

## **Break the Chains Bible Study Year 2**

### **Session 2**

### **Miriam's Dance**

*by Joyce Anderson-Reed*

Experts estimate that today there are 27 million people enslaved around the world on all six inhabited continents.

**The Lord is my refuge and my defense.**

A girl can allegedly be bought as a slave in Abidjan on the Ivory Coast of Africa for about \$7; a shipment of 10 children from Mali for work on the cocoa plantations costs about \$420.

**The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is His name.**

The ruling military junta of Myanmar coerces minorities into forced labor in factories that benefit the regime and foreign corporations.

**Your right hand, Lord, is majestic in strength; your right hand, Lord, shattered the enemy.**

Millions of Pakistanis, often members of religious minorities, are forced to work as brick makers or in the fields of feudal landowners.

**You overthrew those who opposed you: you let loose your fury.**

Up to 90% of the Albanian girls who live in rural areas don't go to school for fear of being abducted and sold into sexual servitude.

**The enemy boasted: "I shall pursue, I shall overtake, I shall divide the spoil, I shall glut my appetite on them, I shall draw my sword, I shall rid myself of them."**

The CIA estimates that up to 7000 slaves are trafficked into the U.S., the land of the free, every year.

**You, O Lord, blew with your blast; the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the swelling waves.**

Today's slavery takes on the forms of chattel slavery, sex trafficking, debt bondage, and forced domestic and agricultural labor. 80% of all victims are women and children.

**Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing. Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the Lord, for He is highly exalted. The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea."**

*(Scripture cited from The Revised English Bible, University Oxford Press, 1989)*

**The Scripture:** Read Exodus 1:1-14, 5:1-21, 14:21-31, and 15:1-21.

#### **Slavery Then**

Miriam grew up as a slave. Sometimes we forget that fact because we prefer to remember her as the heroine of the Sunday School story about Moses in the basket—the big sister who rushed in to save her baby brother from certain death. But it was Moses who went to live in the palace, not Miriam.

In Exodus we're told that a Pharaoh came to the throne who did not remember Joseph. Threatened by the Israelites' numbers, this ruler forced them into slavery. According to Exodus 1:11, the Israelites built at least two cities for their captors. It was said they labored in brick and mortar, as well as all kind of work in the fields. Deuteronomy 11:10 says they pumped water from the Nile into the fields to irrigate them. When the adult Moses

comes on the scene at the end of Exodus, chapter 4, he and the Pharaoh don't see eye-to-eye on the release of the enslaved Egyptian labor force. In retaliation for Moses' message from God to free the Israelites, Pharaoh orders the slave masters to have the Israelites make bricks without straw—without dropping their quota. If they refused, they were beaten. Why was straw important? It was mixed with the clay as a binder to make the bricks stronger.

Born into slavery, Miriam most likely saw or experienced some type of violence every day of her life. The mothers and daughters were responsible for carrying water and food to their male relatives as they worked in the slave camps. As a young girl growing up in that environment, she would have been a sexual target for the Egyptian slave drivers and foremen. Perhaps she even had to be wary of the Israelite foremen. Sexual harassment of every kind was probably her "normal."

During this time in history, all the ancient cultures of the world—Mesopotamia, China, Egypt, India—accepted slavery as a fact of life. It was also common in the sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas. It wasn't until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that slavery was abolished in much of the world. At least for awhile. In the early 1990s, the end of the cold war and other geopolitical changes allowed human trafficking and slavery to once again expand.

### Slavery Now

Today there are four common types of slavery:

1. **Chattel Slavery.** Chattel slaves are considered their master's property. They are exchanged for things like vehicles, weapons, or money, and expected to perform labor and sexual favors. Once of age, their children are expected to do the same. In the Sudan, a country that straddles the Arab-African divide, a person can become the property of another for life. Slaves are used for house or farm labor, for sex, and for breeding. They may be exchanged for camels, trucks, guns, or money. In 1988, one automatic weapon could be traded for 6-7 children. A woman could be bought for \$90.
2. **Debt Bondage.** This is the most widely practiced form of slavery around the world. Extreme poverty often forces parents to offer themselves or their children as collateral against a loan. Though they are told they will only work until the debt is paid off, inflated interest rates often make this impossible. Leelu Bai from India says: *"I became bonded after I got married to my husband 20 years ago—his family had been bonded for three generations to the same landlord—they took loans for marriage, for illness, for education and so it went on.... I used to work from 6:00 am in the landlord's house—cleaning, fetching water.... Then I would go to work on the farm...cutting, threshing and so on until 7:00 pm or later. Sometimes I would have to go back to the landlord's house to clean and wash everything. Only after I had finished could I go home to feed my family."*
3. **Forced Labor.** This results when individuals are lured by the promise of a good job but instead find themselves subjected to slaving conditions—working for little or no payment, and enduring physical abuse, often in harsh and hazardous conditions. In his home country of Haiti, Andrei Prevot met a man who promised him a good job in the Dominican Republic. But it was a classic lure. Prevot was taken across the border, then sold to the Dominican soldiers for \$8 and forced against his will to cut sugar cane from December to June for little or no money.
4. **Sexual Slavery.** Women and children are lured by false offers of a good job and then beaten and forced to work in brothels. Many are kidnapped, although some are sold by their fathers or brothers to pay off a debt. Lin-Lin was 13 when her mother died. Her father took her to a job placement agency which promised to get her a good job. Her father took a \$480 advance on her earnings. Instead she was taken to a brothel. Clients pay the owner \$4 an hour for her. She cannot leave until she pays off her debt. If she refuses to cooperate, she is beaten, burned with cigarettes, or has her head immersed in water until she relents. If she tries to escapes, she might be killed.

