

In Their Midst

Exodus: From Slavery to Covenant Presence

Session 1. God Heard Their Cry

Reading: Exodus 1:1-2:10

Part One

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim

The group discovers how oppression, courageous faithfulness, and hidden providence prepare the way for Israel's deliverance.

Catholic Touchstone

The session touches the sanctity of human life, obedience to God above unjust commands, and divine providence working through free human cooperation.

Exodus opens with no visible deliverer and no immediate escape. Israel multiplies under oppression, two midwives fear God more than Pharaoh, and a threatened child is preserved through a chain of courageous human choices. Help the group stay with what the text reveals slowly. God is not absent because his work is quiet.

What You Need to Know

From a family to a people

The opening names connect Exodus directly to the family that entered Egypt in Genesis. By Exodus 1:7, that family has become numerous enough to alarm a new king. The language of fruitfulness recalls God's blessing in Genesis 1:28 and signals that oppression cannot cancel his purposes.

Pharaoh is a title

The text does not identify this Pharaoh by a personal name. Avoid building the discussion around a proposed date or ruler. The narrator wants the group to notice Pharaoh's fear, calculations, and escalating violence.

The escalation matters

Pharaoh moves from forced labor, to a secret command directed at the midwives, to a public command involving all his people. His policies become more violent as earlier measures fail. Israel's multiplication and the midwives' resistance expose the limits of his power.

What the midwives are praised for

Exodus explicitly emphasizes that Shiphrah and Puah fear God, refuse Pharaoh's command, and preserve the boys alive. The text does not explicitly commend every word of their report to Pharaoh. Catholic moral teaching never permits a good end to make lying good, but it does require refusal when civil authority commands what is contrary to the moral order.

Providence without puppets

God's providence does not make the women passive. The midwives, Moses' mother, his sister, and Pharaoh's daughter each make real choices. God works through these choices without erasing their

freedom. In Exodus 2:1-10, the narrator does not explain each event by direct divine intervention, yet a child marked for death is preserved within Pharaoh's own household.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Promise under pressure

Genesis establishes the promises behind the opening of Exodus. God promised Abraham descendants and blessing, while also foretelling that his descendants would be afflicted in a foreign land before being brought out. Exodus begins with both parts visible: the people multiply, and the foreign power oppresses them.

A vessel through the waters

Moses is placed in a small vessel among the reeds and drawn safely from the water. This prepares for the larger deliverance through water at the sea. Do not resolve that pattern yet. Plant it and let Session 6 develop it.

The threatened deliverer

Christian tradition has often read Moses as a partial type of Christ. Both are threatened as children by a ruler willing to kill and both are preserved, and Matthew presents Jesus' flight into Egypt and return in the light of Israel's own story. Note that Matthew's own fulfillment language is primarily Israel-and-Jesus rather than Moses-and-Jesus; the Moses parallel is a traditional reading laid alongside it. Moses will mediate liberation for one people. Christ fulfills and surpasses the pattern by delivering humanity from sin and death.

Voices of the Church

Read these aloud where they land. Each is either a direct citation or an honest summary, labelled as such.

St. Augustine, 354-430

Summary of his teaching: God is so good and powerful that he would not permit evil unless he could bring good from it.

Enchiridion 11.

How this is cited. This is a close summary of St. Augustine's well-known statement in Enchiridion 11, not a direct quotation.

For the group. Pharaoh's evil remains evil, but it cannot place Israel outside God's providential care.

St. Thomas Aquinas, 1225-1274

Summary of his teaching: every created thing falls under divine providence, although God ordinarily governs creatures through real secondary causes.

Summa Theologiae I, q. 22, aa. 2-3.

How this is cited. Summary drawn from two articles, not a quotation. Article 2 establishes that all things are subject to providence; article 3 is where St. Thomas argues that God provides for all things immediately in his plan while executing that plan through intermediate causes.

For the group. The women's free decisions are not rivals to God's action. They are among the means through which his care unfolds.

St. John Paul II, 1920-2005

Summary of his teaching: a civil law that authorizes or requires the violation of innocent human life lacks binding moral force, and conscientious objection to such commands is required.

