

# God's Presence and Sustaining Grace

## *Exodus 1–2*

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### **Archaeological Moment: The World Behind Exodus 1**

Before we open Exodus tonight, it helps to know something about the world these chapters are describing — because the more you understand that world, the more the text comes alive.

Three ancient people groups are important here. The first are the Hyksos — a Semitic people of the same general ethnic stock as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Hyksos actually invaded Egypt and controlled the southern region, known as Upper Egypt, for several hundred years before the Egyptians eventually defeated and expelled them around 1550–1525 BC. The Hebrews were not the same tribe as the Hyksos, but they were of the same people group — and in the aftermath of that conflict, the Egyptians had every reason to view them with deep suspicion.

The second group is known as the Habiru — sometimes spelled Hapiru or Apiru, a term meaning roughly “the dusty ones,” carrying connotations of outlaws, raiders, mercenaries, servants, and slaves. It was a word used to describe landless laborers living on the margins of established society. Many scholars believe the Hebrews would have been seen through this lens as well.

The third group, of course, is Israel itself — and archaeology has something to say here too. We have images and grave sites from this period that confirm the kind of brutal labor conditions Exodus describes. The bones tell the story. The slavery of Exodus 1 was real, and it was ruthless.

Keep all of that in mind as we read tonight.

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### **The Book of Exodus and the Word “And”**

The book of Exodus is one of the most important books of the Bible. At a basic level, it moves through three great movements: the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, the establishment of God's covenant — that defining, governing relationship between God and his people — and the construction of the tabernacle. You could also read it as a bifid structure: nineteen chapters

of narrative about how God brought his people out of bondage and constituted them as a nation, followed by the covenant itself beginning in chapter 20, where the stories give way almost entirely to law — the terms of relationship, the regulations for worship, the instructions for the tabernacle, even the design of the priests' garments. Or, more simply, the first half of Exodus is about God's action toward us; the second half is about our right response — worship — toward God.

What is remarkable is that Exodus does not stand alone. From Exodus 19 through Leviticus and into Numbers 2, the people of Israel are camped at Mount Sinai for thirteen months. They are learning what it means to be God's people — many of them not ethnic Hebrews at all, having joined Israel in the exodus from Egypt. They are learning the stories, having the covenant renewed, learning how to approach God in worship. They are getting oriented to an entirely new way of life.

And if you widen the lens further, to include Leviticus and Numbers — the books we will be moving into later this year — you find that Exodus opens out into the great themes of economic responsibility, land stewardship, the radical reset of the Year of Jubilee, and the standards of right living that formed the backbone of Israel's common life.

But Exodus is more than even this. It is the redemption story of the Old Testament. Everything in Israel's faith is tied to this event — the plagues, the Red Sea, Sinai, the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant. And the book ends with the glory of God filling the tabernacle, the visible, luminous presence of God dwelling among his people. For us, Exodus sets the stage for everything we believe about Jesus Christ and what he has done for us. Without Exodus, we do not fully understand the cross.

Knowing all of this makes it a little startling that the book begins with the word *and*.

“*These are the names of the sons of Israel who came into Egypt with Jacob; each came with his household.*” (Exodus 1:1, ESV)

It is an underwhelming opening, grammatically speaking. The Hebrew title of the book is actually taken from this first line — *Shemot*, meaning “Names,” from the phrase *ve’eleh shemot benei Yisrael*, “and these are the names of the sons of Israel.” That opening *and* is a connector. It reaches back. It says: this story is not starting from scratch. It is picking up a thread.

The thread it picks up runs all the way back to God's creation of the world, to the fall of man, to God's purposeful covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — a covenant whose promise was that through this family the whole world would be blessed. That blessing, followed through the whole arc of Scripture, is the blessing of life: a knowledge of how to live now, and the gift of relationship with God that extends beyond the now into eternity. It begins with the

promises given to the patriarchs — a land, a nation, a people — and it finds its fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus.

