

## Module 3: Self-Discovery Through Change and Rebirth

### Topic 3 Content: *Oedipus the King*, Exodos

OEDIPUS: king of Thebes  
PRIEST: the high priest of Thebes  
CREON: Oedipus' brother-in-law  
CHORUS of Theban elders  
TEIRESIAS: an old blind prophet  
BOY: attendant on Teiresias  
IOCASTE: wife of Oedipus, sister of Creon  
MESSENGER: an old man  
SERVANT: an old shepherd  
SECOND MESSENGER: a servant of Oedipus  
ANTIGONE: daughter of Oedipus and IOCASTE, a child  
ISMENE: daughter of Oedipus and IOCASTE, a child  
SERVANTS and ATTENDANTS on Oedipus and IOCASTE

*[The Second Messenger enters from the palace]*

**SECOND MESSENGER:** O you most honoured citizens of Thebes,  
what actions you will hear about and see,  
what sorrows you will bear, if, as natives here,  
you are still loyal to the house of Labdacus!  
I do not think the Ister or the Phasis rivers  
could cleanse this house. It conceals too much  
and soon will bring to light the vilest things,  
brought on by choice and not by accident.\* 1470 [1230]  
What we do to ourselves brings us most pain.

**CHORUS LEADER:** The calamities we knew about before  
were hard enough to bear. What can you say  
to make them worse?

**SECOND MESSENGER:** I'll waste no words—  
know this—noble Iocaste, our queen, is dead.

**CHORUS LEADER:** That poor unhappy lady! How did she die?

**SECOND MESSENGER:** She killed herself. You did not see it,  
so you'll be spared the worst of what went on.  
But from what I recall of what I saw  
you'll learn how that poor woman suffered. 1480 [1240]  
She left here frantic and rushed inside,  
fingers on both hands clenched in her hair.  
She ran through the hall straight to her marriage bed.  
She went in, slamming both doors shut behind her  
and crying out to Laius, who's been a corpse  
a long time now. She was remembering  
that child of theirs born many years ago—  
the one who killed his father, who left her  
to conceive cursed children with that son.

She lay moaning by the bed, where she, 1490  
 poor woman, had given birth twice over—  
 a husband from a husband, children from a child. [1250]  
 How she died after that I don't fully know.  
 With a scream Oedipus came bursting in.  
 He would not let us see her suffering,  
 her final pain. We watched him charge around,  
 back and forth. As he moved, he kept asking us  
 to give him a sword, as he tried to find  
 that wife who was no wife—whose mother's womb  
 had given birth to him and to his children. 1500  
 As he raved, some immortal power led him on—  
 no human in the room came close to him.  
 With a dreadful howl, as if someone [1260]  
 had pushed him, he leapt at the double doors,  
 bent the bolts by force out of their sockets,  
 and burst into the room. Then we saw her.  
 She was hanging there, swaying, with twisted cords  
 roped round her neck. When Oedipus saw her,  
 with a dreadful groan he took her body  
 out of the noose in which she hung, and then, 1510  
 when the poor woman was lying on the ground—  
 what happened next was a horrific sight—  
 from her clothes he ripped the golden brooches  
 she wore as ornaments, raised them high,  
 and drove them deep into his eyeballs, [1270]  
 crying as he did so: "You will no longer see  
 all those atrocious things I suffered,  
 the dreadful things I did! No. You have seen  
 those you never should have looked upon,  
 and those I wished to know you did not see. 1520  
 So now and for all future time be dark!"  
 With these words he raised his hand and struck,  
 not once, but many times, right in the sockets.  
 With every blow blood spurted from his eyes  
 down on his beard, and not in single drops,  
 but showers of dark blood spattered like hail. [1280]  
 So what these two have done has overwhelmed  
 not one alone—this disaster swallows up  
 a man and wife together. That old happiness  
 they had before in their rich ancestry 1530  
 was truly joy, but now lament and ruin,  
 death and shame, and all calamities  
 which men can name are theirs to keep.

**CHORUS LEADER:** And has that suffering man found some relief  
 to ease his pain?

**SECOND MESSENGER:** He shouts at everyone  
 to open up the gates and thus reveal  
 to all Cadmeians his father's killer,  
 his mother's . . . but I must not say those words.