Evangelium Vitae 73.

How this is cited. This is a summary of Evangelium Vitae 73, which addresses intrinsically unjust laws against human life and the duty not to obey or participate in them.

For the group. Shiphrah and Puah show that reverence for God can demand courageous refusal of an unjust command.

Catechism Connection

The Catechism says

CCC 302. Creation is not complete in every respect but journeys toward the perfection God has appointed.

CCC 303. God's providential care extends to every creature and every circumstance, including apparently insignificant events.

CCC 307. God grants human beings the dignity of cooperating freely in the unfolding of his providence.

CCC 129. Christians read the Old Testament in the light of Christ while respecting the Old Testament's own value and meaning.

CCC 2242. Citizens must not obey civil directives that are contrary to the moral order, fundamental rights, or the Gospel.

CCC 2258. Human life is sacred because it comes from God and remains in a special relationship with its Creator.

CCC 2485. A lie is wrong by its nature because it misuses speech, which is ordered toward communicating truth.

Thread Watch

Thread Watch

Why God brings Israel out (plant). Give participants the sealed guess on the Take-Home sheet without hints, commentary, or discussion.

Deliverance through water (plant). Let the group notice Moses' preservation in the reeds. Do not yet explain the sea or baptismal fulfillment.

Fear of God versus fear of rulers (plant). Contrast Pharaoh's fear-driven control with the midwives' God-centered courage.

God dwelling among his people (plant). Do not introduce the tabernacle yet. Allow the opening problem to stand: Israel is multiplying, suffering, and waiting for God's saving action.

Mediators of deliverance (plant). Notice how God prepares a deliverer through the courageous cooperation of several women.

Objection Bench

Leader only. Do not raise these unless someone in the room does.

If God is providentially caring for Israel, why does he permit oppression and murdered children?

The passage never calls the evil good or offers a complete explanation for suffering. It shows that human agents remain responsible, that God sees acts of fidelity, and that evil cannot finally overturn his promise. Do not offer a quick answer to someone carrying personal grief.

Does God's treatment of the midwives prove that lying is acceptable whenever it saves a life?

The text explicitly connects their blessing with their fear of God and preservation of life, not with a moral approval of every word they spoke. Catholic teaching commends their refusal of murder while still teaching that a good purpose cannot make lying good.

There is no independent Egyptian record of Israel in Egypt or of an exodus. Did any of this actually happen?

Take the question seriously rather than deflecting it. Egyptian royal inscriptions were not neutral chronicles and seldom recorded reverses, enslaved populations leave little archaeological trace, and scholars differ widely on date, route, and numbers. The Church teaches that Scripture teaches without error the truth God willed to be recorded for our salvation, and Dei Verbum asks us to attend to the literary forms the sacred writers actually used. Catholic faith holds that God really acted to save a real people, while leaving genuine latitude on reconstruction. If one person needs more than this, offer to follow it up rather than turning the session into a debate.

Session Goals

1. Trace how Pharaoh's response to Israel escalates from anxiety to oppression and attempted extermination.
2. Identify what motivates Pharaoh and what motivates the midwives.
3. Discover how God's promises remain active while circumstances appear to contradict them.
4. Distinguish the text's praise of courageous obedience from an assumed approval of every action reported.
5. Notice how providence works through the free and costly choices of several women.
6. Leave participants ready to ask what God is bringing Israel out for, not only what he is bringing them out of.

Time Note

Planned for 75-90 Minutes

Allow 8 minutes for welcome and prayer, 10 minutes for the Win questions, 8 minutes for reading, 43 to 50 minutes for Build, 10 minutes for Send and weekly practices, and 4 minutes for closing prayer and the memory verse.

If you are running long, cut in this order.

1. Cut the Dig Deeper prompt under Question 5 first.
2. Shorten Question 10 by asking only where God's action is explicit and where it is quiet.
3. If necessary, take only one response to each Send question.

Part Two

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Pray together

Father, you hear the afflicted and remain faithful when your work is hidden from us. Send your Holy Spirit to open the Scriptures, make us attentive to what the text says, and give us courage to follow the truth we find. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win

Open questions. No wrong answers. Let everyone speak before you move on.