The *and* of Exodus 1:1 links us to all of that.

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## The Mystery of Egypt

Genesis ends with a haunting image:

“*So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.*” (Genesis 50:26, ESV)

Joseph — the providentially appointed one, the dreamer, the one through whom God had preserved his people — is entombed in a foreign land. And with that, the curtain falls on Genesis, and a question hangs in the air: what will become of this family?

If you have been reading Genesis carefully, you know that every family in the book has a tendency to fracture. Will the family of Jacob hold together, far from home, surrounded by the most powerful culture in the ancient world? Will they remember God’s covenant? Will they retain their identity as the children of Abraham, or will they be absorbed into Egypt — their distinctiveness dissolved, their story forgotten?

On my reading, two things God used to hold this family together through the long silence between Genesis and Exodus are worth pausing over. The first is Jacob’s blessing — spoken over his sons before his death, a blessing that recounted what God had done, declared contentment in him, and looked forward to his promises. I believe that blessing functioned like an anchor, knitting this family to their God and to each other across generations. The second is the written record — the names, the genealogies, the stories that are rehearsed at the opening of Exodus 1. These were not incidental. They were the means by which a community in exile preserved its memory and its identity.

According to the chronology I find most persuasive, the Abrahamic covenant was given around 2000 BC. Jacob’s family entered Egypt around 1750 BC. The exodus itself came around 1400 BC. That is three and a half centuries — and all of it in silence, as far as the biblical narrative is concerned.

And yet:

“*But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.*” (Exodus 1:7, ESV)

God had something to do with that.

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## The Anatomy of Slavery

The growth of Israel in Egypt was, from Pharaoh's perspective, a threat — especially given the memory of the Hyksos and the general Egyptian suspicion of Semitic peoples. And so the text pivots sharply:

*“Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, ‘Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.’” (Exodus 1:8–10, ESV)*

What follows in the text is a portrait of slavery that deserves careful attention, because the Bible is doing something more here than recording historical events. It is giving us an anatomy of oppression — and the picture it draws is one the New Testament will return to again and again as a picture of what sin does to human souls.

Notice what the text shows us. Slavery begins with a mental component — “let us deal shrewdly with them.” Oppression works first in the mind. It keeps the oppressed disoriented, uncertain of their own strength, unable to imagine freedom. The goal is passivity and containment.

*“Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses.” (Exodus 1:11, ESV)*

Slavery results in affliction. It results in the carrying of heavy burdens — not burdens freely chosen, but burdens imposed, crushing, endless. The archaeological evidence from the graves of laborers in this period is sobering: the physical toll of this kind of work is written into the bones.

*“But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves.” (Exodus 1:12–13, ESV)*

Slavery results in rejection. The very vitality of the people becomes a source of dread and contempt in the eyes of their oppressors. And the response to that dread is ruthlessness — a relentless, grinding cruelty.

*“And made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.” (Exodus 1:14, ESV)*

Slavery results in a bitter life. A life without meaning, without peace, without rest. And it ends, as Pharaoh’s final decree makes clear, in death:

*“Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.” (Exodus 1:22, ESV)*

The first genocide recorded in Scripture. Gather it all together: a blinded mind, affliction, heavy burdens, rejection, bitterness, the absence of peace, death. This is the picture the Bible paints of slavery — and it is not accidental that this becomes, throughout the rest of Scripture, one of the primary images for what sin does to human beings.

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## **Moses: A Man in the Wrong Moment**

Into this world, chapter 2 introduces Moses — born a Hebrew, adopted into Pharaoh’s household, raised in the palace, educated in the finest traditions of Egyptian learning. He did not know firsthand the weight of the slave’s burden. But he knew who he was.