### What Can We Do?

Miriam's situation in ancient Egypt, and the plight of men, women, and children still enslaved around the world today, can overwhelm us. How do we respond to such dire need? First, I believe we need to remember that God is personally involved in the lives of each of these people. God cares about injustice. God is quick to remind Moses that he knows exactly what's going on with the Israelites. In Exodus 3:7-8a, God says, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters and

oppressors; for I know their sorrow and sufferings and trials. And I have come down to deliver them out of the hand and power of the Egyptians." (*The Amplified Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 1965) If God knew the suffering of the Israelites, then God knows about the suffering of those enslaved today. Psalm 146:7-9 says: "He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked."

Second, I believe that hope and faith are critical in these situations. The Israelites had been enslaved for 400 years by the time Moses came on the scene to liberate them. You would think that they'd given up hope by then. But many had not. Throughout Exodus, again and again, we catch glimpses of people's faith despite all the hardship and injustice done against them. Even Miriam and her brother Aaron maintained their spiritual integrity and their faith in God despite growing up as slaves. How? Though we're never directly told, I credit the faith of their parents. Their mother showed incredible faith in the providence of God when she decided to hide Moses in a basket in the bulrushes. Miriam was a witness to that faith. Aaron didn't hesitate to join his brother Moses when he went to face the Pharaoh. He trusted that God was talking to his brother. These siblings were taught that their God had not abandoned them, that he still loved and cared for them. Their faith led them into action.

And I believe this is what God calls you and me to do as well: To let our faith move us into action! Once our ears and eyes are opened to the distress of our neighbors, we cannot be silent. If God cares for the enslaved child in the Sudan, the trafficked woman in the Ukraine, and the carpet maker who is a bond-slave in India, then so must we. Psalm 82:3-4 tells us, "Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."

Abolitionists around the world are using new methods to fight slavery. For those of us that live in countries of the developed world, they are urging the following:

1. Say no to products made with forced labor.
2. Don't do business with or tour countries that engage in slavery-like practices.
3. Press your government to act against slaving nations.

Miriam and her siblings were able to taste freedom because of God's power and intervention. God continues to intervene in history, often using people like you and me. Through many non-profit and Christian anti-slavery organizations, slaves are being set free today too. They are joining Miriam's dance. God is inviting you and me to set people free, to allow them to dance. Whatever action we take, whether big or small, will make a difference.

### Questions to Engage

1. What impacted me the most after studying this lesson? Why?
2. Have I ever heard of a modern-day slavery situation in my city or state? Is it possible slaves are being "hidden" through domestic labor, through nightclubs, or even through sweat shops in my neighborhood? How would I find out?
3. The Organic Consumer's Association ([www.organicconsumers.org](http://www.organicconsumers.org)) reminds me that Valentine's Day is the biggest shopping day of the year for chocolate and flowers. Did I know that over 40% of the world's conventional chocolate comes from the Ivory Coast where there are widespread reports of exploitation of cacao farmers and farm workers? Would I consider purchasing organic and Fair Trade chocolate as a consumer statement? With what other products might I change my buying habits?
4. What action will I take to abolish slavery? (Suggestions: Pray and correspond with a missionary working in this area. Educate myself more about a country where slavery is still practiced and share the information with a friend. Find out what is happening in my community and work with church and/or city officials to free a slave.)

### Closing Dance and Prayer

Find some tambourines and/or long scarves. With the women in your group, dance around the room playing the tambourines, waving the scarves, and singing a praise song like Miriam and her sister-friends did after crossing the Red Sea. Form a circle and offer prayers for the men, women, and children still enslaved in our world today. Pray for Holy Spirit discernment and wisdom to guide each of you to one specific action in the coming month.

### Sources

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#### **Other Websites to Explore**

[www.stophetraffik.org](http://www.stophetraffik.org); [www.antislavery.org](http://www.antislavery.org)

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