

THE LIFE OF  
MOSES



THE LIFE OF  
MOSES  
GOD'S FIRST DELIVERER OF ISRAEL

JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
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## FOREWORD

Introducing this volume is a rare and genuine privilege.

I say “rare” because *The Life of Moses* has never been published. This book thus provides the reading public with completely new material from the exceptional ministry of Dr. James Montgomery Boice, who for more than thirty years served as senior minister of Philadelphia’s Tenth Presbyterian Church. To my knowledge, this is the first new expository commentary of Dr. Boice’s that has been published since he died in 2000.

I say “genuine” because this new book gives us Boice at his best. Each chapter is based on a sermon that he first preached to his beloved congregation in Center City Philadelphia. Later, some of these messages formed the basis for materials used worldwide by Bible Study Fellowship.

Here we see many hallmarks of Dr. Boice’s ministry. First and foremost, we see his absolute commitment to the Bible as the very Word of God. At various points Dr. Boice defends the Bible’s historical reliability within the cultural context of Israel and Egypt. He also highlights the human authorship of writings that come to us from the pen of the prophet Moses. But he does all this without ever losing his firm grip on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

In effect, *The Life of Moses* completes the exposition of the Pentateuch that Dr. Boice began when he preached his well-known series on the book of Genesis. The exodus is the Old Testament’s great

story of redemption. Rather than giving a verse-by-verse exposition of this section of the Bible—the kind of approach that he took with the book of Romans, for example—Dr. Boice captures the broad sweep of Israel’s captivity, deliverance, and wanderings in the wilderness.

He does this by focusing squarely on the life and ministry of Moses. I am reminded of the advice that he gave me when I decided to preach the book of Jeremiah, which happens to be the longest book in the Bible. For five years I served as Dr. Boice’s associate minister for preaching. Frankly, he wasn’t sure that preaching the whole book of Jeremiah was a very good idea. But he wisely and kindly suggested that it would be best for me to focus on the dramatic story of the prophet’s life and ministry—exactly the approach that he had taken when he preached from Exodus to Deuteronomy and made Moses’ ministry come to life.

As we read this big-picture survey, we sense Dr. Boice’s obvious love and admiration for Moses as a man of God. The book finds important unity in its thematic focus on Moses as a man of faith and prayer, who led God’s people with a rare combination of humility and courage. In many ways, Dr. Boice was a man after Moses’ heart—completely committed to communicating the Word of God, totally trusting in God’s promises, and faithfully willing to lead the same people of God decade after decade. He, too, combined humility with courage as he fought a series of battles for the Bible and led his congregation out of a denomination that was drifting away from gospel truth.

Much more important than Moses, however, is the God of Moses, who is the real hero of the exodus and everything that happened afterwards. *The Life of Moses* shows God faithfully keeping his covenant promises, graciously rescuing his wayward people, powerfully defeating their enemies, generously providing for their daily needs, and wisely showing them the way of obedience—in short, being everything in a God that they could ever need or desire. *The Life of Moses* is a God-centered book that introduces us to a Savior who comes for his people and delivers them again and again.

It is also a Christ-centered book that gives us a clearer understanding of the person and work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Dr. Boice had an eye for the many close connections between the Old

*Foreword*

and New Testaments. With Moses, those connections are especially abundant. The result is an exposition that frequently displays Jesus Christ in his atoning sacrifice and resurrection glory. Moses may have been “God’s first deliverer of Israel,” but he was only the first: Jesus Christ is God’s final Deliverer.

In this study, Dr. Boice supplies sound biblical teaching and wise pastoral advice on a wide range of practical topics—everything from principles for effective leadership to the Christian’s relationship to the governing authorities. His constant goal is practical Christianity.

Everyone who reads this life of Moses will have the rare and genuine pleasure of hearing Dr. Boice’s strong voice again. By the grace of God, the message in its pages will bring fresh blessing to the church of Jesus Christ. Over the course of a lifetime, God will lead us the way that he led Moses: into a courageous life of faith and prayer.

Philip Graham Ryken  
President  
Wheaton College



## PREFACE

From January 1993 to early February 1994, Jim Boice preached a series of messages on “The Life of Moses” in the Sunday evening services at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, covering four of the five books of the Pentateuch. This was a comprehensive sermon series, but until now it has never appeared in print.

