

LESSON 11: MOSES (COVENANT WITH ONE NATION I)

Instruction for Faith Educators

For Basic Level / Age 7	:	Cover points 1 to 14
For Intermediate Level / Age 10	:	Cover points 1 to 14
For Advanced Level / Age 13	:	Cover points 1 to 18

Revision from previous lesson:

In the previous lesson, we learned that God had established His covenant with Abraham by promising to bless him, and that this promise was fulfilled through his son Isaac, and subsequently through Isaac's son Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons, and as an entire family, they ended up living comfortable lives in Egypt because God saved them from the famine through Joseph (the eleventh son). In this lesson, we will learn what happened to their descendants in Egypt.

Current lesson:

1. When Jacob died, Joseph and his brothers buried him in Canaan, but they all returned to Egypt to continue living there (Genesis 50:5-14). Eventually, Joseph and all his brothers, together with all the people of their generation, died in Egypt (Exodus 1:1-6). Their descendants in Egypt were many (Exodus 1:7), and they were living very comfortable lives because Pharaoh remembered what Joseph had done for their nation.

But eventually, there arose a new Pharaoh who either did not remember Joseph or did not care about the history of the nation (Exodus 1:8). This new ruler saw the Israelites in Egypt as a threat to their nation because of how numerous the Israelite population was in their land (Exodus 1:9). It is estimated that the number of Israelites had grown from 70 people (Joseph's brothers and their family members) to about two million people now. According to Scripture, there were at about 600,000 men, not counting their wives and children (Exodus 12:37). What would happen if Egypt went to war one day and the Israelites there sided with their enemies? This new ruler started an era of oppression and violence in Egypt. The new Pharaoh forced the Israelites to become slaves, using their hard labour as brick makers to erect vast structures in two cities in Egypt and as workers in the fields (Exodus 1:11-14). They had to toil endlessly and were hardly given enough to eat. Later on, Pharaoh also commanded for every newly born Hebrew (Israelite) baby boy to be thrown into the Nile river (Exodus 1:22). This infanticide was meant to reduce population growth among the Israelites. But despite these efforts, nothing could stop God's plan to build a mighty nation out of the Abraham's descendants (Genesis 12:1-3).

2. God actually allowed the Israelites to be forced into slavery so that they could be separated from the Egyptian society. Otherwise, they were so comfortable in Egypt that they would have happily assimilated themselves into the Egyptian way of life and forget their identity as the People of God. In fact, by this time, they had already adopted the superstitions and idolatries of Egypt and sinned against God. They used to be upper class people (similar to aristocrats) who were now subject to daily hard labour. Their bodies were not ready or

trained for such work. But precisely because of this, slavery was the only way to make them anxious to leave Egypt. God did not want to force them out of Egypt, and wanted them to desire to leave themselves, so that they could rejoice about getting out of a land that was not their own. Meanwhile, the Israelites cried out to God for help (Exodus 3:7).

There are times in our lives when God allows our sins and our disobedience to cause us suffering. This is so that we will want to stop this sin and disobedience. If life continues to be free of trouble despite our sin and disobedience, it would be difficult for us to want to stop sinning. God may allow suffering as a consequence of our wrong choices in order to make us sick of sin and disobedience. If He does that, it is only because He loves us and wants us to return to the correct path.

3. Jochebed was a Levite woman who gave birth to her youngest child, Moses, during the time when Pharaoh ordered for newly born Hebrew infants to be drowned. She hid Moses for three months, but found that she could do so no longer. She waterproofed a basket, hid the baby in it and let it flow along the Nile River where he was eventually found by Pharaoh's own daughter who happened to be bathing there. Pharaoh's daughter, realising that she was looking at a Hebrew baby, took pity on the baby.

