

Out of the Waters

RESISTING the POWER of FEAR

A FAITH on the MOVE BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

Session 1: A Pharaoh Who Did Not Know Joseph – Exodus 1:1-14

*“Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” Exodus 1:8**

Introduction

From nursery rhymes to movies, stories communicate our deepest longings and our greatest aspirations. They help us understand and interpret the world. Some stories—such as our faith stories or our family stories—are at the core of our very identity. In this first session we explore the roots of the epic story told in the book of Exodus, emphasizing the importance of *remembering*, both as an act of memory and as one of reclaiming the story (re-membering) for our day.

To orient yourself to the series, be sure to download and read “Faith on the Move Bible Studies: Series Introduction.” To prepare to lead the session, review the materials in this document. The column on the left below is your guide for personal preparation for leading the study. The column on the right is to be used to facilitate participant discussion during the session itself. Make enough copies of this session’s Scripture handout for all participants.

TIP: Consider setting up a small display of items that represent important ancestors in your family—pictures of grandparents, a small family heirloom, etc. If any of your ancestors migrated to the United States—or if your church has immigrant roots—consider having pictures or other items that help tell their story.

If this is the first time you are using a study from the Faith on the Move Bible Study Series, you may want to use the following introductory activity:

Obtain a large map of the world or draw one on a chalkboard or on chart paper. As participants arrive, ask them to place a mark (a dot or a small circle) on the place where they were born. Once everyone has gathered and you have offered an opening prayer, say: “On your own or with the assistance of someone next to you, take a moment to look at the labels of the clothing you are wearing. Make a list of the places where it was made. You can do the same also with items that you are carrying with you like your purse, watch, phone, cap, glasses, etc.” After a few minutes, ask participants to call out the names of the countries they have identified on their labels. As they do so, place an “x” on that country on the map. When you have a good number of locations or most participants have had a chance to call out a country’s name, draw the group’s attention to the visual representation of the reality of mobility in our world today—both for product and for people.

Opening Prayer

You may offer an opening prayer or invite a participant to lead the group in prayer.

* All Scripture passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized Edition. Copyright 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

TIP: Tell participants they can simply jot down first names. Then invite them to write a word or phrase by each name that reminds them of a story about or a memorable characteristic of those whose names they have written down.

EXTRA: If there is time, participants may add the names of other ancestors who have been important in their lives, or those whose stories are central to their family. You may ask, “*What stories circulate in your family during family gatherings, special celebrations, etc.?*”

Biblical stories often begin with genealogies. It is tempting to skip them, to think they’re irrelevant. However, they are significant. They ground the story in context. As individual ancestors were named, images and stories would fill the minds of those who first heard those stories.

In a few verses, the writers of Exodus connect the story they are beginning to tell with that which is told in Genesis. By naming Jacob—who became “Israel” after struggling with God—the writer evokes memories of God’s promises and constant presence even in the midst of difficult family and life situations. The second half of the book of Genesis (beginning with chapter 30) tells the story of Jacob and his children, the sibling rivalry that led them to sell their younger brother Joseph into slavery, and their eventual reconciliation as a famine forced them to be reunited in Egypt. This story is very significant to the Exodus story.

Preserving family stories and cultural traditions has always been significant to immigrants. Stories sustained God’s people in times of both stability and upheaval. For many immigrants, however, keeping hold of these important cultural stories can be difficult. The pressure to assimilate to the new culture is strong, particularly upon the younger generation who are either born or grow up in a culture foreign to their parents. The balance between assimilation and identity is a life-long struggle for immigrants, and a hotly debated aspect of immigration conversations.

Addressing the very first human couple in Genesis 1:28, God blesses them and commands them: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...” By using the same phrasing in Exodus 1:7, the writer further connects the story being told to that of Genesis, and presents it also as a story of beginnings. This is good news: in spite of the death of Joseph and his whole generation (v. 6), the Israelites and their culture would not end with the death of the first generation of immigrants.

According to verse 6, the Israelites had already been in Egypt for at least a full generation. All those featured in the story would have been born in Egypt; yet, they are still perceived as foreigners in the land. Cultural mores and legal definitions were significantly different in the ancient world, particularly in a time well before the modern concept of “nation states.” While this

Ancestors

Take a brief moment to write down the names of your ancestors, beginning with parents and going as far back as you can. Briefly share a story about one or two of your ancestors with someone in the group.

READ Exodus 1:1-5.

