

“From Paradise To Prison”

Text: Exodus 1:1-22

Series: Book of Exodus [#01]

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Date: March 29, 2009

Introduction.

This morning we begin a march through the book of Exodus. Exodus is a gripping drama rich in spiritual truth. The drama opens in Egypt, the land of the pyramids, the sphinx, and the Pharaohs. The story opens with two antagonists—the Egyptians represented by the Pharaohs, and the people of Israel represented by Moses. Beneath the surface, and just as real, is the cosmic battle of Satan and his forces against God and His people.

The story of Moses’ path to leadership begins with his birth, his appearance as the baby in a basket in the Nile River; his being adopted into the royal family. And, later, his rash action and flight into exile. In his exile God appeared to him in a blazing fire in a bush, calling him to lead Israel out of slavery into freedom and their promised land. Moses returned to the Pharaoh’s court representing God and Israel. When the Pharaoh refused to let the people go, God brought ten plagues on the land, beginning with the Nile river being turned to blood and ending with the death of the firstborn throughout the land. In preparation for the last plague and their departure, God introduced the Passover. And then, of course, there was the miraculous exodus from Egypt crossing through the Red Sea.

All of that takes us through just the first third of this drama! More than that, Exodus is not a standalone drama, it is a sequel. We see this in the opening line, “*Now* these are the names of the sons of Israel...” The first word “*Now*,” or better, “*And*,” (omitted in some versions), ties this to what went before, the book of Genesis, which we looked at four years ago. In fact, Exodus is part of the five-part drama of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Exodus describes God’s redemption of Israel from bondage and idolatry in Egypt to freedom and worship. It, and the other books in this five part drama, was written by Moses during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. The date of the book depends on dating the Exodus. There are two basic options: mid-fifteenth or mid-thirteenth century B.C. I won’t go into details now, but I believe the mid-fifteenth century date, around 1445 B.C., best fits the Biblical record and the historical records outside the Bible.

The opening scene, chapter one, portrays the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph in Egypt going “*From Paradise To Prison*.” The events of chapter one are described briefly, but cover a long time span.

God told Abraham, recorded in Genesis 15:13-14,

“Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions.”

Here in Exodus, Moses tells us in 12:40-41,

“Now the time that the sons of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. And at the end of four hundred and thirty years, to the very day, all the hosts of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt.”

Now let's survey the historical scene and then move to some key principles. We begin with Israel going ...

From Clan To Nation.

First, a review from Genesis. Joseph's jealous brothers sold him to slave traders and told their father Jacob that he had been killed by a wild beast (Genesis 37). Joseph rose quickly and fell even more quickly in his owner's house in Egypt (Genesis 39). But after Joseph interpreted the Pharaoh's troubling dream, he was made Prime Minister, at the age of 30. In response to God's word in the vision, he stored food in the seven years of plenty to be used in the seven years of famine (Genesis 41).

Now the famine affected Joseph's father Jacob and the clan back home in Canaan. So the sons traveled to Egypt to buy food. When his brothers came a second time, Joseph revealed who he was (Genesis 42-45). After this, Joseph moved his father and the entire clan to Egypt. The Pharaoh gave them special status and the choice of whatever land they wanted (Genesis 46-47).

The immediate family who went down to Egypt is summarized in Genesis 46, and listed as 70 people. We see that here in Exodus 1:5. The Greek version of the Old Testament, produced over a thousand years after Moses, changed the number to 75 to include relatives who were not listed in the summary. That number is cited in Acts 7:14. There were still others not included in the list and numbers. If we add the wives and daughters not on the list, the number could double. Then, there may have been servants and their families. Whatever the actual head count was of all who immigrated to Egypt around 1875 B.C., Jacob's family was a relatively small *clan*.

Now, moving forward to an undated time in verse 7.

“...the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them.”

God blessed them! This blessing was part of His faithfulness to keep His promises to Abraham.

Turn back to Genesis 13:16. God told Abraham “I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered.” God reaffirmed this to his son Isaac. Genesis 26:24. “The LORD appeared to [Isaac] the same night and said, ‘I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you, and multiply your descendants, for the sake of My servant Abraham.’” And to Isaac’s son Jacob, in Genesis 28:14 God said, “...Your descendants will [also] be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south...”

They were fruitful, increased greatly and multiplied. But how many? No number given here. But there is some insight. The book of Numbers, the fourth installment of this drama, opens after the Exodus. God had Moses take a census of the all the men who were twenty and older. After the long list of family groups in chapter 1, verse 46 tells us that “all the numbered men were 603,550.” So we can conservatively estimate that there were at least 2 million Israelites at the time of the Exodus.

