

The Midwives, Who Feared God

Exodus 1:15-22

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus, chapter 1 again. We're going to concentrate on the final words of the chapter, beginning in verse 15. I couldn't help but think as Derek was preaching on Job, chapter 2 on Wednesday night, that the same struggle of Job not knowing what God's sovereign purposes were in his trial, must have dawned upon at least some of the children in Egypt. Surely, this question crossed their mind. Why would you have sent us to Egypt in the first place? Why would we have faced the attempts of the officials of this land to exterminate us as a people? Why would we undergo slavery, not for one or two or three generations, but for ten generations. Four hundred and thirty years. Why would we have been called by you to dwell in land where Joseph was no longer remembered? Lord, what are your purposes? What are you doing? Seems to make no sense.

Now we had the benefit of Moses' divinely inspired explanation of God's sovereign providential plans, but you understand again now the people of God in the midst of this did not have the benefit which we have. We not only have the hindsight of seeing as it were the end of this story, but we have the superscript which describes for us as its unfolding God's purposes. God reveals to us something of his purposes, even as Moses tells the story. We'll see how God sort of gives clues to what he is doing even in the ironic statements in this account we're going to read tonight. But the people of God, just like you today, don't always have a clue what God is doing in their lives. That, of course, is a key for us, as we cope with God's providence. Because part of God's providence is to trust in Him when the lights are out. The people of God had to learn that in Exodus, as Job had to learn it as we have to learn it. Now we come then to Exodus, chapter 1, verse 15 and one of these instances in which the lights seemingly go out. But God is sovereign. Let's hear His word:

Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiprah, and the other was named Puah; and he said, "When you are helping the Hebrew woman to give birth and see them upon the birth stool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live." But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live. So king of Egypt

called for the midwives, and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, and let the boys live?" And the midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous, and they give birth before the midwife can get to them." So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty. And it came about because the midwives feared God, that He established households for them. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, "Every son who is born you are to cast into the Nile, and every daughter you are to keep alive."

Amen and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we bow before You tonight and we thank you for the story that you have set before us. This true account of the history of Your dealings with Your people, Israel. We acknowledge that this is not simply an interesting story about a people who lived a long, long time ago. This is not simply an interesting story about a people who lived a long, long time ago, very far, very remote from us. But this is something You have written for us, for our instruction. It happened for our instruction. You tell us by the words of the apostle Paul. Help us to remember that as we study it. Help us, O God, not only to be moved by what You've done, and to be moved even by the way that Moses tells it, but to be moved to wonder, love and praise, to worship, to the fear of God and to obedience. We ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

The last time we were together looking at verses 8 through 14 of Exodus, chapter 1, we said that Pharaoh- in an attempt to retain his power and to keep the children of Israel under control who were multiplying, according to the promise of God to Abraham being fulfilled in their midst-that Pharaoh had established a plan. He decided that he would attempt to constrict the population growth of Israel, to manage population, to impose some sort of population control, he would inflict heavy labor upon the children of Israel. Perhaps this would bring about a high mortality rate amongst the men, the laborers. Perhaps the very vigors and rigors of life would decrease their life expectancy, and perhaps bring about impotency. And so he enforced on them heavy, burdensome labors. Forced corporate labor upon the men. Building cities, making bricks, working in the fields around the Nile, doing manual labor even that say animals would have been expected to do in some settings.

But we also saw that it didn't work. Even in the midst of the Pharaoh's plan to thwart the growth of God's people, God blesses them in accordance with the blessing and promise that he had given to Abraham. Thus again showing God's sovereignty even over the designs of the enemies of his people. When we come to this passage tonight, Pharaoh has dropped back to plan B. Plan A has not worked. Now comes plan B. A second plan to control and to suppress the children of Israel.