For several reasons, the series differed from Jim’s usual approach to preaching through books of the Bible. In the Moses sermons he deliberately presented a more sweeping, introductory series of messages, covering a much greater swath of Scripture than in his usual, often verse-by-verse, exposition. The series also represented an exception to Jim’s usual practice of writing out complete manuscripts, which he never failed to do when preparing sermons for the morning services. Sometimes for an evening series, as in the case of these messages on Moses, he made careful notes to guide his preaching but did not prepare complete texts of each sermon. This gave the delivery a kind of freedom, as he was not tied to an edited text. He memorized almost verbatim the written messages after only one or two readings; the more informal delivery seemed to fit the less formal atmosphere of the evening services.

Despite these surface differences, however, Jim did not depart from his deep conviction that the Scriptures are a unity and that all Scripture points to Jesus Christ. Though he focused on the actions and character of Moses, that great deliverer of Israel, and on the

many events connected to the exodus and the years of the desert wandering, these messages are much more than an interesting biography and a historical review of Israel's beginnings as a nation, no matter how important or compelling those intertwined narratives might be.

As Jim makes clear in his opening chapter, in studying the deliverance from slavery in Egypt on the night of the Passover, or the great symbolic significance of the rituals performed on the Day of Atonement, or so much other material related to the experiences and struggles of the forty years in the desert wanderings, we see that “all point forward to Jesus Christ”; all “prefigure the coming ministry of Jesus Christ” (p. 8). The discussion of those events leads to an explanation of how they are a “shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col. 2:17). Jesus Christ is present in every chapter. Practical applications flow out of the theological affirmations.

The challenge of turning these “studies,” as Jim would have called them, into a published volume has been truly a team effort. These messages, though not written as complete manuscripts, were recorded, and Robert Brady, executive director of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, has had the vision to believe that in book form *The Life of Moses* would provide helpful and readable instruction on four often-neglected books of the Old Testament and would therefore be a blessing to God's people. He persevered, and the editors at P&R Publishing accepted the challenge to put the messages into print.

Transcribing the audio messages was only the beginning of this journey. There has been the need for careful editing, not to alter the content, but to smooth out where needed the transition from verbal to written expression—to make, in other words, the rough places plain. There has also been the need to track down when possible the sources Jim refers to without giving the full publishing data that he would have provided in a more formal manuscript. I became involved in the editing process once the editors at P&R had done much initial work.

I want to express deepest thanks to those whose help, patience, perseverance, and encouragement have brought us to the goal—the publishing of *The Life of Moses*.

## Preface

Special thanks go to Robert Brady for his gracious perseverance and his involvement at key points—an involvement that has kept the project on course. He has been both a friend and a cheerleader.

I am thankful indeed for an afternoon over tea with Janice and Stan Roberts and for their wisdom and support as we talked over the need for more time to tackle the editing challenges and my possible role in that effort. Their appreciation of the continuing value of Jim's biblical studies has been a great encouragement.

Special thanks are also due to Aaron Gottier, editorial project manager at P&R, who has been endlessly patient as the editing has progressed. He has been a very careful reader and editor, with perceptive questions and gentle nudges in order to improve clarity and, in certain places, nail down specific references when at all possible. He and his team have been immensely supportive.

It has been a great blessing to have Marion Clark, a former pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church, read through the entire manuscript. He, too, has an eagle eye, as well as sound sense. As one who served with Jim and who knows Jim's work well (having edited *Come to the Waters*, a year's devotional readings gathered from Jim's published and unpublished works), he has been especially helpful in pointing out some statements in the text that needed clarification or revision.

Lydia Brownback, a friend and former editor of Jim's messages for *The Bible Study Hour* radio broadcasts and the monthly magazine *God's Word Today*, has graciously added to her own heavy responsibilities by taking time to tackle the arduous task of preparing the Scripture and topical indexes. I am deeply grateful for her help and expertise.

Deryck Barson, in the midst of his own PhD studies and ministry duties at Tenth Church, has been resourceful and perceptive in tracking down bibliographic data and smoothing out several troublesome places in the text. Faithful friend Bill Edgar, with the help of a research librarian, took time from his busy schedule to find in the recesses of the Westminster Seminary library two volumes needed for documentation. Nancy Hala, for many years a stalwart friend-in-need, dug out from the archives at Tenth Church the preaching schedule for the Moses series. All these efforts have added to the accuracy and helpfulness of the book.

