

God's Got a Plan *Exodus 1:15 – 2:15*

Introduction

Last week we began our study of the book of Exodus by looking back in biblical history to set the story of the book in its wider context. God called a man to be the father of a new nation. He made a covenant with this man, Abraham, and reiterated it to his son and grandson: Isaac and Jacob.

One of Jacob's sons, Joseph, was hated by his jealous brothers. Given the chance to do him harm, they sold him to slave traders who took Joseph down to Egypt. There, Joseph put his trust in God and God prospered him.

Through a set of extraordinary circumstances, Joseph comes to the attention of the Pharaoh and eventually is elevated to the position of prime minister.

Because of a wide-spread famine, Jacob sent his other boys down to Egypt to buy grain. Eventually, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. He told them, "What you meant for evil, God used for good."

Jacob and the members of his family are brought to Egypt – for their very survival. The clan of Jacob numbered 70 people. They settle in the area known as Goshen and God prospers them. Turn to Exodus – the second book in your Bible.

Exodus 1:6-7

About 350 years later, a new Pharaoh comes to power who was ignorant of Joseph and his valuable service to the nation. He recognizes the danger of these Hebrews. Gaining in number and strength, they could potentially align themselves with another enemy and be a threat to Egypt. The result is that the Pharaoh begins an oppression of the people of Israel that eventually took three forms.

I. Pharaoh's Oppression

A. Slavery – The people of Israel were oppressed, enslaved, and subjected to brutality and forced labor. Think of what probably happened to the people's resolve and faith over time. Dean Stanley, on the impact of the Egyptian sojourn upon the children of Israel, writes:

The old freedom, the old energy, above all, the old religion of the patriarchal age had faded away.

Scripture indicates that the people actually participated in the idolatrous rites of the land. Two generations later, Joshua, towards the end of his life, said to Israel:

Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.
– *Joshua 24:14*

Much later in their history, the Israelites were chastened by God for this very reason. Listen to the Lord, speaking through the prophet Ezekiel:

On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands. And I said to them, Cast away the detestable things your eyes feast on, every one of you, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the LORD your God. But they rebelled against me and were not willing to listen to me. None of them cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. – *Ezekiel 20:6-8*

In Egypt, two things happen as time moves on: 1) they continued to multiply in number; 2) they were increasingly brutalized in their slavery.

Exodus 1:12-14

When slavery does not seem to be accomplishing the purpose of the Pharaoh, he moves on to infanticide.

B. Infanticide – Exodus 1:15-21

Motivated by a fear of these people, Pharaoh instructs the midwives to kill any male child at birth. The two midwives mentioned here were most likely those in charge of all the midwives of the Hebrews.

Can you imagine what they felt when receiving these instructions? Their hearts were to serve the women giving birth, to assist in bringing new lives into the world. And now they are given this cruel command. What would they do? What would you?

Verse 17 tells us not only their decision, but the reasoning behind it. They were unwilling to be participants in a culture of death. It sounds much like those in the medical profession today who refuse to be part of the culture of death in abortion. They had a greater respect for God than Pharaoh. They would rather risk their lives doing what was right than what was commanded.

God honored their fear, their respect, of him. There has been a lot of debate as to whether or not they lied to Pharaoh – which would clearly be a sin, or whether they were just deceptive. Often times in real life we are faced with the choice of lesser evils. This may well be the case with the midwives.

C. Murder – When this fails to accomplish the Pharaoh’s intent to eliminate Hebrew males, he simply orders that all male children be thrown into the Nile River and drowned.

Exodus 1:22

This is his final trump card that he hopes will take care of the “problem.” For the Israelites things have gone from bad to worse. Could their suffering be any more intense, their labors any more burdensome, their survival as a people any more at risk? One is tempted to ask, “For what purpose was God allowing this to happen to his covenant people?”

Dan McCartney in his book *Why Does It Have to Hurt*, writes:

God saw the suffering of his people and then delivered them. But why did he allow the suffering to happen in the first place? Could he not rather have simply prevented it?

Well, he goes on to answer the question with another question:

If he (God) had done so, would the Israelites have ever desired to leave Egypt? It was hard enough to get them to leave when they were suffering.

It would seem to have taken suffering to get the people to the point of wanting to leave, to go to the place which had been promised to Abraham and his descendants.

Charles Spurgeon, the great 19th century English preacher, writes:

In order to cut loose the bonds that bound them to Egypt, the sharp knife of affliction must be used; and Pharaoh though he knew it not, was God’s instrument in weaning them from the Egyptian world, and helping them as his church to take up their separate place in the wilderness, and receive the portion which God had appointed for them.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons for suffering in our experience. Certainly we can trace much of our difficulties to being fallen people living in a fallen world. But God uses our sufferings to wean us from too much dependence, too much affection, too much comfort in this world and in the things of this world.

It is interesting that God wanted Israel to always remember their sufferings in Egypt and his deliverance of them from slavery. Such a remembrance would give them a continual reminder of God's grace and salvation. And so it is with us today as well.

Now, before we move on, three lessons we should be mindful of:

1) God's promises were not negated by the hard times. The promise of Genesis 15, the covenant promise, still stood. God's promises stand forever. When circumstances conspire to cause doubt in God's promises, we must retreat to the foundation of his character.

Spurgeon once said: "When you cannot trace God's hand, trust God's heart."

2) God's concern was not diminished by the harsh treatment; God did care.

Exodus 3:7

It is important when suffering to remember the truth that God is good; he is sovereign; and he really does care.

3) God's care was not overpowered by this heavy test. He provided the midwives who feared him more than they feared Pharaoh.

So, the stage is set. This is the world into which Moses was born.

