

## **God Remembers: The Impotence of Evil and the Power of Promise**

**Exodus 1:1-22**

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Now would you please take your copies of God's Word in your hands and turn with me to the book of Exodus, chapter 1. You'll find that on page 44 in the church Bibles. Before we read, a word of preface. We're beginning a new series in Exodus, a foundational book if we're to understand the history of God's dealings with His people. It is of course more than simply a history. It is the record of God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery and bondage and of the way that He ordered or began to order their lives together. And it becomes the Old Testament paradigm for salvation, for the way God rescues and redeems His people. The Exodus story, in other words, is the Gospel story in Old Testament categories, points us to, teaches us about God, His sovereignty, His promises, His covenant, especially His purpose to save a people for Himself from among the nations for His glory, and that it will do so ultimately by our Passover Lamb, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Lord Jesus Christ. Our title, as we work through the opening section of the book of Exodus, the first twelve chapters, is "God Remembers," because that is the big idea in those twelve chapters - God's remembering and being faithful to His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is because God remembers His covenant promises that His people, then and now, are secure.

So let's turn to page 44, Exodus chapter 1. Before we read it would you bow your heads with me as we pray? Let's pray.

*O Lord, would You speak to us by Your Word, pour out Your Spirit, save us from the way our sin distorts the truth; our remaining corruptions still would bend it to our own ends. Instead, would You bring us to a place of submission to it, resting on the Christ who comes to us by it. Feed us on Christ and His promises and by them strengthen us for Your glory. In Jesus' name, amen.*

Exodus chapter 1, beginning at verse 1. This is the Word of Almighty God:

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. All the

descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt. Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.

Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and let the male children live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live."

Amen, and thanks be to God that He has spoken to us by His holy Word.

### **Tumultuous Days and Timeless Truths**

We live at a time when pessimism and discouragement about the future are very real temptations, perhaps especially as Christians. Socially it's a time of rapid, moral change. I was thinking the other day about how President Obama, when he ran for office, what was it, in 2008? He said that he believed that marriage was between one man and one woman. He could not get elected on any other basis. Today, we see Supreme Court actions striking down state bans on same sex marriage across the country. Racial tensions boil over into open protests, even violence on our streets, and more often than not it seems to us our politicians are gridlocked in point-counterpoint debate rather than really attending

to the needs of the citizens. Internationally, we are watching the horror of ISIS sweeping through central Asia, displaying their brutality on the television screen, leveraging Facebook to publicize their beheadings. In Africa, Ebola has claimed now thousands of deaths and in Europe, Russia seems intent on carving off chunks of the Ukraine. These are dark days, aren't they? Which is why it's so important for us to arm ourselves with a Biblical philosophy of history, to understand the world and its events from the vantage point of God's grand design. We need some theological perspective and Exodus chapter 1 can help us with that. Let's take a look at it together.

I want you to notice three things. First, we're reminded in verses 1 to 7 that our story is part of a larger drama. Our story is part of a larger drama. Then in verses 8 to 22, our struggle is part of a wider conflict. And then the whole passage reminds us that our security rests on a solid foundation. Our story is part of a larger drama, our struggle is part of a wider conflict, and our security rests on a solid foundation.

## **I. Our Story is Part of a Larger Drama**

Let's look at verses 1 to 7 first of all - our story is part of a larger drama. The Hebrew text, untranslated by our English version, begins actually rather strangely. The first word is literally "And." "And these are the names of the sons of Israel..." The book of Exodus starts as if the book of Genesis had not ended. It's written in a way to make the point that Exodus is not a disconnected tale of events happening at a time and place remote from anything else God had said or done. No, it is the continuation of the story. This is Act II in the drama. This is Volume 2 in an ongoing work. The eleven sons of Jacob who moved with their families into Egypt are listed in verses 2 to 4 with the total number of persons who made the journey along with them. Seventy people went down, we're told, to live in Egypt. And you'll recall that Joseph, the twelfth son, had been sold into slavery and bondage in Egypt by the others. That is the story that occupies the last cycle of the book of Genesis. And yet by God's providence, his bondage notwithstanding, Joseph became prime minister of Egypt. And when famine struck, as God had told Joseph it would, he was enabled to make provision not only for Egypt but also for his family. He brought his family to live with him in safety in Egypt. That is the burden of the last section of the book of Genesis recapitulated here in the opening verses of Exodus chapter 1.