I want you to understand what's going on here. Moses is making it clearer and clearer in this passage that what we have going on is not merely a contest between a powerful near eastern monarch and the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It's not simply the story of a monarch who is seeking to consolidate his control over a nation, to make his nation invulnerable to international attack, and using this particular people that happens to be in his midst. It's not just a story about that. It is, in fact, a story with much greater dimensions. In fact cosmic dimensions because this is a story about the struggle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. And ultimately it's the story of the struggle between Satan to thwart the purposes of God, and God in his sovereignty to bring about blessing to His people, and indeed to the whole earth. And so with that in mind, I'd like you to look at two or three things in this package tonight.

I. Pharaoh's second plan to control the children of Israel.

First of all if you look in verses 15 and 16 we see delineated the second phase of Pharaoh's plan to keep the children of Israel under control, or rather, let me state it more boldly, Pharaoh's plan to destroy the children of Israel. To cause them to be no more. Now let me just pause there, and you say, "Now wait a minute. That doesn't make sense. He needs the forced labor of Israel. Aren't you just reading that into the passage?" "No, I'm not." He wants forced laborers, but he doesn't necessarily want Israelite forced laborers. He would like people who were half Israelite and half Egyptian to be his forced laborers. They would not form, as it were, a strong cohesive, foreign, ethnic group within his land that would be a potential threat. So he would much rather have something that was not a unified tribe or people or race. He would rather have a new lotto race, a mixed race. And so his desire really is to destroy Israel. I don't mean to wipe out everyone, including the women, but I do mean to wipe out the men in order to bring about the only progress in the race through intermarriage in Egypt.

One of the very reasons we said that God had probably put Israel in Egypt to prevent intermarriage with a foreign culture. And so Pharaoh's plans are working at cross-purposes with God's plans, who will win. Moses tells you, "Pharaoh is here." Already in verses 15 and 16 are shown to be part of the cosmic struggle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. We've already seen Pharaoh, in an attempt to retain his own power and to suppress Israel, commanding the midwives of Israel to commit infanticide, the murder of infants, and specifically the murder of infant boys. And in doing this he is merely a pawn of Satan. I do not deny that Pharaoh had his own reasons for doing this. And I am not even contesting that if you and I had been there and had been meeting with Pharaoh's chief of population control, I am not even denying that he might have tried to come up with some sort of a humanitarian explanation for why this was a good thing for him to do. Well, you have to remember there's only a limited

food supply, and we have so many people to take care of, and on and on and on. I can imagine the justification. Actually, we're much more humane than the countries around us, etc., etc., etc. I'm not denying that at all, but you need to understand that pharaoh here is a pawn of Satan. Wittingly or unwittingly he is carrying out the designs of the evil one.

Moses is depicting this, this unfolding drama as a contest between the god of Israel and the God of Egypt. And Pharaoh, of course, was one of the gods of Egypt himself. He was considered to be divine. So now we're going to see who's sovereign. The god of Egypt, little 'g' false god, pharaoh, the other gods of Egypt whom the Egyptians worshiped or God, the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This is a battle, a war between the forces of light and darkness that Moses is unfolding for us.

And the passage, I want you to see before we ever begin to look at it in detail, is filled with irony. And those ironies not only display God's wisdom, but they display God's sovereignty. For instance, think of this. Egypt's fear of Israel leads Egypt to wickedness with the design of destroying Israel, but it fails. The midwives fear of God leads to a refusal to do wickedness in order to preserve life of the sovereign tyrant of Egypt, and it succeeds. There is irony throughout this passage, and the irony is there to display for us the sovereignty of God.