*“One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.” (Exodus 2:11–12, ESV)*

Perhaps Moses thought this single act of violent justice would be the spark his people needed — that they would recognize him as their deliverer and rise. Instead, the next day he finds two Hebrews fighting one another, and when he intervenes, the response cuts him to the bone:

*“Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” (Exodus 2:14, ESV)*

Moses flees Egypt. This onetime prince, this man who had lived his entire life with every advantage, becomes a shepherd in Midian — the most scorned occupation in the ancient Near East. Whatever vision he had carried for his life, whatever sense of calling or purpose, it has collapsed entirely. He is alone, far from home, far from his people, seemingly far from God.

If you had been watching from the outside — watching the Israelites groaning under Pharaoh’s lash, watching Moses exiled in the wilderness, watching the years pass in silence — you might

have concluded that God had forgotten his people. That the prayers were going nowhere. That the covenant was a dead letter.

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## Four Words That Change Everything

And then Exodus 2 ends with four of the most important sentences in the Bible:

*“During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel — and God knew.” (Exodus 2:23–25, ESV)*

Four verbs. God heard. God remembered. God saw. God knew.

These four words are the hinge of the book of Exodus, and they are the foundation of everything that follows — the burning bush, the plagues, the pillar of fire, the parting of the sea, the thunder of Sinai, the glory filling the tabernacle. All of it flows from this: God heard, God remembered, God saw, God knew.

When the Bible speaks of God’s love for his people, this is what it means. It is not a vague sentiment. It is these four realities: that he hears the cries for help, that he is faithful to what he has promised, that he sees us in our struggles, and that he knows our situation — fully, intimately, without distance.

This is the story of Exodus. God is present among his people.

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## Sustaining Grace Before the Burning Bush

But here is what I want you to notice before we close. The dramatic acts of God in Exodus — the burning bush, the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea — are still chapters away when we reach the end of Exodus 2. And yet God was not absent before those moments. Long before the great dramatic interventions, there were quiet, ordinary, easily-overlooked signs of what we might call sustaining grace — God present and at work in the midst of suffering, before the suffering was over.

Consider: Israel thrived as a people even under brutal oppression. God had something to do with that. When Pharaoh ordered the death of every Hebrew son, there were two midwives —

Shiphrah and Puah — who feared God more than they feared Pharaoh, and who protected the children at risk to themselves. God had something to do with that. When Moses was born, his mother placed him in a basket on the Nile — and that basket came to rest before Pharaoh's own daughter, who drew the child out of the water, adopted him, and unknowingly hired his own mother as his nurse. God had something to do with that. When Moses fled Egypt, he was welcomed into the household of a Midianite priest, given a family and a home and forty years of formation in the wilderness. God had something to do with that.

Even before the people of Israel cried out, God was at work sustaining them. The great deliverance did not come out of nowhere. It came at the end of a long, quiet, largely invisible work of grace.

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## **A Word for the New Year**

We are at the beginning of a new year. It is a natural time to look back and to look forward — to take stock of where we have been and to ask honest questions about where we are.

Perhaps you are encouraged. Perhaps your faith feels strong and your sense of God's nearness is clear. But perhaps you are carrying something heavier than that. Perhaps you have had setbacks you did not anticipate, and you are entering this year feeling discouraged, worn down, quietly wondering whether God is absent. Perhaps your prayers feel cold. Perhaps, like Moses, something you gave yourself to fully and completely has come apart, and you find yourself somewhere you never expected to be, unsure what comes next.

The message of Exodus 2:23–25 is for you. God hears. God remembers. God sees. God knows.

And more than that: if you pause long enough to look, you will very likely find, in your own story, the same pattern of sustaining grace that runs quietly through the opening chapters of Exodus. There are people God has placed in your life. There are providential moments that, in retrospect, were unmistakably his doing. There are ways you have been sustained and prepared for something you cannot yet see. The evidence of God's presence is there — not always in fire and thunder, but in the ordinary, unremarkable, easily-missed mercy of a God who has not forgotten you.

This is the story Exodus begins to tell. And it is your story too.