He wants them to cast him out of Thebes, [1290]  
so the curse he laid will not come on this house 1540  
if he still lives inside. But he is weak  
and needs someone to lead him on his way.  
His agony is more than he can bear—  
as he will show you—for on the palace doors  
the bolts are being pulled back. Soon you will see  
a sight which even a man filled with disgust  
would have to pity.

*[OEDIPUS enters through the palace doors]*

**CHORUS LEADER:** An awful fate for human eyes to witness,  
an appalling sight—the worst I’ve ever seen.  
O you poor man, what madness came on you? 1550  
What eternal force pounced on your life [1300]  
and, springing further than the longest leap,  
brought you this awful doom? Alas! Alas!  
You unhappy man! I cannot look at you.  
I want to ask you many things—there’s much  
I wish to learn. You fill me with such horror,  
yet there is so much I must see.

**OEDIPUS:** Aaaiiii, aaaiii . . . Alas! Alas!  
How miserable I am . . . such wretchedness . . .  
Where do I go? How can the wings of air 1560 [1310]  
sweep up my voice? Oh my destiny,  
how far you have sprung now!

**CHORUS LEADER:** To a fearful place from which men turn away,  
a place they hate to look upon.

**OEDIPUS:** O the dark horror wrapped around me,  
this nameless visitor I can’t resist  
swept here by fair and fatal winds.  
Alas for me! And yet again, alas for me!  
The agony of stabbing brooches  
pierces me! The memory of aching shame! 1570

**CHORUS LEADER:** In your distress it’s not astonishing  
you bear a double load of suffering, [1320]  
a double load of pain.

**OEDIPUS:** Ah, my friend,  
so you still care for me, as always,  
and with patience nurse me now I’m blind.  
Alas! Alas! You are not hidden from me—  
I recognize you all too clearly.  
Though I am blind, I know that voice so well.

**CHORUS LEADER:** You have carried out such dreadful things—  
how could you dare to blind yourself this way? 1580  
What god drove you to it?

**OEDIPUS:** It was Apollo, friends,  
it was Apollo. He brought on these troubles— [1330]  
the awful things I suffer. But the hand  
which stabbed out my eyes was mine alone.  
In my wretched life, why should I have eyes  
when nothing I could see would bring me joy?

**CHORUS LEADER:** What you have said is true enough.

**OEDIPUS:** What is there for me to see, my friends?  
What can I love? Whose greeting can I hear  
and feel delight? Hurry now, my friends, 1590 [1340]  
lead me away from Thebes—take me somewhere,  
a man completely lost, utterly accursed,  
the mortal man the gods despise the most.

**CHORUS LEADER:** Unhappy in your fate and in your mind  
which now knows all. Would I had never known you!

**OEDIPUS:** Whoever the man is who freed my feet,  
who released me from that cruel shackle [1350]  
and rescued me from death, may that man die!  
It was a thankless act. Had I perished then,  
I would not have brought such agony 1600  
to myself or to my friends.

**CHORUS LEADER:** I agree—  
I would have preferred your death, as well.

**OEDIPUS:** I would not have come to kill my father,  
and men would not see in me the husband  
of the woman who gave birth to me.  
Now I am abandoned by the gods, [1360]  
the son of a corrupted mother,  
conceiving children with the woman  
who gave me my own miserable life.  
If there is some suffering more serious 1610  
than all the rest, then it too belongs  
in the fate of Oedipus.

**CHORUS LEADER:** I do not believe  
what you did to yourself is for the best.  
Better to be dead than alive and blind.

**OEDIPUS:** Don't tell me what I've done is not the best.  
And from now on spare me your advice. [1370]  
If I could see, I don't know how my eyes  
could look at my own father when I come  
to Hades or could see my wretched mother.  
Against those two I have committed acts 1620  
so vile that even if I hanged myself  
that would not be sufficient punishment.  
Perhaps you think the sight of my own children  
might give me joy? No! Look how they were born!  
They could never bring delight to eyes of mine.

