

Life In Egypt: From Prosperity To Oppression

Exodus 1:1-14

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² Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, ³ Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, ⁴ Dan and Naphtali, Gad and

Asher. ⁵ All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt. ⁶ Then Joseph

died, and all his brothers and all that generation. ⁷ But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased

greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. ⁸ Now there

arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹ And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of

Israel are too many and too mighty for us. ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ Therefore

they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities,

Pithom and Raamses. ¹² 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. ¹³ So they ruthlessly made the

people of Israel work as slaves ¹⁴ 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.

("The grass withers and the flower falls but the word of the Lord endures forever")

"Almighty, eternal and merciful God, whose Word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path, open and illuminate our minds, that we may purely and perfectly understand your Word and that our lives may be conformed to what we have rightly understood, that in nothing we may be displeasing to your majesty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." –Ulrich Zwingli

Intro: Relationship Change Over Time

I don't know about you, but one of the things that I'm missing during this quarantine is sports. I've actually been watching NBA finals games from a decade ago, trying to get my kids to bet me on the outcomes: "If the Lakers win, I'll clean up after dinner; if the Celtics win, you can." For some reason they're not going for it. I'm still learning who the sports fans in the church are, I promise not to use too many sports analogies and illustrations, but I am going to use one now.

In sports, the athletes we root for can easily become the ones that we vilify if they go to a different team. Even non-sports fans probably remember when LeBron James left the Cleveland Cavaliers after his first seven years in the NBA to take his talents to South Beach and play for the Miami Heat. Cleveland fans, who had seen him as the greatest player ever, the Savior of Cleveland sports, immediately turned on him, burning his jersey and calling him selfish. Similar treatment happened to Kevin Durant several years later when he left the Oklahoma City Thunder for the Golden State Warriors. He was called a traitor and vilified for going to the team that the Thunder had lost to in the conference finals. It's an interesting phenomenon that players who were once cheered and treasured when they played for the hometown team are later booed and vilified when they leave. We forget that he helped our team win more games in its history or helped win a championship or was voted to the All Star Game or whatever.

Relationships can change over time, can't they? Someone that you were close friends with at one time can easily become a distant acquaintance when one of you moves away. Someone that you avoided,

disliked, or considered an enemy can become a friend when one of you reaches out and builds a bridge to the other. This happens with nations and people groups, as well. If you were to go back 75 years in American history, we were at war with Germany and Japan, the enemies of World War II. Today, we consider them allies and send our tourists there to enjoy their cultures. If we were to go back 250 years, we'd be in the middle of hostilities with England as we fought the Revolution to be out from under the tyranny of the mother country. Today, England is one of our closest allies and friends.

Today's passage sees two people groups who were formerly allies that have now become enemies. Joseph was a man who had come to Egypt as a foreigner and a slave, and had helped it become strong and weather a major crisis. But in time, Joseph's influence and help were forgotten and his descendants were repressed, persecuted, and vilified. The Hebrew people's identity in Egypt went from heroic tribe to irritating foreigners to slaves in the generations between Joseph's death and Moses' birth.

I'm excited to dive into the book of Exodus with this church! We're only going to get through the first 15 chapters, we're not going to do the whole book. Whether you've studied it in depth before, only know the stories from Sunday School as a kid or maybe through the movies based on it, or whether you're completely new to the text, there is much to be learned and gained as we work our way through it.

And, of course, the first thing to see in Exodus is that it is a continuing story. The book of Genesis has laid the foundation for God creating the world, dealing with human beings and their Fall into sin, and calling a covenant people to Himself through the first leader of Israel, what we call a "patriarch" – Abraham. The majority of Genesis covers the stories of Abraham, his son Isaac, his grandson Jacob, and his great-grandson, Joseph. There are plenty of other people we meet along the way, but those are the main guys. And Exodus picks up after all of them have been dead for hundreds of years. But in order to understand how Israel and Egypt are intertwined, we have to understand

I. Joseph's Legacy (vv. 1-7)

¹ These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: ² Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, ³ Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, ⁴ Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. ⁵ All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt. ⁶ Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. ⁷ But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

So, we won't go into Jacob's life too much, but it's a fascinating one. Read Genesis chapters 25-35, all about how he was the younger twin brother who stole his brother's inheritance, and then he cheated his father-in-law, who in turned cheated him... he was a total scoundrel that God chose to carry on His covenant line through. Jacob was a bigamist, two wives who were sisters, and also impregnated two maidservants; just crazy stuff, but through all of that, Jacob has 12 sons who eventually become the 12 tribes of Israel. So, verses 2-5 here are the names of the sons.

