

# reading the Bible with Luther



## Session 8: Moses, Preacher of Promise (Exodus 1 - 3)

by Virgil Thompson

Session 7 concluded with the report that Jacob's family had settled in Egypt, compliments of Joseph and the king for whom he worked. That, however, is far from the end of the story. Even as Joseph prepares to die he proclaims the promise by which the story of faith continues, *"God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land, to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob"* (Genesis 50:24).

### God's Promise Delivers

God's promise is not an idle word, as though it hangs idly in the air awaiting humanity's decision to act in accordance with it. As Moses, Pharaoh and everyone else involved are about to discover, the promise of the Lord delivers of its own accord. If the promise of the Lord had depended on the approval of Moses and Pharaoh, Egypt would have spelled the end of the road for the story of faith. Pharaoh's heart was set hard, dead-set opposed to it. Moses threw every excuse in the book to avoid getting involved with it. That was just fine with the Lord God. To them both He declared, *"Go ahead, oppose me as fast and furious as you wish; in the end we will see who is God and who is not God. We will see whose word has its way with the life of the world. We will see who has the last word over the life of humanity and all creation."*

Faith in God's power and determination to keep His promise explains at its heart Luther's Reformation. Reading the Bible with Luther is learning to read the Bible with the expectation that God will surely come to us, bring us up out of the old land of sin and unbelief into the promised land of everlasting righteousness, blessedness and innocence. Listen to the story as it happened to the people in the Bible that it may happen again to the people who hear the story of the Bible told for them.

### Hard Times for the People of Israel

Before God's promise came to fruition for Joseph's family, their fortunes had fallen on hard times. A new king who did not know Joseph had assumed the throne over Egypt. He may not have known Joseph, but he did know that the descendants of Joseph were not real Egyptians. They were different. The king was afraid the differences might lead to disloyalty. He reasoned, what if the people of Israel should side with our enemies, *"fight against us and escape from the land"* (Exodus 1:9)? To prevent that prospect, the king proposes to deal shrewdly with the people of Israel, *"to oppress them with hard labor"* (Exodus 1:11). The ruthless oppression, fails to achieve the desired end. In fact, under the imposed burden of their forced labor, the people of Israel grew stronger.

So, the king embarks on a policy of genocide against the people of Israel. He instructs the Hebrew midwives, *"If it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl she shall live"* (Exodus 1:16). The Hebrew midwives, fearing God more than Pharaoh, refuse to obey. When the king calls them to account for their failure to execute his order against the sons of Israel, they concoct a story, explaining that the women of Israel are so strong and vigorous, unlike the women of Egypt, that they give birth before the midwife arrives. The "shrewd" Pharaoh is apparently duped by the story of the poor "powerless" midwives. That, however, does not deter him from executing his policy of genocide against Israel: *"Every boy that is born to the Hebrews,"* his edict proclaims to the people of Egypt, *"you shall throw into the Nile"* (Exodus 1:22).

### Plucked from Water

It was under the threat of this edict that a son was born to a pious Israelite couple. They successfully execute a plan against the "shrewd Pharaoh" by which they not only save their son's life, but provide for his adoption into the life of

the palace. For the first three months of their son's life they conceal the birth from the authorities. But as the danger of detection increases with the growth of their son, they put into motion a desperate plan. In an especially prepared basket the baby is set afloat in the Nile—the very river, according to the decree of Pharaoh, in which the sons of Israel were to be drowned. The infant's sister is posted in the weeds to keep watch over her brother. What transpires can only be explained as an answer to prayer, even though there is no mention in the story that any prayers were ever prayed. But this is typical of the gracious providence of the Lord God. He answers our prayers even when we haven't the presence of mind to pray them.

The strange way the Lord works to answer prayer and keep His promise—“*God will surely come to you and bring you out of this land*”—deserves to be remembered and relished and never forgotten. Its proclamation is the means God continues to use to come to us to create faith and hope where and when it pleases Him.

According to the story, the daughter of Pharaoh has come down to the Nile to bathe. Seeing the basket afloat in the reeds of the river, she instructs a servant to fetch it for a closer look. The discovery of the crying infant inside moves her heart with a mother's compassion to save the child. In that moment the sister of the child is quick to act. She races from the weeds to the side of the princess and offers, “*Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?*” (Exodus 2:7).

Of course, nursing an infant is beneath the dignity of a pampered princess, and so the daughter of Pharaoh quickly consents. I don't need to tell you which mother of Israel is sought out to nurse the baby until he reaches a suitable age for the Pharaoh's daughter to adopt him as her own son! When that day eventually arrives the child is named Moses, for as the adopted mother explains, “*I drew him out of the water*” (Exodus 2:10). So this son of Israel, born under threat of the Pharaoh's policy of genocide, was raised in the palace of the Pharaoh as the Pharaoh's own grandson. You see what I mean by the strange way in which the Lord goes about keeping his promise, showing who is God and who is not?