What do you hear? What do you notice? What stands out?

What names do you recognize in these first few verses of Exodus? What stories do they call to mind?

Verse 1: “...Israel...came to Egypt...” Why had Jacob/Israel and his descendants gone to Egypt? Why was Joseph already there? Like a brief naming of our ancestors, the list of names in these first verses evokes many stories!

How would remembering these stories be particularly significant to the people of Israel as they lived far away from their land of origin? How might ancestor stories or traditions be important for immigrants today?

Be Fruitful and Multiply

READ Exodus 1:6-10

What do you hear? What do you notice? What stands out?

In a Bible study in southern Florida, a participant exclaimed, “¡Que lindo! [How beautiful!]” in response to the description in verse 7 of the increase in Jacob’s descendants. Her comment emphasized the importance of the family in her culture of origin. What do you notice about the tone and language of this verse?

fact must be kept in mind as the biblical account is explored in today's context, the core issues raised by the story—the role of fear, justice, etc—remain quite applicable to our day.

Pharaoh viewed the growing immigrant population as a threat, and according to verse 12, so did the rest of the population. Pharaoh devises a variety of “population” control measures, beginning here with hard labor. Throughout this study, we will reflect on God's role in rendering these various measures ineffective.

Reflecting on his own experience of having to do hard labor in the field when he first came to the United States, a participant in a Bible study in Washington State said that he and his family—like many other immigrants today and many in previous generations—had learned through that hard work to appreciate things in a way that many others in the broader culture may not. The hard work made him and his family physically stronger. He celebrated this as a positive that may have come out of a negative. Paradoxically, the perception of immigrants' strength causes fear in “locals,” just as the strengthening of the Israelites caused fear in the Egyptians (v. 12).

Memory—remembering—is a key concept in the Bible. God repeatedly promises to remember God's people and commands us to remember God's actions on our behalf. Jesus likewise commands his disciples to eat bread and drink wine when they are gathered “in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19 and 1 Corinthians 11:24-25). The theme of memory is equally central to the book of Exodus. The new Pharaoh forgot the contributions of Joseph—the contributions of the immigrant—and now sees his descendants only as a problem. In contrast, the writer remembers their contributions by naming their role in building Egypt's supply cities (v. 11), thereby recalling Joseph's own role in saving Egypt from famine. More importantly, in contrast to the Pharaoh's forgetfulness, God will be shown as the one who remembers Israel and the promises made to him and his descendants.

TIP: If your discussion group does not include individuals who are themselves immigrants, encourage participants to share the names and stories of those they may know who are newcomers to the community. Reflect together on how knowing someone personally—specifically an immigrant—might shape a person's view about immigration.

Compare Pharaoh's reaction and tone in verses 9-10 to that of verse 7. List Pharaoh's concerns.

How do Pharaoh's concerns compare to those expressed about immigrants today?

Memory

READ Exodus 1:11-14

What do you hear? What do you notice? What stands out?

What is the role of fear in the way that the Israelites were perceived? What role does it play in contemporary perceptions of immigrants?

The “children of Israel” are limited to hard labor in the fields and in construction (v. 14). Compare this with the work immigrants do today, particularly those who are undocumented.

Following his dream about seven fat cows and seven lean cows, an earlier Pharaoh recognized that he needed an immigrant (Joseph) who was lingering in his jail in order to face an uncertain future. By contrast, the new Pharaoh (who did not know Joseph) fails to see the immigrants as assets. Discuss the current public perception—and media portrayal—of immigrants: Do we remember their contributions as much as the challenges they may pose to our communities (issues of assimilation, use of resources, etc.)?

Do our elected officials, our “Pharaohs,” know “José”? Much of the food we eat has been picked, processed, or milked by immigrant labor. Do we know “José”?

Transitions

Return to the stories you shared at the beginning about your ancestors. What role have these stories and memories played in your own life? How important is it to you that your descendants hear these stories, and why?

We live in a world of high mobility and transition. How do our family stories, and our faith stories, help us to stay grounded?

In pairs or small groups, talk about the “next generations”—children, youth, and young adults who may be your children, grandchildren, or part of your congregation or town. Compare their experiences with and opportunities to travel for vacation, study, work, etc. to your own. What may today’s Bible passage and conversation offer to those next generations?

Closing Prayer

After inviting any final comments and providing details for the next session, you may conclude by offering a prayer or inviting a participant to lead the group in prayer.