W1. When have you seen one apparently small act of courage make a larger difference?

W2. What can cause a person or group to view someone else's growth as a threat?

Welcome stories without trying to connect every response to the passage. The text will make the connection.

Read

Read aloud

Use two readers. Reader one reads Exodus 1:1-22. Reader two reads Exodus 2:1-10. Ask everyone else to mark repeated words, changes in Pharaoh's strategy, and each person who acts to preserve life.

Build

Numbered inductive questions. Ask, wait, let the group work the text. The ANSWER boxes are for you to share after the discussion, not before it.

A People Becomes a Threat

1. Compare Exodus 1:1-7 with 1:8-10. What changes, and what does not change?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

A new king arises who does not know Joseph, and Israel's fruitfulness is reinterpreted as a political threat. Israel's identity and multiplication continue, but the new king's fear and hostility replace the settled place the family had held under Joseph, which Exodus 1:8 and Genesis 47:5-6 supply.

2. What does Pharaoh fear in verses 9-10, and what assumptions are built into his plan?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

He fears Israel's numbers, a possible alliance with enemies, war, and Israel's escape. He assumes that harsh control can prevent an imagined future danger and that the Israelites may be treated as a problem rather than as persons.

3. Trace Pharaoh's strategy through verses 11-22. How does it escalate, and what happens after each attempt?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. List Pharaoh's measures in the order they appear.

Ground. Ask what each new measure reveals about what he fears most.

Depth. Consider why escalating force is a sign of weakness rather than of strength.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

He begins with forced labor, then increases harsh treatment, secretly commands the midwives to kill the boys, and finally orders his people to cast every Hebrew boy into the Nile. Oppression does not stop Israel's multiplication, and the midwives refuse the secret killing order, so Pharaoh makes the violence public.

Dig Deeper

Where do you see irony in Pharaoh's attempt to control Israel's growth?

Two Kinds of Fear

4. Compare Pharaoh in verses 9-10 with Shiphrah and Puah in verses 15-17. What does each fear produce?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Pharaoh's fear produces control, exploitation, and death. The midwives' fear of God produces disobedience to an evil command and the preservation of life. Fear directed toward power closes Pharaoh in on himself, while reverence for God frees the women to act courageously.

5. Who is named in Exodus 1:8-22, and who remains unnamed? What effect does that have on how you read the conflict?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The king is known only by his title, while the midwives are named Shiphrah and Puah. The story grants personal recognition to women with little social power while the powerful oppressor is reduced to his office. Their faithfulness, not his status, receives lasting honor.

Dig Deeper

How does this naming pattern challenge ordinary ideas about who matters in history?

Build: What Does the Text Praise?

6. Look closely at Exodus 1:17-21. What actions and motives does the narrator explicitly connect with God's favor toward the midwives?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The midwives fear God, refuse to do what the king commands, and let the boys live. The text says God deals well with them and connects the gift of families with their fear of God. It does not explicitly say that God rewards them for every word in their explanation to Pharaoh.

Press: Does a Good End Justify Deception?

7. How would you answer the claim that this passage gives moral approval to lying whenever the outcome is good?

Build then press

The strongest form of the objection. The midwives give Pharaoh an explanation that appears designed to deceive him, and the next verses say God deals well with them. The most natural reading seems to be that Scripture approves their deception because it saves lives. Saying that lying is always wrong can look like imposing a later moral system on the story.

Answering from the text. The narrative explicitly identifies their fear of God, refusal of the murderous order, and preservation of the boys as central. Verse 21 connects God's blessing with their fear of God, not with a declaration that every part of their report was morally good. The text therefore supports resistance to an evil command without establishing that a good result turns false speech into a good act.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The passage praises the midwives' fear of God and defense of life. It does not formulate a general permission to lie. Catholic teaching holds both truths together: they were right to refuse participation in murder, and a good intention does not make lying morally good.

Live Discovery: The Promise Behind the Crisis

Live discovery

Divide into pairs. Half the pairs find what God promises about Abraham's descendants and blessing. The other half find what God foretells about affliction, judgment, and departure. Ask each pair to report only what the passage says.