*Preface*

Always, I am thankful for the friendship, wisdom, and guidance of Philip Ryken, once my pastor at Tenth Presbyterian and now president of Wheaton College. His kind introduction to this volume is only one evidence of his gracious spirit. Phil's concern for the continuation of Jim's ministry through the printed word has done much to protect and strengthen that legacy.

Finally, it can truly be said that without the steady, skilled help of Sarah Brubaker, my former student and now my friend and colleague, all the edits of the last year—researched, collated, revised—would be trapped in the ancient technology of pen and paper. Sarah's technology skills, as well as her thoughtful suggestions when a word or phrase just wasn't quite right, have been a vital contribution. Her cheerful, willing spirit has made working together a joy.

May the Lord use these studies of Israel's first deliverer, Moses, to point us to the great Deliverer, the Lord Jesus Christ, and to strengthen the faith and godly walk of all who read these pages.

Linda M. Boice

# PART 1

## THE BATTLE OF EGYPT



# 1

## ISRAEL IN EGYPT

*Exodus 1:1–14*

### A GREAT MAN IN HISTORY

Apart from Jesus Christ, no person in history has made as deep or lasting an impression on the world as Moses, the “servant of God” (Rev. 15:3). He was the great lawgiver and emancipator of Israel, born to Jewish parents when they were slaves in a land not their own. He was educated in the court of one of the mightiest empires that has ever existed. He was heir to Egypt’s wealth, prestige, and legendary pleasures. Yet, when he was forty years old, he elected to identify himself with his own oppressed race. He had to flee the country and live outside Egypt for forty years, until God called him to return and lead the people out. He stood before Pharaoh and demanded in the name of God that Pharaoh let the people go, and God did mighty miracles to deliver his people. Moses then led the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years to the very threshold of the promised land.

His was a remarkable career. The exodus from Egypt alone is one of the great stories in history. The law, which contains the Ten Commandments, is one of the great treasures of the world.

Moses’ story is told in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, which he authored alongside Genesis. He also wrote at least one psalm—Psalm 90—and is mentioned nearly seven hundred times

in Scripture. We find his name on the lips of Jesus Christ. Paul speaks of him often. Obviously he is important.

One English writer says about Moses, “Take him for all in all, regard him not in one but many aspects, Moses is the greatest character in history, sacred or profane.”<sup>1</sup> I’m a little leery of that kind of statement. But at the very end of Deuteronomy, after Moses’ death, we read God’s own evaluation:

And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, none like him for all the signs and the wonders that the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, and for all the mighty power and all the great deeds of terror that Moses did in the sight of all Israel. (Deut. 34:10–12)

## THE CHARACTER OF MOSES

Important as Moses’ achievements are, they are overshadowed by his character. It is Moses’ character that brings him down to us and makes this study valuable. If we think only in terms of what Moses achieved, who could ever begin to dream of doing such things? It is almost inconceivable that God would use anybody today in that way. But if we think in terms of those aspects of his personality that God used, this study becomes very practical for us.

Four traits stand out above the others.

*His faith.* Moses is praised for his faith again and again. He seems to have never taken his eyes off God after God first met him at the burning bush, and so he went from faith to faith and thus from strength to strength. That is the secret of Christian leadership: faith in God. All the great heroes of the Bible—those who are praised by the Scriptures themselves—are praised because of their faith. They were normal people. They had shortcomings and doubts, just as we

1. Thomas Guthrie, *Studies of Character from the Old Testament* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1872), 107.

do. But because of their faith in God, they became strong and were used by God in great ways. The author of Hebrews says that through faith they “conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises” (Heb. 11:33). By faith they “stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword” (vv. 33–34); they “were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight” (v. 34). If you feel weak in faith, you have something to learn from Moses.

*His dedication to prayer.* When God used Moses to lead the people out of Egypt and they were trapped, as it seemed—the water of the Red Sea before them and the pursuing armies of the pharaoh behind—Moses instinctively turned to God in prayer. When the people rebelled in the wilderness, Moses turned to God in prayer. The greatest example of intercessory prayer in the entire Bible—greater even, in my judgment, than Abraham’s great plea for Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18—is Moses’ prayer for the people when they disobeyed by making the golden calf (Ex. 32). Moses offered to be sent to hell himself if by his sacrifice he could save the people whom he loved. We learn a lot about prayer from Moses.

*His meekness.* Moses was a meek man. So many people who become great or get into positions of authority lose humility right away. I’ve not known many of the famous in the world, but I’ve known some. My experience is that generally they’re very much full of themselves; you find yourself thinking that you’d rather go home and be with someone nice instead.