Miriam (the baby's elder sister), who had been hiding in a distance, came up to Pharaoh's daughter and suggested that she be allowed to help get a Hebrew nurse to suckle the baby. When Pharaoh's daughter agreed, Miriam quickly went and brought her mother (Jochebed) who instantaneously was hired by Pharaoh's daughter to take care of the baby. Jochebed nursed her own son until he was sufficiently old, and then she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who raised him as her own son. Moses therefore grew up as a prince of Egypt, but never forgot that he was of Hebrew descent. (Exodus 2:1-10)

4. One day, in a fit of anger, Moses killed an Egyptian who had beaten a Hebrew slave. Obviously, Moses felt for his own people. When Pharaoh learned about this, he wanted to execute Moses, but Moses ran far away to another land called Midian. There, he married a woman called Zipporah, who gave birth to a son named Gershom.
5. Moses helped his father-in-law Jethro to tend to his flock for 40 years. On a particular day, he brought his flock to a mountain called Horeb. There, God appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush which was not consumed by the fire. God began by introducing Himself to Moses, who probably did not know God because he was raised as an Egyptian and most likely grew up praying to the Egyptian gods: "I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6).
6. God said to Moses that He had taken note of the misery and cry of His oppressed people in Egypt, and He wanted to deliver them. He thus instructed Moses to return to Egypt, to gather all the elders of Israel there, and to go to Pharaoh and demand that they be released from Egypt to go to the desert and offer sacrifice to God. But God also told Moses that Pharaoh would not let the people go unless something drastic was done to compel Pharaoh to release them.

Moses had serious doubts about God's command to return to Egypt, as he felt that the Israelites would not believe that he, a prince of Egypt (who was now an outlaw), would be

sent by God to save them. Despite three miraculous signs that God had given him as evidence for them, Moses still doubted and was fearful, and therefore, used his verbal ineloquence as an excuse to be exempted from this task. God was angry at Moses' lack of faith and promised Moses that his elder brother, Aaron, would be there to be his mouthpiece. (Exodus 3:1 to 4:17)

7. Moses lived a large part of his adult life in disgrace because of the crime he had committed in Egypt. As a result, he was in Midian because he was a fugitive of Egypt. There, he worked for many years as a shepherd for his father-in-law Jethro. This was hardly a luxurious or glamorous way of life. But it was also an important duration of training for him, as God prepared him for the next phase of his life to lead His people out of Egypt to the Promised Land.

There are many seasons in our lives when it seems like God is not doing anything in particular, and that we are just going through mundane routines with nothing exciting to look forward to. But if God is going to commission us for any greater work than the one we are already doing, fidelity to the mundane tasks that we are currently doing is of utmost importance. Our mundane routines cultivate in us a discipline of mind, heart, and spirit, which is precisely what is required of a person who is called by God to do greater works.

8. It would also seem that Moses might not have been the best candidate for this task of delivering the people of Israel. He lacked confidence and could not even speak eloquently! But God does not necessarily call the best man to do a work for Him. He may not even call a person who wants the job! He calls whom He wills, and that person could be us, at which time, it would be up to us to respond willingly in obedience to His call. You may not be the most skilled person for the task that God calls you to fulfil. But just as God sent Aaron to be the mouthpiece of Moses, if you are willing to go, He will send you help to get the job done.
9. Reluctantly, Moses returned to Egypt and had an audience with Pharaoh. He demanded that Pharaoh set the Israelites free from slavery. But Pharaoh did not want to lose the slaves, as their free labour was very important for the economy of Egypt. As a result of his refusal, awful things began to happen in Egypt. God sent ten plagues in total, one after another. Before each plague, Moses warned Pharaoh what was going to happen, saying that these disasters were going to be sent by God to convince him to release the Israelites. The first nine plagues were water being turned to blood (Exodus 7:17-18), multitude of frogs (Exodus 8:1-4), swarms of lice (Exodus 8:12-13), pest of flies (Exodus 8:20-22), plague of cattle or livestock (Exodus 9:1-4), epidemic of boils (Exodus 9:8-9), torrential hailstorm (Exodus 9:22-23), attack of locusts (Exodus 10:4-5), and darkness for three days (Exodus 10:21-22).
10. The tenth plague was the worst (read Exodus 12:1-36). It involved the death of all the firstborn children and animals among the Egyptians. On the day of the tenth plague, every Israelite family was instructed to slaughter a lamb or a goat which had to be a one-year-old male without defect (smaller families could share with their neighbours). The blood of this animal was to be applied onto the doorposts and lintels of the Israelite house using a bunch of hyssop plants (Exodus 12:22). That night, the flesh of the animal was to be roasted and the family was to eat it in a hurry together with unleavened bread (i.e. bread without yeast).