Yes, God blessed them greatly. They went *from being a clan to being a huge nation* within Egypt enjoying privileged status. To many it must have seemed like *Paradise*. But, we know this did not last. They went “*From Paradise To Prison*.” Starting in verse 8, we seen them going...

From Blessing To Suffering.

Regime change took place in Egypt. Go to verse 8. “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” We don’t know when the persecution and enslavement of the Israelites started. There were many regime changes, or different Pharaohs and even changes in dynasties in Egypt after Joseph up to the time of the Exodus.

The new Pharaoh “did not know Joseph.” Moses is not telling us the Pharaoh was a poor student of history, but that he did not respect Joseph for what he had done for the nation. As a result, he had no sense of obligation to Joseph’s people who were *living, growing, expanding* in his land.

Look at verse 9.

“He said to his people, ‘Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land.’”

Both arrogance and fear are powerful motivators. It is hard to say which was motivating the Pharaoh here. We don't know if the Pharaoh really believed that if they were at war the people of Israel might side with the enemy, or if he simply did not like these *foreigners* who had become so numerous and prosperous in *his* country.

The phrase "depart from the land" is an idiom which might mean, as in Genesis 2:6, to "rise over," "cover" or "overwhelm" the land. It is possible the king was fearful that they might join an enemy force and take his throne away. This makes more sense than Israel joining an enemy to *leave* Egypt, since the Israelites were not yet oppressed and enslaved. If the Pharaoh feared their numbers, their leaving would take care of that worry. And of course he could have deported them. But with their large numbers, the loss of productivity and potential enemies coming to their aid if they decided they did not want to leave, that choice would have its own problems.

So, on to the plan or, better, the *plans* to deal with the Israelites. Plan number one. Verse 11. "So they appointed taskmasters over them to afflict them with hard labor. And they built for Pharaoh storage cities, Pithom and Raamses." The Israelites went from freedom and privilege to slavery and suffering.

One would think this plan would work. A slave at hard labor had a shortened life. Also, the lives of slaves were expendable, with many being killed for any or no reason. The result of this plan? Verse 12. "But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out, so that they were in dread of the sons of Israel." Contrary to the Pharaoh's *common sense* expectations, the plan did not work.

That brings us to plan number two. We continue at verse 13.

"The Egyptians compelled the sons of Israel to labor rigorously; and they made their lives bitter with hard labor in mortar and bricks and at all kinds of labor in the field, all their labors which they rigorously imposed on them." (13-14)

The first plan didn't work so, "Ratch it up a few notches! Work them even harder!" But this plan also failed. Look at verse 9. "He said to his people, 'Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land.'"

Plan number three brings a sharp change in direction. Verse 15.

"Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah; and he said, 'When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live.'" (15-16)

The Pharaoh's people told the Jewish head midwives to kill all the sons, the baby boys, right after they were delivered. No sons, then no boys, then no men who might possibly fight against him. As well, the people would die out faster, or the women would marry Egyptians and assimilate. This was ethnic cleansing, genocide. They may have thought the midwives would do this out of fear. But they didn't. Verse 17. "But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live."

We don't know how much time went by, probably a number of years, before the court realized the women were not following orders. The women "feared" God, and God blessed them for not taking the lives of these babies.

There has been much discussion of whether these midwives lied. It is possible the word was spread not to call a midwife until after the babies were born. What we know is God blessed them for preserving lives, not for any lies they may have told.

Plan number four. *The final solution.* Go to the last verse, verse 22. "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.'" Think of the irony here: the Nile was an indispensable source of *life* to the Egyptians. Pharaoh was decreeing it should be an instrument of *death*.

The Pharaoh enlisted everyone to help, not just the Israelites. Throwing the Israeli baby boys into the Nile River could have been seen as a *cleaner* way of killing them. Some suggest that since the Egyptians believed the Nile River was one of the gods, it was up to the Nile to decide the fate of the babies, which might make some feel better about doing this.

The people of Israel had gone from "*Paradise to Prison*," from great blessing to great suffering. Now let's move from this history to some principles God has for us in this section.

From History To Principles.