They're also the names of 11 brothers who sold their 12th brother into slavery. Joseph was that brother, who the text says had already been in Egypt when Jacob came with his other 11 sons. That story is told at the end of Genesis, chapters 37-50. And if you remember Joseph's life, he is the first son of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. He's the 9th son of Jacob, but Jacob loves him and lavishes gifts on him. Which, of course, ticks off all of his brothers, particularly when he kind of rubs it in their faces. So, you probably know the story: the brothers sell him and tell their dad that he got killed by a fierce animal. He gets sold to an Egyptian officer and earns his trust until the man's wife falsely accuses him of assaulting her, and he winds up in prison. He eventually impresses Pharaoh by interpreting his dream and becomes the 2nd

in command over the whole nation. And he stores grain for 7 years knowing that a 7-year famine is coming (God had revealed that to him). When the famine came, people in the surrounding area had to come and buy food from Egypt, including the brothers that had sold Joseph into slavery. So, they didn't recognize him, he messes with their heads for a while and tests them to see if they've changed in the many years that he's been gone. But eventually he welcomes them, tells them they're forgiven, and invites his entire extended family to live in Egypt, 70 people in all verse 5 says.

Now the start of Exodus is hundreds of years later. Jacob's descendants are still in Egypt, they never left after the famine. And they have grown so large that they filled the land of Egypt – Exodus 12:37 said they numbered over 600,000. Where have we heard that phrase in verse 7 *"fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong"* before? It's part of the mandate that God gave human beings at the very beginning, in Genesis 1:28 – *"And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.'"* Israel is still doing in captivity and a foreign land what they had always been told to do – have children and fill the earth with new people.

Back in Genesis 12:2-3 God made a covenant with Abraham – *"And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you **all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**"* Had this promise already been fulfilled? Had they already been a great blessing since they helped Egypt and the surrounding countries get through the famine? The book of Exodus, as well as the rest of redemptive history, will show us that God has a lot more in store to deliver on that promise.

So whereas Joseph and his service to Pharaoh was seen as a blessing to Egypt, the Israelite people are not seen as a blessing anymore. They are seen as a threat. The next four verses show us

II. Egypt's Insecurity (vv. 8-11)

⁸ Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹ And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses.

The new king, the new Pharaoh it says *"did not know Joseph."* He was ignorant of Egypt's history and how Joseph had saved the nation and given it wealth and power. He saw only the current situation that there were foreigners, or rather resident aliens, who are a threat to him. So the Pharaoh thinks Israel will do exactly the opposite of what brought them to Egypt – instead of helping the nation grow stronger he is paranoid they will help tear it down. There will be a major theme in Exodus, and all the books of Moses, on remembering versus forgetting what God has done for His people. God needs a community that remembers the good done to it, not like Egypt who forgets.¹

Pharaoh's concern about the Hebrews is that they have grown too large and too mighty. They are a threat because they have not become part of the Egyptian people, they are still a nation apart, they have not really intermingled with the natives. Otherwise Pharaoh couldn't have singled them out or felt that they would be disloyal. Egypt had enemies all around it, and they recognized that the Hebrews might grow so large and mighty that they could help one of those enemies overthrow the nation. So the answer is to deal "shrewdly" with them, which works out to giving them very heavy burdens. I guess the

¹ Dennis Prager, *Exodus: God, Slavery, and Freedom* (Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2018), p. 6.

idea is that if they are too busy and overloaded with manual labor helping build Pharaoh's cities that they won't keep multiplying or get any ideas about rebelling or leaving.

So Pharaoh gets his cities built, but the harder work doesn't slow down the growth of the Hebrew people, as they continued to multiply and spread. But the hard work does change their lives, so we see the last 3 verses show...

III. Israel's Bitter Lives (vv. 12-14)

¹² 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. ¹³ So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves ¹⁴ 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.

Notice the words used here: oppressed, dread, bitter, ruthlessly. The Hebrew word used for "oppressed" (*anah*) means "violently afflicted" or "cruelly crushed." The word used for ruthlessly means "with violent hate."² They oppressed and afflicted them because they feared them. That seemed to be a common theme in the American south during the days of slavery. Slaveowners were in great fear that slaves would rise up and overpower them, so they tended to treat runaways or rebellions like those organized by Nat Turner and John Brown with great brutality. And so, in this account, in no way were God's people treated well. Although it's crazy that later when the Israelites are out in the desert and things are getting hard, they longed for their days in Egypt: "*Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full*" (Exodus 16:3). In the harder days of uncertainty in the wilderness, the people forgot how bad it was in Egypt and lost sight of the fact that God had delivered them to freedom.

God had made a specific promise to Jacob in Genesis 46:3-4: "*I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again.*" And Joseph told his brothers right before his death: "*God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.*" (Genesis 50:24). Where was the "I will bring you up again" part of this promise? Or put another way: Joseph at one point tells his brothers that what they meant for evil God used for good. Is that still possible? Will God still redeem other's evil for His good? Is He still moving His hand of providence in His people's lives? Will He act in a mighty way on their behalf? Well, we'll find out as we make our way through this amazing book.

