terrible famine that was starving the Middle East. This is how the children of the famous Genesis patriarch Jacob (whom God renamed "Israel") left the land of Palestine and came to live in Egypt (Exo 1:1-5).

The story continues in verse 6: **Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them (Exo 1:6-7).** Exactly how the children of Israel stopped being viewed as celebrities and started being viewed by their fellow Egyptians as more like we view cicadas doesn't get spelled out, but the next verses tell us this is what happened.

**Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become far too numerous for us (Exo 1:8-9).** It's a good reminder that most of us only get to surf so long on the wave of good or goodwill that the people who came before us may have generated. Every generation has to reestablish its own character and credibility. **Come [said the new king], we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies... So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh (Exo 1:10-11).**

**But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread (Exo 1:12).** It was like we've seen so often throughout history. The greatest threat to the Church is comfort not persecution. When the Church has been oppressed in places like Rome or the Soviet Union, this very pressure drives believers together and forges fresh resolve and fruitfulness. **So the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields;** And then just to underline the weight of the suffering, Exodus repeats: **In all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly (Exo 1:12-14).**

Have you ever been through one of those seasons in life where you think: *"This is really bad. It can't get worse."* Then it does. Exodus is a template for this. If you go on and read the next verses, you learn how Egypt's pharaoh orders two Hebrew midwives – women named **Shiphrah and Puah** – to start executing some of the Jewish baby boys. These two women, however, exercise the first act of principled civil disobedience recorded (to my knowledge) in history. They spare the kids; and God blesses them for their courage and devotion to Him above all earthly authorities and expands their

families (Exo 1:15-21). But chapter 1 ends as circumstances turn from bad to worse. **Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live" (Exo 1:22).**

Let me pause for a moment here and make an observation I hope you are noting. The Bible is not a book about some wispy heaven or some disembodied spirituality or some simple pathway to health, wealth and prosperity that allows us to bypass challenges and suffering. If you've been following the story so far, you're getting reminded that the Bible is a manual for living in a world of real SIN and struggles -- a world where your past contributions get too quickly forgotten... and you get pressured to work ruthlessly hard... and insecure people are threatened by your strength... and horrible things happen even to innocent kids... and where it is only natural to long for a Savior.

Exodus chapter 2 introduces us to a figure who will be a savior of sorts. The chapter begins: **Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman [named Jochebed], and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. 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. His sister [Miriam] stood at a distance to see what would happen to him. 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. She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him.**

I just want us to note, once again, the stunningly significant, compellingly courageous, history-altering role that women continue to play in God's story of salvation. If you've ever been told or made to feel like the Bible or God's plan is mainly about and for men, then Exodus (and a lot of other scriptures) will tell you otherwise. It's hard to miss the message here that the main redemptive actors in the story so far are Shiprah and Puah, Jochebed and Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter and her attendants.

We're getting tight on time so let me summarize what happens next and encourage you to read the rest of chapter 2 yourself. The baby in the basket is a child who will be given the name "MOSES" -- from the Hebrew verb which means "to draw out of the water." Though born a Jewish slave, he will be raised as the son of Pharaoh who, in the Egyptian mind was thought to be a god. Aware of his secret dual identity, Moses develops a heart of compassion toward the suffering and bondage of the Jewish people. **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. Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand (Exo 2:11-12).**

Like most of our sins, this one was more visible than Moses imagined. Pharaoh found out about it, realized that Moses was, in fact, a Jew and sought to kill him. Fearing for his own life now, Moses fled from Egypt to the land of Midian, east of Egypt in the Arabian desert. At some point, he finds himself at a well and observes some surly shepherds bullying a group of girls who'd come to draw water. Again, Moses' compassion and sense of justice flared. The text says that **Moses got up and came to their rescue and watered their flock (Exo 2:17).**

If you've ever had someone stand up to defend your kids against harm, then you won't be surprised that this act of heroism endears Moses to the girls' father, a man known as Reuel – or more commonly as Jethro – a notable local shepherd and priest. Jethro takes the young refugee into his home, allows him to marry his daughter, Zipporah, and for the next forty years Moses learns and practices the art of shepherding and protecting Jethro's great flock. Chapter 2 comes to an end with these words: **During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God (Exo 2:23).**

We'll stop there for today. I've titled today's message BASKET CASE because of the double-entendre in that phrase which well describes the figure of Moses. Carried from infancy by a basket of grace, Moses was also something of a basket case himself. He struggled to get clear on his identity. He wrestled with how to use his great passions – sometimes using them constructively (as in rescuing those girls) and sometimes destructively (as in killing that Egyptian). From the name he gave to his firstborn son (Exo 2:22), it's clear that Moses felt, when he was in Midian, like a stranger in a strange land, a failure whom God had forgotten.

Sometimes, we feel this way, don't we? We are very conscious of our failures and the gap between what we planned and what has turned out. We find it hard to believe that God is not done with us -- that he will use every experience we have to prepare us to be of greater use to his purposes. We can't yet see that we are still being carried in the basket of his grace. But we are. I encourage you to believe that for yourself today. I encourage you to share that hope with someone who may be despairing about their past, their present, or their future.

### **Exodus Points Us to Jesus our Ultimate Deliverer**

I said at the start that there are several reasons that understanding Exodus truly matters. I've told you something of the story of Moses and in weeks ahead we'll learn a lot more about him. But the ultimate point of Exodus isn't Moses.

Who else have you heard of who was born a Jew at a time when a cruel Gentile leader oppressed his people? What other child's birth was greeted by a King's edict that all the male babies of a certain age be destroyed? What other figure was famously bedded down in an unusual basket or spent time in Egypt while he was a child? Who else was not only blessed by an unusually courageous mother but trained by a man

who was not his biological father? What other very significant person was drawn up out of the water to occupy a special role in history? Who else left exalted positions at the right hand of a throne to suffer with and for people and to set them free? Who else fulfilled the role of shepherd, prophet, priest and king? Who besides Moses matches ALL these characteristics – so much so that it’s, frankly, **WILD**. You almost wonder if the whole story of Exodus wasn’t brilliantly designed by a Higher Power to point us all to Him?

Say His name with me. JESUS. As we journey with the people of Exodus in days ahead, may you and I come to see Him more clearly, love Him more dearly, and follow Him more nearly, day-by-day.

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Woodruff, Christ Church Lake Forest, sermon series on Exodus

<sup>2</sup> Phil Ryken, *Exodus*, p. 15