### **Bloody Murder and Flight from Justice**

Moses may have been raised in the palace as the grandson of the king, but he never forgot who he was under the outward attire of his Egyptian education and privilege. One day while making his way among the Hebrews, Moses observes an Egyptian mistreating an Israelite, whom he recognizes as “*one of his own kinsfolk*” (Exodus 2:11). He quickly takes

justice into his own hands. He kills the abusing Egyptian and buries the corpse in the sand. However, covering up a misdeed, no matter how righteously we may seek to justify it, never works out as planned.

The murder had not gone unobserved. Moses has no choice but to flee from Pharaoh's justice. Eventually, the fugitive takes refuge in the land of Midian. There he distinguishes himself as a man committed to the opposition of bullying bullies. In one instance, he came to the aid of seven sister shepherdesses. For his trouble, Moses is taken in by their wealthy father. In fact, he eventually marries one of the daughters. Moses might have been content to end his days there in the safety and comfort of Midian. It wasn't home, as Moses acknowledged in the name he gave to his firstborn son, Gershom, which means something like “alien in a foreign land.” All the same, it was better than the fate he feared in Egypt.

Moses did not, however, end his days in Midian. The Lord God had marked Moses as a proclaimer of promise precisely for the congregation of his people who suffered under Pharaoh's imposed bondage. Moses was not at all keen on the idea, and suggested to God that surely He might find someone else more suited to such service. Moses seems to take a somewhat dim view of preaching. Perhaps he imagines himself a man of action, not a mere talker. But despite his reticence and resistance, Moses is about to become a preacher of the promise. Once the Lord God sets His sights on a person, all the wriggling and niggling in the world will not result in escape.

### **God Chooses Moses**

With the help of some minor pyrotechnics (Exodus 3:11-4:17), God succeeds in getting the undivided attention of Moses. Moses has no doubt in whose presence he stands. In the

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Select: Reading the Bible with Luther - Session 8

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presence of God, Moses' first impulse is not what you might imagine—or perhaps you do imagine it all too well. His first impulse is to hide. He is afraid to look at God (Exodus 3:6). God explains that He has decided that now is the time to keep His promise, to deliver His people from their bondage. Further, God explains, I have decided. I have chosen you to deliver the message to Pharaoh and to bring the people out to worship me (Exodus 3:7-12). “Me?!” exclaims Moses. “*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*” (Exodus 3:11)?

“Don't worry,” God assures Moses, “*I will be with you; this will be a sign for you that it is I who sent you; when you have brought the people out of Egypt you shall worship me on this mountain*” (Exodus 3:12).

In the end, Moses will go as he has been called by God to go. The story tells once again who is God and who is not. As Luther frequently observed, so much of the Bible's story of faith centers around the First Commandment that you begin to suspect it is the central theme of the entire story.

## Looking Ahead

One of the most crucial issues in Christian theology is the relationship between the promise of God and the life of faith. As the Bible tells the story of Moses, it is clear that the promise of God does not require faith as a prerequisite. When God speaks the promise to Moses, Moses is captive to his own unbelief and resignation. The promise of God's Word, alone, makes a believer of Moses. Eventually, Moses will “**worship God on this mountain.**”

The story of how God's Word makes a believer of Moses and liberates the people of Israel from their Egyptian bondage is the subject of our next session. For now, it is sufficient to appreciate what the story of Moses reveals about the relationship between the promise of God and the faith of the believer. Faith does not precede the promise, as though the effectiveness of the promise is dependent upon faith. Rather, it works the other way around. The promise creates faith in God as our God. The job of the church is to proclaim the promise in such a way as to make believers out of unbelievers.

# reading the Bible with Luther — Bible study



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### Bible Study and Prayer

Each installment of our series offers suggestions for reflection and discussion.

1. Luther frequently pointed out that God saves under the sign of the opposite. That theme plays out in the story of Moses. The River Nile, according to Pharaoh's decree, was the instrument of Israel's destruction. He instructed his people to drown the newborn infants of the Israelites in the waters of the Nile. But in the promise of God, the waters of the Nile serve the saving purpose of God. Pharaoh's daughter plucks Moses out of the Nile. Can you think of other Bible stories that feature this theme? Can you think of stories from your own life with this theme?
2. When God confronts Moses at the Burning Bush, Moses's first instinct is to hide. Why do you think Moses hides

from God? What do you think this story reveals about the human relationship to God in our own day? There are many places where people hide from God. What are the obvious hiding places? Consider that Moses hides from God in a very holy place. Do you think the church can become a hiding place from God?

3. Our study of Exodus 1 - 3 has focused on the relationship between the promise of God and the life of faith. Consider:
  - a. *What do I find most comforting, most disturbing about these chapters?*
  - b. *How do these chapters shape the missionary outlook of the church?*
  - c. *What do these chapters promise to faith?*
  - d. *What do these chapters demand of faith?*