Now let's notice some of the interesting details, just right here in verses 15 and 16. First of all, we see this irony. The king of Egypt having a conversation, an interview, a court session with two midwives. Now my friends I recognize we live in a liberated time, and I mean no offense whatsoever to the females of our congregation, but for the king of Egypt in his day and age to be sharing a courtroom exchange with midwives, surely that's beneath the majesty of the mightiest monarch in the near East. And Moses tells us that with his tongue firmly planted in his cheek. Look how far the god of Egypt has to go to further his desires. He is dependent upon midwives to carry out his plan. Notice also that the midwives are named, Shiphrah and Puah. Perhaps a name that means beautiful and a name which perhaps means girl or one who is favored. At any rate, isn't it interesting that no reigning monarch of Egypt is ever named anywhere in the entire narrative of the exodus, but the midwives are named. The great and powerful of this world, who do not serve the one true God, their names will be forgotten, but the names of the righteous will live forever. Who are the people that I want to see when I am in glory are Shiphrah and Puah, because without those faithful women, the Messiah would not have come. Their refusal to bow to the genocidal plans of this tyrant was an integral component in bringing about the line of promise, succession, even in the bondage of Egypt so that the Messiah of God would eventuate in this world born of Israel. In the biblical scale of values these lowly champions of morality assume a far greater historic importance than do the all-powerful tyrants who rule Egypt.

Look at the command of Pharaoh. This is cruelty at its best. Look at the four-fold

aspect of this plan which shows just how cruel and contemptuous is the heart of Pharaoh. First of all children are to be killed, infant children are to be killed. You cannot conceive of a more wicked deed. You know of all the human beings that dwell on this planet that are most innocent, it is those defenseless children in the first moments of their birth. I do not deny that they are possessed of original sin like all of us, I do not deny that every human brought into this world is deserving of punishment because we have fallen in Adam and thus have contracted his guilt and his deserved punishment. Nevertheless, of all those who are least guilty of actual sin, little infants. And they are the objects of Pharaoh's rage.

Secondly, he calls on women to carry out the murder of these little children. Now my friends, you don't need to know anything about anything to recognize the unnaturalness of that. Women who are the carriers and givers of life called upon to be the destroyers of it. But that's not all, he not only calls on women to do this, he calls on midwives to do this. Now you need to understand that in the Bible, and historically, there is no gynecological profession other than that of midwifery. Did you realize that midwifery was the way that babies were delivered until about the sixteenth century universally? It was not considered appropriate for a man to be anywhere near the birth of a child. It was indiscreet, it was immodest. And so midwives were the way that children were delivered. And he is calling upon those who were the assisters of the life-giving process of birth to slaughter those that they are bringing into this world. It is wickedness of the deepest dye. But that's not all. He calls upon those who are called Hebrew midwives to do this deed. Now I know the scholars tell us that it's unlikely that Hebrew midwives would have agreed to slaughter the children of their own people. And I understand that the scholars tell us that the word Hebrew was capable of a broader meaning than simply the children of Israel. It may well have applied much more broader to any kind of Semitic race dwelling in Egypt. I understand all those things. But you understand that the irony that Moses is building for you here is that Pharaoh wants to use these women, these female midwives of God's own people to destroy His people. Moses is painting you a picture of how black the heart of Pharaoh is. He's showing you how dastardly is this deed.

Why would Pharaoh only want to only kill the males? Well, because they were the potential soldiers who could serve with some enemy of Egypt joining with them to fight against Pharaoh's regime. The women, of course, could be assimilated into the stock of Egypt through intermarriage or through ethnic cleansing. The bloodlines, the status, the nationality, the ethnicity was perpetuated through the male bloodline. That was the bloodline that needed to be exterminated. But of course behind all of this we need to recognize that this is a sheer attempt to thwart the will of God as set forth in Genesis 3:15. As God had promised that the seed of woman would crush the head of the serpent. The serpent is here with all his might conspiring to thwart the plan of God. This is the main point of Moses in the passage that we have here. A manifestation of Satan's designs against the church as John tells us in Revelation 12:4. Satan under the old covenant is doing everything in his power to prevent the coming of

the seed. The coming of the seed of woman. The promised champion who would crush the head of the serpent. In the new covenant, after the coming of the seed of woman, the Messiah of God, Jesus, the Christ, Satan is still waging a futile but vindictive war against the church in the wake of the coming of the promised one. He wants to do as much damage as possible. And Satan is using Pharaoh to foster those purposes. That's the big picture that's happening here.