Nor could the city or its massive walls,  
 or the sacred images of its gods.  
 I am the most abhorred of men, I,  
 the finest one of all those bred in Thebes, [1380]  
 I have condemned myself, telling everyone 1630  
 they had to banish for impiety  
 the man the gods have now exposed  
 as sacrilegious—a son of Laius, too.  
 With such polluting stains upon me,  
 could I set eyes on you and hold your gaze?  
 No. And if I could somehow block my ears  
 and kill my hearing, I would not hold back.  
 I'd make a dungeon of this wretched body,  
 so I would never see or hear again.  
 For there is joy in isolated thought, 1640  
 sealed off from a world of sorrow. [1390]  
 O Cithaeron, why did you shelter me?  
 Why, when I was handed over to you,  
 did you not do away with me at once,  
 so I would never then reveal to men  
 the nature of my birth? Ah Polybus,  
 and Corinth, the place men called my home,  
 my father's ancient house, you raised me well—  
 so fine to look at, so corrupt inside!  
 Now I've been exposed as something bad, 1650  
 contaminated in my origins.  
 Oh you three roads and hidden forest grove,  
 you thicket and defile where three paths meet,  
 you who swallowed down my father's blood [1400]  
 from my own hands, do you remember me,  
 what I did there in front of you and then  
 what else I did when I came here to Thebes?  
 Ah, you marriage rites—you gave birth to me,  
 and then when I was born, you gave birth again,  
 children from the child of that same womb, 1660  
 creating an incestuous blood family  
 of fathers, brothers, children, brides,  
 wives and mothers—the most atrocious act  
 that human beings commit! But it is wrong  
 to talk about what it is wrong to do,  
 so in the name of all the gods, act quickly—  
 hide me somewhere outside the land of Thebes, [1410]  
 or slaughter me, or hurl me in the sea,  
 where you will never gaze on me again.  
 Come, allow yourself to touch a wretched man. 1670  
 Listen to me, and do not be afraid—  
 for this disease infects no one but me.

**CHORUS LEADER:** Creon is coming. He is just in time  
 to plan and carry out what you propose.

With you gone he's the only one who's left  
to act as guardian of Thebes.

**OEDIPUS:** Alas,  
how will I talk to him? How can I ask him  
to put his trust in me? Not long ago [1420]  
I treated him with such contempt.

*[Enter Creon]*

**CREON:** Oedipus, I have not come here to mock 1680  
or blame you for disasters in the past.  
But if you can no longer value human beings,  
at least respect our lord the sun, whose light  
makes all things grow, and do not put on show  
pollution of this kind in such a public way,  
for neither earth nor light nor sacred rain  
can welcome such a sight.

*[Creon speaks to the attending servants]*

Take him inside the house  
as quickly as you can. The kindest thing  
would be for members of his family [1430]  
to be the only ones to see and hear him. 1690

**OEDIPUS:** By all the gods, since you are acting now  
so differently from what I would expect  
and have come here to treat me graciously,  
the very worst of men, do what I ask.  
I will speak for your own benefit, not mine.

**CREON:** What are you so keen to get from me?

**OEDIPUS:** Cast me out as quickly as you can,  
away from Thebes, to a place where no one,  
no living human being, will cross my path.

**CREON:** That is something I could do, of course, 1700  
but first I wish to know what the god says  
about what I should do.

**OEDIPUS:** But what he said [1440]  
was all so clear—the man who killed his father  
must be destroyed. And that corrupted man  
is me.

**CREON:** Yes, that is what was said. But now,  
with things the way they are, the wisest thing  
is to ascertain quite clearly what to do.

**OEDIPUS:** Will you then be making a request  
on my behalf when I am so depraved?

**CREON:** I will. For even you must now trust in the gods. 1710

**OEDIPUS:** Yes, I do. And I have a task for you  
as I make this plea—that woman in the house,

please bury her as you see fit. You are the one  
to give your own the proper funeral rites.  
But never let my father's city be condemned  
to have me living here while I still live. [1450]

Let me make my home up in the mountains  
by Cithaeron, whose fame is now my own.  
When my father and mother were alive,  
they chose it as my special burying place— 1720  
and thus, when I die, I'll be following  
the orders of the ones who tried to kill me.

And yet I know this much—no disease  
nor any other suffering can kill me—  
for I would never have been saved from death  
unless I was to suffer a strange destiny.  
But wherever my fate leads, just let it go.  
As for my two sons, Creon, there's no need  
for you to care for them on my behalf—  
they are men—thus, no matter where they are, 1730 [1460]  
they'll always have enough to live on.\*

But my two poor daughters have never known  
my dining table placed away from them  
or lacked their father's presence. They shared  
everything I touched—that's how it's always been.  
So take care of them for me. But first let me  
feel them with my hands and then I'll grieve.  
Oh my lord, you noble heart, let me do that—  
if my hands could touch them it would seem  
as if I were with them when I still could see. 1740 [1470]

*[Some SERVANTS lead ANTIGONE and ISMENE out of the palace]*

What's this? By all the gods I hear something—  
is it my two dear children crying . . . ?  
Has Creon taken pity on me  
and sent out the children, my dear treasures?  
Is that what's happening?