Let them find it. Genesis 12:1-3; Genesis 15:13-14

8. What earlier promises help explain why Israel's multiplication and suffering both matter?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

God promises Abraham a great nation through which blessing will reach others. He also foretells that Abraham's descendants will be strangers and servants in another land, that the oppressing nation will be judged, and that the descendants will come out. Exodus opens with the promise under severe pressure, not with the promise forgotten.

A Deliverer Preserved

9. In Exodus 2:1-10, list each person who acts to preserve the child. What does each person risk, contribute, or receive?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. Simply identify the people and their actions.

Ground. Ask what courage or initiative each action required.

Depth. Ask how the women act within limited power without becoming passive.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

His mother conceals him, prepares the vessel, and places him among the reeds. His sister watches and takes the initiative to speak to Pharaoh's daughter. Pharaoh's daughter recognizes that he is a Hebrew child, has compassion, and adopts him, so that her action frustrates the purpose of her father's decree. The text does not tell us what she knew of the decree or what she intended by it. The child's mother receives him back temporarily and is paid to nurse him. Each action contributes to preserving the future deliverer.

Hidden Providence

10. Where is God's action explicit in this passage, and where does his care appear to be working quietly through human choices?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. Mark the verses where God is the explicit subject of a verb.

Ground. Ask what changes in the telling once the narrator stops naming God directly.

Depth. Discuss how a person may recognise providence without claiming to read God's mind.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

God's favorable treatment of the midwives and gift of families are explicit in Exodus 1:20-21. In Moses' preservation, the narrator describes human decisions without repeatedly naming direct divine action. Yet the condemned child survives through his mother, sister, and Pharaoh's daughter, is nursed by his own mother, and enters Pharaoh's household. The text invites recognition of providence without treating the people as puppets.

Send

Open questions. Let these land in silence if they need to.

S1. Where are you being tempted to let fear of consequences outweigh reverence for God?

S2. Whose quiet act of courage or protection might God be inviting you to support this week?

Live It This Week

Practices

1. Pray with Exodus 1:15-21 once this week. Name one pressure that makes faithful action difficult, then ask God for the midwives' courage.
2. Perform one concrete act that protects or supports vulnerable human life, such as assisting a pregnancy resource center, checking on someone who is isolated, or giving practical help to a struggling parent.
3. Choose one person whose faithful work is usually overlooked. Thank that person specifically and by name.

Scripture Memory

Exodus 1:17

"But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live."

Exodus 1:17

Closing Prayer

Pray together

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, you remain faithful when your people cannot yet see the way forward. Give us reverence stronger than fear, compassion stronger than self-protection, and courage to defend every life entrusted to our care. Teach us to cooperate freely with your providence. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Part Three

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order. Print this page and keep it in front of you.

Primary text

- **Exodus 1:1-2:10** Read aloud in two sections.

Live discovery

- **Genesis 12:1-3** The promise of a great nation and blessing.
- **Genesis 15:13-14** Affliction in a foreign land, judgment, and departure.

Preparation connections

- **Genesis 1:28** The blessing of fruitfulness.
- **Genesis 46:8-27** The family that entered Egypt.
- **Hosea 11:1** God's son called from Egypt.
- **Matthew 2:13-15; 2:19-21** The threatened Christ child, the flight into Egypt, and the return.

Terms

- **providence.** God's wise and loving governance of creation, directing all things toward the end he has appointed
- **secondary causes.** Real created agents through whom God ordinarily accomplishes his purposes, without destroying their freedom
- **conscientious objection.** The refusal to carry out a command that would require acting against the moral law
- **type.** A person, event, or institution in the Old Testament that God ordains to prefigure a greater reality fulfilled in Christ

Catechism

- CCC 302-303. Creation's journey and God's universal providence.
- CCC 307. Free human cooperation with providence.
- CCC 129. Reading the Old Testament in the light of Christ.
- CCC 2242. Refusal of civil commands contrary to the moral order.
- CCC 2258. The sacredness of human life.
- CCC 2485. Why lying is wrong by its nature.