That did not happen to Moses. The greater he became, the more meek, the more humble he became. “Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3). When you’re thinking of leadership qualities, don’t forget humility. God puts it right up there at the top.

*His courage.* Moses excelled in courage. He showed it on many occasions, but if we had no other example, he certainly showed courage in marching up before the mighty pharaoh. A Bedouin shepherd

from the desert, Moses stood in the splendor of Egypt and said, “In the name of God Almighty, let my people go.” It took courage to do that. He showed that courage throughout his life.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHARACTER

In the few incidents we know from Moses’ early life, these good qualities do not seem prominent. For example, when Moses decided to quit the court of Pharaoh and identify himself with his people, the first thing we know he did was to kill an Egyptian. He saw oppression taking place, so he killed the oppressor. That’s not exactly humility. It may have been courage of a sort, but that courage did not stand him in great stead, because as soon as the murder was found out and he realized that his life was in danger, he fled the country. Then, when he stood before the burning bush and God told him to go back to Egypt, courage was the last thing he showed. He did not want to go. He thought up all kinds of reasons why he couldn’t go and why God had to choose somebody else.

You and I can look at characters in the Bible and say, “I wish I had those great traits, but I don’t.” But it is encouraging to know that *these* people did not always have those traits. They learned them along the way. Moses learned courage and meekness and prayer, and he grew great in faith year by year as he lived with God. If he did it, you can do it, too.

Moses lived to be 120 years old. He had forty years in Egypt in the court, and when he was forty years old, he had to run away. He spent forty years in the desert as a shepherd, and God met him at the burning bush and called him to be the deliverer when he was eighty years old. Then he led the people for forty years. It has been said that Moses spent forty years in Egypt learning *something*, then he spent forty years in the desert learning to be *nothing*, and then spent the last forty years of his life proving God to be *everything*. This is a good way of describing what the Christian life is all about. Some of us do not prove God to be everything because we’ve never learned that we are nothing. When we come to that point, we are ready to have God work through us as he did with Moses.

## MOSES THE AUTHOR

Not only was Moses a great emancipator, but he was also the vehicle by which God gave us the first five books of the Bible: the *Pentateuch* (“five scrolls”). He was the author, humanly speaking, of a large portion of the Scriptures.

Some people once argued that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch because writing was unknown in Moses’ day. All that has gone by the boards. Six different written languages from the time of Moses have been discovered in the very area where Moses led the people for forty years. Since Moses was educated in the court of the Egyptians, he certainly knew hieroglyphics; and he probably knew Akkadian, the trade language of the day. He was undoubtedly a highly educated man.

That is not the most important thing that needs to be said, however. Let me give you a basic hermeneutic—some guidelines for how our material in the Pentateuch should be approached. Four important things need to be said about the Bible.

### THE BIBLE HAS ONE TRUE AUTHOR: GOD

The Bible comes to us from God. It is more than a merely human book. It contains the characteristics of human books; the various authors put the stamp of their personalities on what they wrote, and their vocabularies differ. But the Bible, having come to us from God, contains the one story that God wants to tell us. One passage, perhaps more than any other in the Bible, makes this point:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

Sometimes we refer to the Bible as being *inspired*. *Inspired* means that God, by his Holy Spirit, *breathed into* human writers so that they wrote what God wanted. That is true, but it is not what this passage says. This passage does not say that the Bible is the result of God’s

breathing into the human writers, but that the Bible is the result of the *breathing out* of God. It is saying that the Bible is God’s Word, “and is therefore perfect and truthful, as God himself is.”<sup>2</sup>

Two important principles of interpretation follow from this. First, the Bible is God’s book from beginning to end, even though it has come to us through human authors. It is a unity. Second, because the Bible is a unity, it will not contradict itself if rightly understood. Sometimes we read portions of the Bible that seem to contradict. We say, “How can this portion go with this one?” But, if we understand it correctly, we find that the Bible tells a consistent story.

This means that the God we find in the first books of the Old Testament is the same God whom we find in the New Testament. Sometimes people say that the God in the Old Testament is a tribal deity, a God of wrath; they say the descriptions of God in the Old Testament are unworthy of him. We will find as we study that this is not true. The God whom we find at the beginning is exactly the same God who is presented to us by the Lord Jesus Christ—a sovereign, holy, and loving God.