Soon, however, that original generation, the seventy who came down into Egypt, die off, verse 6, and become now instead a great nation. Verse 7, "The people of Israel," listen to this language carefully, "The people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly. They multiplied and grew exceedingly strong so that the land was filled with them." That seems like an innocent enough reporting of the facts. The family of Jacob grew and become an entire people group, true enough, but Moses is carefully using key words to remind us of the earlier story yet again.

They resonate all the way through the book of Genesis. Moses wants us to understand what's really going on in this remarkable expansion in the life of God's people. This is the same language, for example, God used with Adam, commanding Adam in Genesis chapter 1 in verse 28 while he lived in the garden of Eden to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it;" it's language repeated after the Flood with Noah in Genesis 9 and verse 1 - "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." It is language that is taken up and transformed into a promise in the covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 22:17 and following - "I will surely bless you. I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore." Repeated again in the promise to Isaac, Abraham's son, Genesis 26:4, and to Jacob, Isaac's son, Genesis 35:11 - "I am God Almighty, be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you." So the original mandate of creation taken up in the special covenant promise between God and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is what stands behind the language of Exodus 1 verse 7. In other words, God is keeping His promises. God is keeping His promises.

### **God's Purposes Never Fail: Taking a Long-Term Perspective**

Isn't it helpful to remember? No matter the difficulties facing us and as we'll see in a moment there were profound difficulties facing the people of Israel. Isn't it helpful to be reminded that God is working His purposes out as year succeeds to year, that amidst the darkness and the hostility and the sin of a fallen world, the promise and the mandate of God advances nonetheless, that our small stories are part of a larger drama in which the design of God, the agenda of God, is being accomplished no matter how things may appear to us.

I discovered in my research an article in *The Economist* speaking about Jeff Bezos who is the CEO of Amazon who has invested \$42 million dollars in a project constructing the 10,000 year clock, inside a mountain in Texas somewhere. Apparently, you can go and visit this thing and when it's finished you will be able to take a tour and see key dates recorded as the years advance. A 10,000 year clock. Bezos has called it on the website designated or devoted to the project, he's called it "an icon for long-term thinking." That's an understatement, I think. A 10,000 year clock. An icon for long-term thinking. That's what Exodus 1:7 is too, you know, an icon of long-term thinking. It aims to remind us our lives are part of a bigger story in which God's promises and purposes are fulfilled, 100% of the time. It asks us to put ourselves in context, in perspective, in light of the overarching sovereign purposes of the God of infinite glory. Don't let your present experiences or circumstances define for you the limit of God's faithfulness to His plan. Keep your trials in perspective. Develop long-term thinking. Our story is part of a much larger drama in which His purposes never fail. They never fail. Our story is part of a larger drama.

## **II. Our Struggle is Part of a Wider Conflict**

Then secondly notice that our struggle is part of a larger conflict. Verses 8 to 22 - A new king has arisen who doesn't know Joseph. That probably does not mean that he's never heard of the man but rather that he does not care to pay respect to Joseph's memory or to his people. Instead, the new pharaoh sees the expanding Hebrew nation within his borders as a security threat, a threat to national security, or perhaps even a threat to his own dynastic ambitions. "They are," he says, verse 9, "too many and too mighty for us." His fear is that the Hebrews will ally themselves with his enemies and overcome them. His solution, at first at least, is verse 11, to subjugate the people and make them slaves. Verse 11 - "They set task masters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses." Pharaoh, driven by self interest, political expediency, perhaps even no small degree of prejudice, is willing to subject an entire people to bondage and suffering.

### **Blessing and Expansion in the Midst of Suffering and Hostility**

It's a terrible picture but actually it contains an important Biblical principle for the people of God in every age. And that is, that along with the experience of blessing often comes an experience of suffering, oftentimes hand in hand. God was blessing His covenant people, verse 7, He was keeping His promises, He was doing what He said He would do, and yet with that blessing their came a reaction. There is hostility and animosity and insecurity and oppression. It's a hard lesson to learn but it is vital if we are to navigate life's challenges successfully as Christians. The blessing of God does not mean the absence of suffering. In fact, as Jesus puts it in John 16:33, "In this world you will have" what? Trouble. Or Paul, Acts 14:22, "Through many hardships we must enter the kingdom of God." How important it is to understand that. How much confusion and sadness we might be spared if we saw that our sufferings are not the opposite of God's blessings, that His favor towards us in Christ has not been withdrawn because for a season we have been submerged beneath trials. In fact, verse 12, the worst the world can do in all its animus and restless hatred against the church cannot and will not thwart and may in fact provide the best environment and context for the church's advance. Verse 12, "The more they were oppressed the more they multiplied and spread abroad."