As they ate, they were to be fully dressed to anticipate their escape from Egypt: they had to have their belts around their waists, their sandals on their feet, and their staff in their hands (Exodus 12:11). God had also instructed that after this night, the Israelites were required to observe this as a feast day every year throughout every generation in His honour (Exodus 12:14-20).

11. In this tenth plague, Pharaoh's own son was also killed, which resulted in him conceding to set the Israelites free. But as it turned out, Pharaoh very quickly changed his mind and sent his army in chariots to recapture the Israelites as they ran away. First-century historian Josephus, in his *Antiquities*, claimed that Pharaoh had 600 chariots, with 50,000 horsemen, and 200,000 footmen, with him, all armed.
12. Read Exodus 14:5-31. When the Israelites saw Pharaoh's army coming after them, they were afraid, but a pillar of fire and cloud separated them from the Egyptian army. When they were stuck at the Red Sea, Moses held his staff out over the water at God's command, and throughout the night, a strong wind divided the sea, forming a path of dry land with a wall of water on both sides. The Israelites walked through the path with ease. The Egyptian army attempted to pursue them, but God clogged the wheels of their chariots and caused them to go into a panic. When the waters started covering the path again, Pharaoh and his entire army were destroyed. The Israelites left Egypt on the same day that they left their homes. Immediately after crossing the Red Sea, they were in the wilderness (desert) of Sinai. They saw the power of God and put their faith in Him. They sang a song of praise to the Lord (Exodus 15:1-19).
13. As they went out into the wilderness of Sinai, the people had their cattle and sheep as well as their unleavened dough with them (Exodus 12:34, 39). In the desert, they baked unleavened bread for themselves to eat. Unleavened bread was a symbol of their haste when they left Egypt.

The firstborn of every Israelite family, including their firstborn herd and flock, were consecrated (offered) to God to remember their escape from Egypt (Exodus 13:1-16). Without God's help in protecting them, their firstborn would not have survived the night of the Passover.

14. They also had with them the bones of Joseph, the son of Jacob. Before he died, Joseph had requested that they should take his bones back to Canaan when the Israelites returned there one day (Exodus 13:19, Genesis 50:25).
15. Actually, the exile of the Israelites in Egypt had already been foretold by God to their ancestor Abraham.

Genesis 15:13-14: "Then Yahweh said to Abram, 'Know this for certain, that your descendants will be exiles in a land not their own, and be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years. But I shall bring judgement on the nation that enslaves them and after this they will leave, with many possessions.'"

(The reference to time in terms of years is not to be taken literally, as it could very probably refer to the number of generations, or possibly just a rounded up figure.)

16. The first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote that from the time Abraham and his descendants were in Canaan until the time Joseph's family relocated to Egypt was 215 years, and from that point onwards, the Israelites were in Egypt for another 215 years until they were delivered from slavery. (Although Exodus 12:40 says "The time that the Israelites spent in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years", earliest Old Testament manuscripts said "The time that the Israelites spent in Egypt and Canaan was four hundred and thirty years.")
17. When God presented Himself to Moses in the form of a burning bush, it caught Moses' attention and he did not ignore it. He took the initiative to approach God to find out what this holy fire was actually about. As it turned out, Moses' experience with the burning bush was an intimate encounter with God. It was the beginning of a friendship with a God who was now introducing Himself to Moses. More than mere fuzzy feelings, this encounter transformed Moses' life and thrust him into a vocation that he embraced for the rest of his life without turning back.