The Bible’s unity also means that we are not misinterpreting it but rather interpreting it rightly when we see that the details given for Israel’s worship prefigure the coming ministry of Jesus Christ. What we find in the tabernacle, the sacrifices, and the plan of the construction itself—all point forward to Jesus Christ.

## THE BIBLE HAS BEEN GIVEN TO US THROUGH HUMAN AUTHORS

Sometimes people argue that to err is human; so, if human beings had anything to do with the Bible, it must contain errors. That is a fallacy of logic. Just because it is natural for me to make mistakes doesn’t mean that I have to make mistakes in any given instance. It is possible, for example, even on a human level quite apart from inspiration or anything spiritual, to write an inerrant manual on how to run a dishwasher.

2. James Montgomery Boice, *Standing on the Rock: Upholding Biblical Authority in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 39.

Now for human authors to produce an inerrant book covering so many details over such a long period of history would seem an impossibility. But we are not speaking of a book simply put together by human authors. As Paul states so clearly, “this is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:13 NIV).

And Peter states, “No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20–21). The word translated *carried along* is the same word that Luke, the author of Acts, uses when he describes a ship in the midst of a storm at sea. The sailors cut down the ship’s sails to keep them from being torn apart, and the ship was *driven along* before the wind. It was still a ship, but it couldn’t control its own destiny; the wind took it wherever it would. That is what Peter says happened to the human authors of Scripture. They were still men; they wrote with their own vocabularies; but the Holy Spirit bore them along. In other words, “What Scripture says, God says—through human agents and without error.”<sup>3</sup>

This view of inspiration has an application for interpretation. Interpretation has to do with understanding the author’s context, his vocabulary, and the situation out of which he was writing. That means, for example, that when we want to understand these books, we can learn something from secular sources. It is helpful, for example, to know about the religion of Egypt, because the plagues were not a case of God’s simply being arbitrary in his choice of scourges. The plagues were all directed against the gods of Egypt. Every single plague showed that the God of the Hebrews—the true God, Jehovah—was more powerful than Apis the bull or Hathor the cow, down through all the gods and goddesses of the Egyptian pantheon.

3. This wording, developed by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, is taken from James Montgomery Boice, *Does Inerrancy Matter?* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1981), 15, as quoted in Boice, *Standing on the Rock*, 40.

## THE BIBLE'S PURPOSE IS TO LEAD US TO FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST

Jesus taught this himself. Talking to the Jewish leaders, he said,

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. (John 5:39–40)

The Scriptures of the Jewish leaders were the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Jesus was saying in very clear language that these Scriptures were given to point to himself.

You couldn't fault the leaders of Jesus' day for failing to study the Scriptures. They did that. They were diligent in their study. They studied individual words when they copied them out. They counted the letters on the page so that they would not make a single mistake in their copying. They were great students of the Scriptures. But Jesus said that they missed the point of it all. The reason God gave the Scriptures was to point to him, and he had come—and they did not understand him and would not come to him to have life.

Do you see what this means? It means that when we study the life of Moses, we are not studying just a great man or even a marvelous story of deliverance for an oppressed people. We are studying things that point to Jesus Christ. If at the end of this book you do not understand Jesus Christ better and are not following him more closely, you have missed the point.

## WE NEED THE HOLY SPIRIT TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

Not only was the Holy Spirit active in giving the Bible, but he is also active in opening our minds to understand the Bible when we read it. Theologians refer to this as *illumination*. It is like turning on a light. Paul told the Corinthians, “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (1 Cor. 2:12). Without the Spirit, however, spiritual things cannot be understood (see 1 Cor. 2:14). Since the Bible deals with spiritual matters, it requires the ministry of the Holy Spirit for us to understand them.

This leads us to a very practical matter: we have to pray as we come to the Bible. You can become very learned in your knowledge of the Bible and not be affected by it in a personal way. You may know all about Pauline theology and even teach it better than many ministers. But for God's Word to have the right impact on you, prayer must precede your study. You have to ask the Holy Spirit for understanding, and, when you study the Bible and understand it, you have to ask the Holy Spirit to give you the grace to actually live by it. The Holy Spirit has to teach us if we are to benefit from this study of Moses' life or any other Bible topic.

## IN THE BEGINNING

Moses' story begins in Exodus, and the very first thing we notice is that this second book of the Bible is closely tied to the first. It picks up the story of Abraham's descendants by showing what happened to them in Egypt and how they got out of Egypt.