I do not have green thumbs. My study is a place where plants go to die. But my wife does. She once bought a bougainvillea; I don't know what a bougainvillea is but apparently it was flowering and it looked beautiful at the time. And then she planted it out and she tended it carefully and she watered it and it never flowered again. Turns out that bougainvillea don't like what other plants like and don't thrive where other plants thrive. They like poor soil and they don't like to be watered. In fact, they like rather hostile circumstances and conditions. In an environment that seems deadly, it flourishes. And sometimes that's the way it is with the church. That was certainly the case if you'll remember in the book of Acts chapters 7 and 8 - Stephen stoned to death for his faith in Messiah Jesus,

cheered on, the crowds cheered on as they stoned him by Saul of Tarsus. And a great persecution breaks out and the church in Jerusalem is scattered. It looks like a catastrophe of the highest order for the cause of Christ and the spread of the Gospel. And yet it turns out that the church is scattered precisely according to the program outlined by Christ in the opening chapters of the book. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and in Samaria and to the ends of the earth." And everywhere the believers went they shared the good news about Jesus and the Gospel spread and advanced. And eventually Saul of Tarsus, who ravaged the church we're told in the beginning of chapter 8, is converted to faith in Jesus Christ himself and becomes the great missionary theologian and apostle to the Gentiles. The Gospel advanced in hostile conditions, the church grew, the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church.

That's what happened in Acts; that's what's happening here in Exodus, and often it is what God purposes by our trials in our own lives and in our life together as a church. He brings hardship. He prunes the vine that it may blossom and bear fruit. Of course the advance of the people of God under God's blessing "fills the Egyptians with dread," verse 12, and they redouble their efforts. Verse 13 and 14 repeat for emphasis the same line - "The Egyptians ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves." A repetition like this is the Biblical way for italics and underline and bold. This is brutal slavery God's people now are being subjected to and the worse it gets the more they prosper, the more they prosper the worse it gets. It is of course a vain exercise. God's blessing overcomes the hatred of the world. The church, the people of God expand, and so Pharaoh decides on a new strategy, a "final solution," to borrow a phrase. Verse 15 and 16 - "Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 'When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.'" It's a brutal, bloody strategy designed to preserve the adult male Hebrew slave labor force while ensuring at the same time that within a generation the Hebrews, as a distinct people, would be gone forever. Their women married off to Egyptian men, the Hebrews would be no more.

But look at verse 17. These two lowly Hebrew midwives; what heroines they are. They feared God and preserved the lives of the children. And then the story begins to really grip with ironies, doesn't it? Pharaoh, red-faced, steam coming out of his ears, fuming that his every strategy is thwarted, demands an explanation and I'm sure trying to hide a smile these women said, "Well you know Hebrew women aren't like you Egyptians. They're vigorous and they give birth before we can get there." I don't think it's necessary to imagine them telling lies. I'm sure that's simply a statement of fact, although it is one, no doubt, they were banking on as they resolved to disobey the wicked edicts of an ungodly monarch. But you see some of the ironies there? "The Hebrew women are not like you Egyptians." Pharaoh, nameless Pharaoh, is being made a laughing stock of, while two lowly Hebrew midwives names are preserved for posterity and celebrated for their courage and faith; their names recorded in holy Scripture. We

don't know who Pharaoh was. These women are being celebrated, pointed out, highlighted. And notice too the design of Pharaoh is exactly opposite to the final outcome. The Hebrew population continues to grow, verse 20 - "God dealt well with the midwives and the people multiplied and grew strong." And because the midwives feared God - how's this for irony? Because the midwives, who are to be the executioners of the Hebrew boys to stop the expansion and growth of the people of God, because they feared God, God gave them families so that they contribute to the expansion and growth of the people of God. And so the climax of verse 22, Pharaoh now tells the mob to take matters into their own hands. The populous now are to destroy the Hebrew male children by throwing them into the Nile.

