



SEASONS OF OUR LIVES

# NEW BEGINNINGS

*Finding God in the Unknown*

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*A ministry of the Diocese of Little Rock  
in partnership with Liturgical Press*

*Nihil obstat:* Jerome Kodell, OSB, *Censor Librorum*.

*Imprimatur:* ✠ Anthony B. Taylor, Bishop of Little Rock, October 2, 2018.

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ISBN: 978-0-8146-4418-8 (print); 978-0-8146-4443-0 (e-book)

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# *Introduction*

**Alive in the Word** brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

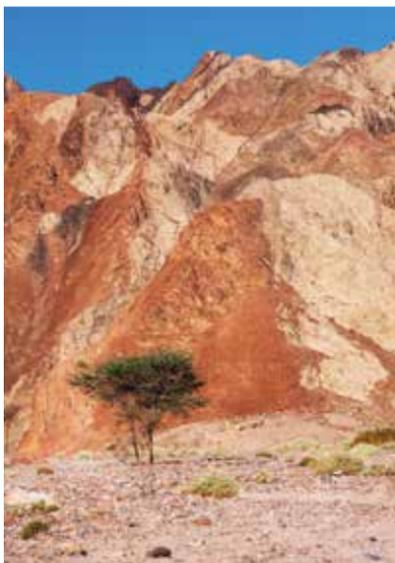
- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each of the chapters.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the day for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume on the topic of new beginnings is one of several volumes that explore **Seasons of Our Lives**. While the Scriptures remain constant, we have the opportunity to find within them a fresh message as we go through life facing various challenges. Whether the circumstances in our lives change due to our own decisions or due to the natural process of aging and maturing, we bring with us the actual lived experiences of this world to our prayerful reading of the Bible. This series provides an opportunity to acknowledge our own circumstances and to find how God continues to work in us through changing times.

## *From Wilderness to Newness*

*Begin by quietly asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read the three passages from Exodus below, each of which follows the Israelites in the journey through the wilderness.*



### **Exodus 16:1-3**

**<sup>1</sup>Having set out from Elim, the whole Israelite community came into the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt. <sup>2</sup>Here in the wilderness the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. <sup>3</sup>The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died at the LORD’s hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our kettles of meat**

**and ate our fill of bread! But you have led us into this wilderness to make this whole assembly die of famine!”**

### **Exodus 17:1-3**

**<sup>1</sup>From the wilderness of Sin the whole Israelite community journeyed by stages, as the LORD directed, and encamped at Rephidim.**

But there was no water for the people to drink, <sup>2</sup>and so they quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses replied to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to a test?” <sup>3</sup>Here, then, in their thirst for water, the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “Why then did you bring us up out of Egypt? To have us die of thirst with our children and our livestock?”

#### Exodus 19:1-8

<sup>1</sup>In the third month after the Israelites’ departure from the land of Egypt, on the first day, they came to the wilderness of Sinai. <sup>2</sup>After they made the journey from Rephidim and entered the wilderness of Sinai, they then pitched camp in the wilderness.

While Israel was encamped there in front of the mountain, <sup>3</sup>Moses went up to the mountain of God. Then the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying: This is what you will say to the house of Jacob; tell the Israelites: <sup>4</sup>You have seen how I treated the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. <sup>5</sup>Now, if you obey me completely and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession among all peoples, though all the earth is mine. <sup>6</sup>You will be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. That is what you must tell the Israelites.” <sup>7</sup>So Moses went and summoned the elders of the people. When he set before them all that the LORD had ordered him to tell them, <sup>8</sup>all the people answered together, “Everything the LORD has said, we will do.” Then Moses

brought back to the LORD the response of the people.

*Following a few moments of quiet reflection on the passages from Exodus, consider the background information provided in “Setting the Scenes.”*

### *Setting the Scenes*

Not all new beginnings stem from, or result in, places of certainty. In fact, more often than not, new beginnings take shape in the midst of the unknown and can lead to even more unknowns than existed before. Along with the uncertainty of the unknown can come anxiety, stress, and fear. But in the arms of a providential God, even uncertain new beginnings can lead us ever more deeply into lasting relationship with God and with one another. Few people have known this truth more intimately than the Israelites in their great exodus from Egypt.

We all know the backstory described in Genesis 37–46: The Israelites landed in Egypt generations earlier when the family of Jacob moved there. Jacob’s sons had sold their brother Joseph into slavery when they were younger, but Joseph worked his way into the pharaoh’s service, becoming one of his most trusted advisors. In an ironic twist, Joseph’s family migrated to Egypt seeking relief from famine in Canaan and were reunited and settled by their powerful brother. They grew and multiplied.

Over the course of time, a new pharaoh came to power who had no connection or loyalty to Joseph or his descendants, and this new pharaoh grew fearful of the Israelites' strength in numbers (Exod 1–2). So he enslaved them and treated them cruelly. Yahweh promised through Moses to deliver the Israelites from slavery (Exod 3), and after a series of plagues, the Israelites were set free—culminating in a dramatic escape from the Egyptians through the parted waters of the Red Sea (Exod 7–14).

But that was not the end of the Israelites' troubles. In fact, in some ways it was only the beginning. Having been liberated from enslavement in Egypt, the Israelites had to make a treacherous journey across a harsh desert climate to a promised land about which they knew very little. Although they'd been slaves in Egypt, at least there they had familiarity. Now, wandering in the desert, having gained their freedom, they lose any sense of familiarity and routine. Now they have to fend for themselves, make their own decisions, lead their own people—all with the providential guidance of Yahweh, whom they still continue to doubt, ignore, and even betray.

Although this adventure constitutes a new beginning for the Israelite people, it should come as no surprise that, given the circumstances, they are a bit wary of their newfound freedom. When things do not go exactly as anticipated in this new way of life, the Israelites begin to grumble and quarrel. The new beginning no doubt brought excitement, but it was the unknown that made them long for the good old days of Egypt.