In many ways, in the course of our lifetimes, God makes His presence known to us, at times in more apparent ways than at other times. No matter how subtle or obvious His "appearances" are, our hearts need to be open to such potentially life-changing encounters so that where a "burning bush" appears, we do not miss out on it. Such encounters allow for us to have conversations with God, to know Him in a more intimate way. They are God's way of drawing us into His life.

However, we also have to be aware that these encounters are not meant to give us an emotional high. Even if they can sometimes be emotional experiences, what is more important is that they should result in a deep transformation within us. Moses' burning bush experience resulted in him being sent out for a specific mission. Each burning bush experience is bound to come with a mandate, a task for which we are set apart to participate in the mission of God and His Church in the world.

18. Did this event of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea ever really happen? Since the 1970s, secular scholars studying Christian Scriptures have really been attempting to reduce the Bible into a myth. Scholars such as Jonathan Van Seter and Thomas L. Thompson, among many others, have come to expound the belief that the personalities found in the patriarchal narratives of the Bible did not actually exist. In other words, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, and many other such figures are purely fictional stories of "heroes" that were originally meant to boost the morale of those who believed in them and to provide an identity for the Jews and the Christians.

Generally, if such fictional stories (also called "myths") are composed in order to boost the morale of their audience, these figures would be described in impeccable terms. They would be perfect and flawless, and nothing about their life accounts would be embarrassing. But let us look at patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. Abraham slept with his maid to produce an heir, and this moral problem caused a ruckus in his family. Isaac, as a father, who was a bad judge of character, favouring the son who had no sense of destiny over the one who was actually concerned about his future. Jacob was a liar who cheated his brother Esau of his birthright. Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob and his favourite of the

twelve sons, was an arrogant braggard. Moses was a reluctant leader who was ineloquent in his speech and was not always totally obedient to God. If these figures had been fabricated purely to inspire confidence and faith, they were, honestly, not that energising.

Furthermore, stories that were created purely for the purpose of inspiration and identity, even if they were created based on true characters, tended to be sanitised over time so that by the time they found their way into any literature, the character portrayal would be flawless and perfectly worthy of imitation. But the Old Testament, especially the accounts of these patriarchal figures, do not seem to be that way. Their imperfections and flaws seem to have been preserved rather than hidden. If anything, their stories inspire gratitude for God's love, grace, and mercy, more than confidence in the men that they tell about. They teach us that God is faithful even when mankind is flawed, sinful, and imperfect.

Therefore, when questions are asked such as whether the Exodus actually occurred, or whether the Old Testament patriarchs actually existed, perhaps the fixation of such questions rests on the wrong protagonist. The important question is, perhaps, not about whether these figures existed and are therefore worthy of belief, but rather, whether God is faithful and able to use even the weakest among all men for the fulfilment of His will. There is better sense in believing these patriarchal figures to be real, rather than fabricated, because the portrayals of their flaws are humanly realistic; but to obsess with that is to miss the point of their life accounts.

The scholars of literature, scientists, and archaeologists who doubt the existence of these characters base their conclusions on scientific evidence such as archaeological findings. Different archaeologists have found or not found different things, and their findings have over the decades led to different conclusions. In time to come, they may or may not discover further evidence for the events described in these patriarchal books. For example, the US National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) in 2010 claimed that their computer simulations demonstrated that a strong east wind could have been blowing through the night that might have pushed the waters of the Red Sea in the way that was described in Exodus. To be sure, we should let the scientists do their work. Archaeologists will continue to keep busy with their discoveries. But as Christians, we need to steady ourselves in the knowing that these events took place at least thousands of years ago, and that evidence may or may not exist for them. Even where evidence does exist, it may not be strong given the erosion brought about by the impositions of time. Therefore, the following maxim must hold true: "An absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." Where the secular scholars say that there is no reason to believe in these events unless convincing evidence is found, we say it is more logical to hold that there is reason to believe unless convincing evidence is found to prove otherwise.



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