### **The "Power" of Pharaoh vs. The Sovereign Providence of God**

Do you see the back and forth here? The competing claims that are being made between Pharaoh and the sovereign God, between the plan of a despotic earthly king and the plan of a sovereign God of grace? Who is in control? Pharaoh believes it should be him, but no matter what he tries, the promises of God and the people of God prosper because God the Lord reigns and never the malice of the world or the hatred of the devil, God the Lord reigns. Exodus 1 is of course a simple repetition, it's another iteration of the ancient enmity fixed by God between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent in Genesis chapter 3 - the cosmic conflict that sweeps down through history between the people of God and the world. There are kingdoms in conflict here but nothing can stop the advance and the victory of the kingdom of our God over the kingdom of darkness. We need to understand that our daily struggle with sin and sorrow, with quiet prejudice or open hostility is nothing other than a localized skirmish in a cosmic war. But as we labor in that conflict we are to remember two of the lessons our passage teaches us - that evil is ultimately futile and self-defeating. Providence always prevails. He is able, our God, to work all things, even the malice and cruel intent of pharaoh, He is able to work all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. "Therefore, let us not grow weary in well-doing," 2 Thessalonians 3 and verse 13. "Let us consider Jesus who endured from sinners such opposition against himself so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted," Hebrews 12 and verse 3. Let's remember the example of Shiphrah and Puah, whose names, by the way, mean "beauty" and "splendor." Doesn't that say it all? Beauty and splendor - that's these two women, adorning the doctrine of God, the Gospel of God by their conduct, trusting the promise of God rather than bowing to the edicts of wicked men. Let's remember these faithful women who trusted God, obeyed Him, stood with His kingdom, and as we learn to imitate them in our own struggle, let's remember that like their struggle it is part of a larger conflict, a cosmic battle. But learn too, as Shiphrah and Puah did by experience, that battle belongs to the Lord.

### **III. Our Security Rests on a Solid Foundation**

Our story is part of a larger drama, our struggle part of a wider conflict, and finally and briefly doesn't all of this teach us and remind us that our security rests on a solid foundation? It is hard to be a Christian today. The pressure to conform to the prevailing norms of the world is incredible. To embrace a life driven by the pursuit of money where sex is an idol, where absolutes are taboo, there are social and political pressures pushing Christian truth claims, especially Christian ethical claims out of the public arena, privatizing them, locking them away and keeping them out of sight. It's hard to be a Christian today. But Exodus 1 points us back to covenant promises and the sovereign providence of Almighty God who works all things together for the good of His people. It reminds us that our lives are lived in the grip of a grand design and we are secure amidst our trials, not because we have the resources to win the battle on our own but in the end because Jesus Christ has triumphed. Puah and Shiphrah teach us to trust the covenant promises and to see that God will make a way. As Martin Luther sings so triumphantly, "His kingdom is forever."

#### **From the Kingdom of Pharaoh to the Kingdom of Christ**

Think about it like this. Puah and Shiphrah, if they had done anything else than disobey the king, if they had given in to the king's command, the Hebrew people would have been wiped out and there would be no virgin birth in the fullness of time and no Jesus, no cross, no empty tomb. There would have been no Gospel and no church in the world. We would not be here praising the name of the Lord our Maker and Redeemer. But God worked by these two remarkable women to bring His sovereign design to fulfillment so that one day born of a woman, born under the Law, Jesus Christ, the Son of Abraham, the Child of promise, might redeem us from sin and death and hell, which means Exodus 1 in the last analysis is a Gospel text. It shows us how the sovereign God works the malice of Pharaoh and the faith of two lowly midwives together to bring His Son into the world by whom the kingdom of Satan has been shattered and defeated at Calvary and under whose rule one day the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ. And that, brothers and sisters, is where our security rests, or it needs to. Not in our faith or in our courage to face down the trials that come our way, but in Christ, who was Himself made the object of the malice and hatred of the world, who was nailed to a Roman cross, and who rose, nevertheless, in triumph King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It is because the battle belongs to the Lord and Jesus Christ reigns that we find the strength today to stay in the fight and to press on even when the battle rages and we feel hard pressed and beleaguered. The battle belongs to the Lord. Christ is risen. Satan has been toppled and his rule overthrown. And sitting on the throne of glory is the God-Man, your Elder Brother, Savior, Friend.

Our story is part of a larger story - the unfolding plan of God, a plan that cannot fail. Our struggle is part of a wider struggle - the cosmic conflict of the kingdom of

God with the world. And our security rests on a solid foundation - the promise of God and the triumph of the person of Jesus Christ. As you rest on Him and on God's promises and on His providence, you will find the strength to stay in the fight and to press on. Will you pray with me please?

*Father, we thank You for the Gospel where our security rests because of which we are safe. We thank You that our Savior reigns from Your throne. Help us when the enemy comes in like a flood to remember the battle belongs to the Lord and help us, therefore, to stay in the fight. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.*

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