**CREON:** Yes. I sent for them.  
I know the joy they've always given you—  
the joy which you feel now.

**OEDIPUS:** I wish you well.  
And for this act, may the god watch over you  
and treat you better than he treated me.  
Ah, my children, where are you? Come here, 1750 [1480]  
come into my arms—you are my sisters now—  
feel these hands which turned your father's eyes,  
once so bright, into what you see now,  
these empty sockets. He was a man, who,  
seeing nothing, knowing nothing, fathered you  
with the woman who had given birth to him.  
I weep for you. Although I cannot see,  
I think about your life in days to come,

the bitter life which men will force on you.  
 What citizens will associate with you? 1760  
 What feasts will you attend and not come home  
 in tears, with no share in the rejoicing? [1490]  
 When you're mature enough for marriage,  
 who will be there for you, my children,  
 what husband ready to assume the shame  
 tainting my children and their children, too?  
 What perversion is not manifest in us?  
 Your father killed his father, and then ploughed  
 his mother's womb—where he himself was born—  
 conceiving you where he, too, was conceived. 1770  
 Those are the insults they will hurl at you. [1500]  
 Who, then, will marry you? No one, my children.  
 You must wither, barren and unmarried.  
 Son of Menoeceus, with both parents gone,  
 you alone remain these children's father.  
 Do not let them live as vagrant paupers,  
 wandering around unmarried. You are  
 a relative of theirs—don't let them sink  
 to lives of desperation like my own.  
 Have pity. You see them now at their young age 1780  
 deprived of everything except a share  
 in what you are. Promise me, you noble soul,  
 you will extend your hand to them. And you, [1510]  
 my children, if your minds were now mature,  
 there's so much I could say. But I urge you—  
 pray that you may live as best you can  
 and lead your destined life more happily  
 than your own father.

**CREON:** You have grieved enough.  
 Now go into the house.

**OEDIPUS:** I must obey,  
 although that's not what I desire.

**CREON:** In due time 1790  
 all things will work out for the best.

**OEDIPUS:** I will go.  
 But you know there are conditions.

**CREON:** Tell me.  
 Once I hear them, I'll know what they are.

**OEDIPUS:** Send me away to live outside of Thebes.

**CREON:** Only the god can give you what you ask.

**OEDIPUS:** But I've become abhorrent to the gods.

**CREON:** Then you should quickly get what you desire.

**OEDIPUS:** So you agree? [1520]



**CREON:** I don't like to speak  
thoughtlessly and say what I don't mean.

**OEDIPUS:** Come then, lead me off.

**CREON:** All right, 1800  
but let go of the children.

**OEDIPUS:** No, no!  
Do not take them away from me.

**CREON:** Don't try to be in charge of everything.  
Your life has lost the power you once had.

*[CREON, OEDIPUS, ANTIGONE, ISMENE, and ATTENDANTS all enter the  
palace]\**

**CHORUS:** You residents of Thebes, our native land,  
look on this man, this Oedipus, the one  
who understood that celebrated riddle.  
He was the most powerful of men.  
All citizens who witnessed this man's wealth  
were envious. Now what a surging tide 1810  
of terrible disaster sweeps around him.  
So while we wait to see that final day,  
we cannot call a mortal being happy  
before he's passed beyond life free from pain. [1530]

## Notes

**The numbers in square brackets refer to the Greek text; the numbers without brackets refer to the English text.**

\*This line refers, not the entire story, but to what Iocaste and Oedipus have just done to themselves.

\*Oedipus' two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, would probably be fifteen or sixteen years old at this time, not old enough to succeed Oedipus.

\*It is not entirely clear from these final lines whether Oedipus now leaves Thebes or not. According to Jebb's commentary (line 1519), in the traditional story on which Sophocles is relying, Oedipus was involuntarily held at Thebes for some time before the citizens and Creon expelled him from the city. Creon's lines suggest he is going to wait to hear from the oracle before deciding about Oedipus. However, there is a powerful dramatic logic in having Oedipus stumble off away from the palace. In Book 23 of the *Iliad*, Homer indicates that Oedipus died at Thebes, and there were funeral games held in his honour in that city.

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