The tie between Genesis and Exodus is closer than is immediately apparent. For one thing, the Hebrew text of Exodus begins with the word *and*. Exodus 1:1 actually says, "*And these are the names. . .*" Numbers and Leviticus also begin this way. What Moses is saying, of course, is that the story that is about to begin in Exodus is not a new story. It is a new chapter in the story of redemption and a continuation of what God began when he first called Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, out of Ur of the Chaldeans.

## GOD'S PROMISE TO ABRAHAM

God's call to the patriarch Abraham gives us an outline of what is coming. In the next chapter, we will see more of the condition of the people in Egypt. But what we find in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy was prophesied by God to Abraham and recorded for us in Genesis 15. This chapter in Genesis describes what was probably the most significant day in Abraham's whole life.

God had called Abraham out of Ur when he was seventy years old and had promised him that he would be the father of a great nation. But Abraham had no children. The time came when Abraham started thinking

of an alternative. He had a servant in his household named Eliezer, and he thought, *I guess Eliezer is going to be my heir*. Then God intervened.

God took Abraham out at night and told him to look at the stars. “Can you count them?” They were beyond Abraham’s ability to count. God told Abraham that his descendants would be like that—innumerable. And Abraham “believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). James and Paul both pick up on believing God as the very essence of the gospel, and Abraham became the first great example of such belief (see Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6; James 2:23). Immediately afterward, God gave Abraham a magnificent promise.

He had Abraham make the preparations. In ancient times, when an agreement known as a covenant was enacted between two people, they did it in a solemn way with the shedding of blood. They cut animals in two and put each half of each animal over and against one another on the ground. The two parties to the covenant stood between the two rows of slain animals and the area that had been consecrated by blood, and there they would exchange their promises.

God had Abraham do that. He took a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove, and a young pigeon, cut each of them except for the birds in half, and arranged them in rows. What happened next, however, differed from the way in which a covenant was normally enacted. Abraham was on the sidelines in a dream or trance, and symbols representing God passed alone between the pieces. In other words, this covenant did not depend on Abraham. Only God participated in the ceremony. The theological term for this is *unilateral*. God’s unilateral covenant with Abraham did not depend on Abraham’s obedience, faithfulness, understanding, strength, character, courage, or anything else. God said, “This is what I’m going to do” and gave Abraham a great and marvelous promise.

Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. . . . And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. . . .

To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites. (Gen. 15:13–14, 16, 18–21)

## A HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE

God's unilateral covenant to bless Abraham contains six great statements, which give us an outline of the subsequent history of the Jewish people.

*The Hebrews would be strangers in a land that was not theirs.* The Hebrews were from Canaan. How did they end up in Egypt?

The last third of Genesis tells us how this happened. Jacob had twelve sons. One of them, Joseph, was Jacob's favorite, and his brothers hated him because of this and decided to sell him into slavery. A caravan of Midianites came by, so the brothers sold him to the Midianites. The Midianites took Joseph down to Egypt, and he was sold as a slave there.

It was a terrible thing to happen. Joseph was seventeen years old when he was carried away to a foreign land. He did not even know the language. But he was a man of integrity. Remarkably, this young man grew up in a pagan land and kept his faith in God and, furthermore, kept his character. He continued to be a moral man, and God blessed him and protected him, even though he experienced all kinds of terrible things—including lies and jail. And God used the circumstances of his life to bring him to a position of power in Egypt.

On one occasion, while Joseph was still imprisoned, the pharaoh had a dream. He did not know what it meant and was puzzled about it. He couldn't get any help from the wise men in his kingdom, but he had a servant who had been in jail with Joseph some years before, and this servant remembered that Joseph had interpreted one of his dreams, which had come true. He told the pharaoh about Joseph, saying that maybe he could help.

They called Joseph, and Joseph explained the meaning of the pharaoh's dream. There was going to be a period of abundance: seven years of plenty in the land. Then there were going to be seven years of

famine. Joseph told them to prepare for these hard years. He conducted himself so wisely that the pharaoh said, “Let’s put him in charge of the operation. Let him take charge of saving up the grain for the lean years.”

Joseph acquitted himself well and eventually became the second most powerful person in all Egypt. When the famine came, it affected Canaan as well as Egypt. Joseph’s brothers and father did not have any food, so they went down to Egypt. Through a chain of events, God not only brought about the repentance of the brothers so that they recognized what they had done and were reconciled with Joseph, but God also saved the family. Under the patronage of Joseph, they came to Egypt, and they and their descendants lived there for 430 years.