II. Moses' Birth

Set against the backdrop of such a despairing situation is the exemplary character of a Hebrew woman by the name of Jocabed. She and her husband had two other children: Miriam, perhaps as old as 13, and Aaron, a three-year old.

Exodus 2:1-9

Look at the faith that Jocabed has. Even putting her child in the river, she has her daughter watching over the basket to see what happens. I think that is just terrific!

Now, here's an interesting thing. She made a basket. The Hebrew word used here is used only one other place in the entire Old Testament. The word occurs back in Genesis, chapter six. Remember a really BIG basket? – Yes, it's the ark.

There is a theological connection between these two events: both arks covered with pitch – both vehicles of salvation through the waters. Peter Enns writes in his commentary on Exodus:

Pharaoh wishes to counter God's plan by casting infants *into* the Nile. God saves Moses by casting him *onto* the Nile and bringing him to Pharaoh's front door.

Moses was cared for by his own mother for probably the first three to four years of his life. I have little doubt he was instructed during this formative time about his heritage and about the God of his forbearers. The truths and promises of God must have been embedded in his young mind, to surface in later years. I see the effect this can have on young children by observing the preschool regularly, by hearing of the impact of children's ministry to even the youngest.

Imagine the feelings of Jocabed when the time came to surrender her son, now to become another's. Moses is taken into Pharaoh's household and becomes a legal heir of the Pharaoh. Enns says:

Ironically, this child, once doomed to death by Pharaoh's decree, will become the very instrument of Pharaoh's destruction and the means through which all Israel escapes not only Pharaoh's decree, but Egypt itself.

Isn't this great? The savior of Israel will now grow up in the house of Pharaoh, protected, safe and secure, free from slavery and given an education that only royalty could enjoy. Listen to Stephen's account in his sermon before the Jewish Council of Jerusalem, recorded in Acts, chapter seven:

And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds. – *Acts 7:22*

Moses had access to the best education of the day. W.H. Gispen tells us that Moses would have received an education in Egyptian "theology, astronomy, medicine, mathematics, and other subjects, in virtually everything that was part of the intellectual domain of the civilized world at that time."

Keep your finger in Exodus two and turn in your Bible to the New Testament book of Hebrews, chapter eleven. In this chapter dealing with the faith of those great witnesses who stand in the line of saints connecting down to us today, we read about Moses.

Hebrews 11:23-26

Now, throughout our study from here on out, it is so difficult to remove from our mind the image of Charlton Heston in Cecil D. DeMille's great production: *The Ten Commandments*. That is mostly the imagination of a screenwriter. Apart from these brief accounts in Exodus, Acts and Hebrews, this is all we know.

By his 40th birthday, Moses had become, in the words of Stephen, "a man of power in words and deed" – diplomatic and political skills, and probably military skills. He was approaching his greatest years as a royal son.

III. Moses' Departure

At this point, his departure is only a matter of time. He responds to his sense of destiny – one that he believes he has discovered regarding his ethnic and religious roots. Aware of the need, and even God's promise, coupled with his sense of destiny, Moses takes the initiative. Rather than waiting for God's instructions, Moses sets into motion a premature plan destined for failure.

Exodus 2:11-14

What went wrong? Moses wants to help his people. He goes out and visits one of the work camps and sees the dire conditions they are enduring and wants to do something about it. Verse eleven says that Moses "looked on their burdens." The verb means more than just to look at or see. It has the sense of "seeing with emotion." His heart was clearly touched by what he was seeing.

This is where Moses makes a choice. He will either have the heart of an Egyptian who held the Hebrews in disdain and disgust, or he would throw in his lot with his fellow Israelites.

Maybe Moses wants to lead, but nobody wants to follow! Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery once said, "Leadership is the capacity and will to rally men and women to a common purpose, and the character which inspires confidence."

Someone once said, "The test of leadership is if anyone is following." What do you think the Exodus would have been like if God had permitted it at this time? What kind of leader would Moses have been? Not a pretty picture.

Sometimes we are so eager to pick up the mantle of leadership when we ourselves have not learned to be lead-able. We want to race on ahead, leading the charge, thinking we have the blessing of God, when in reality, our action flows from misguided ideas of our role, God's role, and an indispensable sense of our service.

Instead of inspiring a follower-ship of his people, Moses incites the wrath of his grandfather, the Pharaoh.

Exodus 2:15

How painful this must have been to Moses. I suspect he thinks he has done a good thing – protecting one of his own kinsman. Not only do his people reject his intentions, now the Pharaoh wants his head on a platter.

Moses wants to help his people, but God hasn't yet prepared him for that task. His heart was in the right place, but he was trying to help his way, not God's way.

It will be another forty years until God steps in and prepares Moses for the task to which he had been called – when he is ready to do things God's way, not his.

What we do have to see, though, is that the past forty years have not been wasted in God's plan. The next forty years of his life are not wasted either in the grand scheme of what God intends to do for his people.

God will be getting his man ready; he will be getting the situation in Egypt ready. Here's the key: God really did have a plan, a plan for good.

I am reminded of Israel's history much later when the people have been conquered by the Babylonians. God's judgment had been visited upon the people because of their unbelief, their disobedience, their disregard of God and his commandments.

Even during that dark time, a time of suffering, God sends a word of encouragement to his people through the prophet Jeremiah. Listen to these words and connect them back to God's intentions with the Israelites as they suffered in Egypt.

For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. – *Jeremiah 29:10-14*

God is good, and would be good to Israel. His divine plan, for Israel's good, was beginning to unfold. It began with the birth of a savior – Moses.

God is good, and is good to us. His divine plan, for our good, has been unfolded. It began with the birth of a Savior – Christ the Lord. This is the work of his grace and mercy.

We can sing with his people of old: “The Lord is good and his mercy endureth forever.”