Now you can imagine all manner of other implications from this passage. I think that it cries out this passage does to remind us of the churches universal constant and historic support for the sanctity of life. Do you realize that until this century, no quadrant of the Christian church, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant of any sort until this century no branch of the Christian church recognized the validity of abortion and infanticide. The Romans practiced both. All Christians held the Romans in contempt for it. Let's don't forget that today. Let's don't forget that today. U.S. abortion in history has been aided and abetted by the quietness of Christians unwilling to speak out against the gross immorality of the practice and now in the very week in which we are speaking we have instituted a way in which you can kill a human being by taking a pill like aspirin. Do you not see the wickedness of that? A convenient way of murder. Do you not see the wickedness of that? Let's make murder as convenient as possible. My heavens, let's not put the murderer to too much trouble. Why, a pill will do. And it also reminds us here, doesn't it, of the ridiculousness of asking those whose job is to preserve life to do murder. Physician-assisted, nurse-assisted abortion and euthanasia is a contradiction of the very profession. It makes killers out of healers. It makes no sense. No wonder we live in a culture of violence when we ask our healers to become murders.

II. God thwarts Pharaoh's evil plan.

But back to the main point. Make no mistake about it. This butchery in this passage is an attempt to annihilate Israel as the people of God from the face of the earth. In verses 17 through 19 we see a second thing. Here the brave faithfulness of the midwives in resisting evil tyranny and their subsequent interview with Pharaoh is recorded. And here God shows his sovereignty by using these women to flail the plans of the God of Egypt. The midwives, we are told, fear God. They fear Him as the life giver, and thus they honor the sanctity of life at the risk of their own. And these women foil the plan of the sovereign tyrant of Egypt. You catch the irony. Two midwives. Now I know that raises a question for you. Two midwives for skazillions of Israelites. Only two? Perhaps they were the leaders of the guild of the midwives. Maybe they were the only names that had been preserved. I don't know, but doesn't it strike you that the very mention of only two of these midwives successfully resisting the plans of the sovereign of Egypt, doesn't that emphasize his impotence before the sovereignty of God. "Let's see," God says from heaven as he laughs with scorn at Pharaoh. I'll thwart your plans with two midwives. That's what I'll do. I'll use the very instruments of

your plan as the instrument of my plan to thwart your plan. I am sovereign, you are not.

The irony here points to the fact that God alone is sovereign. Two midwives confound the power of Egypt. Now of course during their interview with Pharaoh they attempt to hide the truth from him. Yes, they lie. Many commentators, very kindly, try to get them off the hook for this. They say things like well, maybe it was true what they said. It doesn't matter whether it was true what we said. We were told specifically in the passage that they determined not to do what Pharaoh had asked them to do. And then when he asked them why it was that this was not coming about, they didn't say well, we decided to not do what you told us to do. They say, well, there's this other explanation. So they are deliberately attempting to hide the truth from him, but again, even in their statement we see irony. Can you see the irony in their concocted answer, and in the excuse that they give to Pharaoh, they manage to insult all Egyptian women. What's the answer? Well, you know you Egyptian women are kind of wimpy. Hebrew women, real women. We can't even get to them in time. They just pop those babies out, and it's all over with. And so Moses manages to insult all the Egyptians, even in the answer of the midwives to Pharaoh.

By the way, verse 17 is the first time that the name of *God* is mentioned in the book of Exodus. Oh, His sovereign hand has been evident, every verse, every step of the way hasn't it? But isn't it interesting that Moses holds His name until this phrase is to be used, 'The fear of God.' Why? Because one of the great themes of the exodus is Whom will you serve? God or Pharaoh. Whom will you fear? God or Pharaoh. Who is sovereign? God or Pharaoh. And the fear of God is the phrase in which first God's name is mentioned. The believer is certainly called upon in the Bible to respect legitimate government authority, but never, never is the believer called upon to obey a command that directly violates the law of God. And when put into that predicament the believer has no choice but to fear God, rather than man. That is precisely what these brave, godly, courageous, faithful women do, and God uses their faithfulness to confound the plans of the serpent.