The first principle is that God always keeps His word. God chose to make a covenant and promises to Abraham. God reaffirmed that covenant and these promises to Abraham's son Isaac and his grandson Jacob (e.g., Genesis 12:1-3; 15:18-21; 17:4-6; 22:15-18). And *God kept His word to Abraham.*

- The appointment of Joseph as prime minister over Egypt was God keeping His word.
- Jacob and his clan being preserved in Egypt during that time of severe famine was God keeping His word.
- The clan growing into a great nation was God keeping His word.
- Foiling the foolish and evil plans of the Pharaoh was God keeping His word.

And time after time as we march through Exodus we will continue to see *God keeping His word.*

God has given us, as the apostle Peter wrote, “precious and magnificent promises” (2 Peter 1:4). And, as Paul wrote, “... as many as are the promises of God, in [Christ] they are yes” (2 Corinthians 1:20).

Have you ever felt that God has let you down, that He hasn't kept His promises to you? Now, sometimes our interpretation of the Bible and our expectations can be inaccurate. But even when we understand what are and what are not a promises in the Bible, and if they apply to us, we need to remember that God keeps His promises in His own ways and time, not ours. Remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and live with confidence that God always keeps His word.

A second principle to remember from this opening chapter is that God's blessings do not *put us on easy street*. God promised to make a great nation from Abraham. We have seen part of His fulfillment of that promise in this chapter. And while for some years their growing numbers, freedom, and prosperity may have made them think that things couldn't get better, that this was *paradise*, we know it did not stay that way.

Note this very carefully: God's blessings to Israel did not stop when the Pharaoh revoked their special status and privileges and made them slaves. God continued to bless them, as we have seen, in thwarting the Pharaoh's plans and preserving them in that time of great oppression and suffering. God's blessings do not *put us on easy street* as we picture that from our perspective in this world.

Yet, in every generation there has been the mistaken idea that if God is really blessing us...

- the winds and seas of our lives will be calm,
- the sunrises and sunsets of our families and work will be beautiful and peaceful,
- and the gardens of our health and bank accounts will have a bumper crop.

Jesus' said, “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world”(John 16:33).

A third principle is that God rewards faithfulness. Shiphrah, Puah and the midwives under them were faithful and, verses 20-21 say,

“So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty. Because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.”

Their example, repeated time after time in the Bible, is that faithfulness requires obedience. They knew what was right and wrong. They knew the risks of disobeying the Pharaoh and obeying, being faithful to God. They chose to step out in faith and obey God.

God blessed them for their faithfulness. God was good to them. God protected them. God established families for them. It is possible the midwives were women who were not able to have children. In any event, God gave them families. God even preserved their names for us, while not giving us the name of the mighty Pharaoh.

God still, always blesses faithfulness. Sometimes and in some ways it is in the here and now things of this life. Sometimes it is not. Remember the second principle: “God’s blessings do not *put us on easy street.*”

Also remember that God has told us through Paul that each believer will appear before Christ in heaven for the testing, the evaluation or judgment of what we have done for Him. The test will be of the “quality” of what we have done for Him. The test of whether each specific work for Christ was done in faith and obedience, or not. And all of our works which meet the test will be rewarded by Christ. (*cf.* 1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

And the fourth principle from this chapter is that God’s promises are seen more clearly looking back than when watching them unfold. How do you think the Israelites saw God’s promises during that time of terrible oppression? Try to imagine yourself in their place. Do you think you would see God’s presence, power and faithfulness to His promises as you and your family faced the threat of genocide?

Interestingly, God is not mentioned in Exodus until the end of chapter 2. We read there,

“...the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God. So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them.” (23b-25)

We have not faced the same oppression, but we too have sighed, groaned and cried out to God in difficult times. In those times it can be hard to make any kind of sense out of what is going on. In those times it can be hard to see how God is, or will work out and fulfill His promises. In those times it can be hard to remember the first principle that “God always keeps His word.”

So what do we do? We can follow Abraham’s example. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob “died in faith,” as the writer of the book of Hebrews tells us,

“without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having reckoned them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on earth” (11:13).

Keep on living by faith!

Conclusion.

We have taken the first steps in the march through Exodus. In these steps we have seen the people go from *paradise* to *prison*, from blessing to suffering. We have much more to see about the people, their relationship to God, God Himself and how all of this is given to us for, as Paul tells us, "... our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." (Romans 15:4)

As you spend a few moments with God now, thank Him that...

- He always keeps His word.
- That while His blessings do not have the purpose of making your life easy, He does bless you.
- That He rewards your faithfulness here and now as well as in heaven when you see Christ face to face.
- That He is being faithful to you even when you can't see it clearly as turmoil whirls around you.

Thank Him that He is *your solid rock* in every day, in every circumstance.

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