*The Hebrews would be slaves in the land.* Although Joseph was taken to Egypt as a slave, the rest of his family arrived favored by Joseph and with the blessing of the pharaoh. But eventually a new pharaoh arose who had never heard about Joseph (see Ex. 1:8). Under that pharaoh, the people began to experience the oppression that made their lives so bitter.

*The Hebrews would be mistreated.* Not only would the Hebrews be slaves, but they would also be badly mistreated, relentlessly forced to build for the Egyptians and labor in their fields (see Ex. 1:13–14). At last the oppression reached the point where the pharaoh ordered that all the newborn Hebrew males should be killed. It was a very bitter time.

*The nation that mistreated the Hebrews would be punished.* The early chapters of Exodus tell us how this happened. God judged the Egyptians by bringing a series of ten plagues on Egypt. The plagues increased in intensity. They began with the judgment on the river, and they ended with the death of all the firstborn. Because of these judgments, in the end Pharaoh was willing to let the people go.

*The Hebrews would experience a great deliverance and would leave the land of their oppression with many possessions.* Exodus 12 tells how the Israelites left the land of Egypt on the night of the Passover. *Passover* refers to the passing over of the angel of death. The

Israelites were spared on the principle of substitution. The blood they had spread on the lintels of their doors and on their doorposts showed that an innocent victim, a lamb, had died in place of the firstborn of that family. And that very night the Israelites left Egypt.

*In the fourth generation, the Hebrews would return to Canaan.* It was not an easy return. Their return took a long, long time—forty years passed before they actually entered the land. But this journey is what we read about in the continuation of the story throughout the Pentateuch. The actual entrance into the land happened under Joshua, the successor of Moses, and this story is told in the book of the Bible that bears his name.

## LEARNING AS WE GO ALONG

What we will learn in the rest of this study is very practical and can be divided broadly into two areas of application.

### THE CHARACTER OF MOSES

Moses was a great leader, and most of us have leadership responsibilities—in the home, in the church, at work, wherever it may be. If you have leadership responsibilities at all, whether you're responsible for a child or for a large group of people, you can learn from Moses and his character.

Do you believe and trust God implicitly in all things, as Moses did? Moses had a great God, and so he learned to obey him. He became great because of the greatness of God. If you do not trust God much now, are you willing to learn to trust him? If you are willing to learn to trust him, God will teach you. Your trust is what God wants more than anything else.

Are you willing to learn about prayer and to pray better than you do now? None of us is very strong in prayer. We need to learn in this area, and Moses is a great example.

Are you humble? If not, are you willing to be made so?

Moses was also courageous. There is a great difference between bravado and real courage, the courage you have when you stand up

and do the right thing—even when everything seems to be against you—because you know God. Moses bowed before God alone. He knew the greatness of his God to such a degree that he was able to stand up even before Pharaoh. Are you willing to grow in courage?

## THE CHARACTER OF GOD

We have only begun to touch on the character of God. We will see it unfolding here. In the books we will study, God teaches the people of Israel what he is like because, just as with many people today, the Hebrews had no idea. Most people today have a romantic idea of God in their heads that has nothing to do with the true God. In these books, God teaches the people about his character, especially his holiness. Much of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy has to do with God's people, the Israelites, learning about the holiness of God.

Already we have seen several things about God.

*God is faithful.* God made promises to Abraham hundreds of years before the exodus. Centuries went by. Many of the people in Egypt who were suffering under the cruel lash of their oppressors thought that God had forgotten them. But God had not forgotten. The four hundred years had not expired. At the end of that time God, who never breaks his word and who always keeps his promises, sent Moses to say to Pharaoh, "Let my people go." By the plagues on Egypt, God brought his people out of bondage.

*God is powerful.* We've begun to see that God is omnipotent and irresistible. Even Pharaoh, the mightiest monarch of the day, with all the power of the Egyptian armies at his command, was unable to stand against him. The God who delivered the people in that far-off day is the same God who has delivered us from sin through the death of Jesus Christ. He has done it for exactly the same reason: because he is a loving God who is faithful to his promises.

Do you want to know this God in a deeper way? God wants you to know him better. Tell him that, and you will find that he will reveal himself to you as he revealed himself to Moses and the people of Israel.