And I wonder friends, when in this culture, when you are asked to do that which God commands you not to do, whether your faithfulness will be used to further the cause of God and His glory. Do you think of that? When either by enticement or by order this culture commands you to do that which is against God's word, do you think about the fact that you, too, are part of a greater struggle. And perhaps in God's providence, He has chosen that your faithfulness will be used to preserve His people. Oh, my friends, we must never ever trifle with the sin that is dangled in front of us by the culture nor justify in our own hearts acquiescing to it.

III. God blesses those who fear Him, and judges those who do not.

One last thing. Verses 20 through 22. Here we see this glorious report of God's favor upon the midwives, and we also see this fearful command of Pharaoh to commit genocide by drowning. And we see in verses 20 through 22 that God pours His sovereign blessing on those who fear Him, and He pours His judgment on those who don't. That man is blessed who fear in God. Here in verse 20 Moses reports the blessings of God on these faithful midwives. Not a blessing for their lying, but a blessing for their courage in refusing to do that which was wrong. We are told that he was good to them. God was good to the midwives, and that the people continued to multiply. The promise of Abraham was still in force in its fulfillment, and they continued to wax stronger, though Pharaoh had designed to weaken the people of God. In fact, the people of God only grew stronger. These show how unthwartable are the purposes and promises of God.

We're told furthermore in verse 21 that God built houses, he built households for the midwives. I don't know all the significance of that. It has been suggested that oftentimes barren women were used as midwives, and we may be told here, it may be that Moses is telling us that though these women were in this profession because they themselves had not been able to bear children. That God rewarded their faithfulness by giving them a household, or we may be being told here just what God told David in II Samuel, chapter 7. "You will not build a house for me. I will build a house for you."

But think again of the irony here. Pharaoh tells the midwives to destroy households. They refuse and save households, and God gives them a household instead. Again the irony is that Pharaoh's plans are thwarted, and you would expect in their thwarting of Pharaoh's plan for his judgment to prevail in their experience. But, in fact, as they thwart Pharaoh's plan, they are greeted only by the blessing of God. That's not how it always turns out for God's people. Sometimes, with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, we have to be ready to say, "God will preserve us from the fires. But even if He doesn't, we will not bow and worship." But in this case God, in His mercy, shows His sovereignty in the blessing of the midwives. And now Pharaoh turns to an open plan of genocide. The Hebrew midwives won't do it, so he goes to his own people and he says, "Look now, this is what you're going to have to do, my Egyptian people, you must take every son, every male that is born to the Israelites, and you must drown him. All the people of Egypt are to engage in the extermination of Israelite males." Pharaoh is calling on this mass murder to be accomplished by drowning, but in so doing, he has written and sealed his own fate because God is sovereign. Many of you remember Cecile B. DeMille's version of the Ten Commandments with Charlton Heston as Moses. A fine Moses he makes. Not a bad Moses for a Gentile. And perhaps you remember one of the liberties that Cecile B. DeMille takes with the story. He makes the announcement of Pharaoh's intention to kill the male children of Israel to come immediately prior to the announcement of the tenth and final plague. And you remember there's that moment where the daughter of Pharaoh, which is not recorded in Scripture, but which is inserted into the film, is made to have one final meeting with her old flame, Moses. And she

says, "Come Moses, my chariot is waiting. I will save you." "Save me from what?" "Well Moses, don't you know that Pharaoh has ordered that all the first-born sons of Israel must die?" And Charlton Heston as Moses replies: "He has written his own sentence by his own hand." And he cries for the mercy of God. Well, there's not a whole lot of liberty in that. Because right here Pharaoh is writing his own sentence. As he has ordered all the males of Israel to be drowned in the waters of the Nile, so the whole of the army of Egypt will be drowned in the waters of the Red Sea, and in the very next passage, the savior of Israel, Moses, rather than being drowned in the waters of the Nile, will be saved by Pharaoh's daughter. God is sovereign. Fear Him, ye saints, and nothing else have you need to fear. Let's pray.

O God, You honor those who honor You. You punish the wicked by their own desires and designs. Enable us to stand firm then, and to praise you always. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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