Conclusion

I want to suggest a few ways that this text speaks and applies to us today:

1) When the Church is opposed it often grows. Just as the Israelites continued to multiply and spread after Pharaoh cracked down on them and tried to stop their growth, God often thrives His church during times of persecution. From the early days of the apostles when they were being arrested and martyred, the book of Acts tells us that God used this early persecution to spread the Gospel: Acts 8:4 says, "*Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.*" A very famous quote from church history is from Tertullian: "*the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.*" When hostile governments have tried to stamp out Christianity, very often the opposite happen – faith is strengthened and people are attracted to a faith that its followers would die for. Now that's not always true, sometimes persecution

² James K. Bruckner, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), p. 22.

can break the church. But that was true in the early centuries of the growth of the church amidst Roman persecution, it was true in the 16th century Reformation days, and it's true in China and many Muslim countries today. I pray that it's true of the American church, that if we face persecution, God will grow His church through that.

2) God may be working on your character when you are oppressed and struggling. There's another way to look at the Israelites oppression and difficult lives. Charles Spurgeon, the great 19th century preacher, suggested that God was using it to keep them from becoming Egyptianized, from compromising and blending in with the culture. He said that the Israelites "began to adopt the superstitions, and idolatries, and iniquities of Egypt... yet, all the while, God was resolved to bring them out of that evil connection. They must be a separated people."³

God works on our character, accomplishes progress in our sanctification when we go through trials. We should look to grow through trials, not just go through them. I've heard so many stories of believers who suffered, and it was hard and they struggled in the midst of it, but they thanked God afterwards for what He worked in their lives. If you know the name Joni Erickson Tada, she is a Christian author and speaker who was paralyzed in her teen years in a diving accident. In a World Magazine interview, she said this about her life: "Had I not broken my neck I'd probably be on my second divorce, maxing out my husband's credit cards, planning my next ski vacation. I wouldn't be here extolling the glories of the gospel and the power of God to help a person smile, not in spite of the problems, but because of them."⁴

I think we can look at this time of pandemic and quarantine and the great disruption that it's caused in our lives, and in one sense we're all just trying to survive and adapt, not get the virus ourselves, not lose our jobs or starve, and help some others while we can. But I hope you've spent a little bit of time asking yourself: "What is God trying to teach me in this time? Are there sinful patterns or idols in my life that He is trying to remove? How is He making me more Christlike in the midst of this?" I have realized some things about myself and how I had a vision for how my first months of a new pastorate would go. I'd been reading a book called *Every Pastor's First 180 Days*, hoping to implement some of its ideas. Well, there's nothing in that book about social distancing and worshipping via YouTube links. I'm surrendering control, or the illusion of control, and taking life and ministry how God is allowing it happen.

3) We can learn a lot about hurting people out of fear from this text. Israel learned how it felt to be treated poorly as the outsiders, so later when they were settled in the promised land, God commanded them to treat others well. Deuteronomy 10:18-19 – "*He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.*" Near to the heart of God is how we treat those who are weak and in need: Psalm 146:7-9 – "*(God) executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the sojourners; He upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked He brings to ruin.*"

³ Charles Spurgeon, "Israel's Cry and God's Answer," *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (No. 2631) (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1971), 45:337.

⁴ Marvin Olasky's article "Loving Life" from World Magazine January 12, 2013, found at https://world.wng.org/2012/12/loving_life.

Church, we must love people who are not like us, those who are not as fortunate as us. Love the sojourner, love the foreigner, love the outcast, love the refugee, love the immigrant, love the homeless, love the widow, love the orphan. Jesus summarized it pretty well in Luke 6:32-36: *“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”*

4) We have a harsh taskmaster called sin. Our default spiritual position in life is that we are slaves to sin, and the more we give into our sin nature, the more it ensnares us and demands more from us. Andrew Peterson has a song called “Deliver Us” that says it like this: *“Our enemy, our captor is no Pharaoh on the Nile / Our toil is neither mud nor brick nor sand / Our ankles bear no calluses from chains, yet Lord, we’re bound / Imprisoned here we dwell in our own land. / Our sins they are more numerous than all the lambs we slay / Our shackles they were made with our own hands / Our toil is our atonement and our freedom Yours to give / So Yahweh, break this silence if You can. / Deliver us, deliver us, O Yahweh hear our cry / and gather us beneath your wings tonight.”*

Romans 6 has phrases like *“you who were once slaves of sin,”* (v. 17) *“you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness,”* (v. 19) and *“you were slaves of sin”* (v. 20). But that chapter ends with verses 22-23: *“But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Jesus died as the only person who wasn’t a slave to sin, the only one who lived free of the lashes that the taskmaster would inflict on Him. And yet, He took lashes on our behalf. He gave His life and gave us the free gift of eternal life and delivered us from our sin. Amen.

Benediction

Romans 15:13

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”