

Fear God Not The King  
Exodus 1:15-22  
April 26, 2020  
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CenterPoint Church

Read Exodus 1:15-22

### **Introduction: The Case of the Missing Midwife**

I still remember the birth of our first child, as I'm sure all parents do. We were the stereotypical anxious young couple who had read all of the *What To Expect When You're Expecting* books and had completely prepared our house for the arrival of our little one. Kath had been working with a midwife named Lori that she really liked, and so we were all set when the time came. And Miles ended up being right on time, Kath went into labor right at her due date, so we went to the hospital and settled in for what was a long labor. Everything was working out perfectly, except that for some reason the wonderful midwife Lori had gone out of town that weekend. She completely missed the birth. We had a substitute male doctor that we had never met who filled in for her, but it just wasn't the same when you've been working with someone for months.

This morning's passage introduces a set of midwives who worked in Egypt delivering babies for the Israelite community there. They were good at their jobs, but just like Lori they missed the births of the children that they were assigned to. But here they did it on purpose. They had a reason to be late, better than needing a weekend mini vacation. It was their obedience to the Lord and their commitment to human life that made them miss these births.

Last week's sermon introduced us to the book of Exodus and we jumped right into the situation where the Israelites, who had been living in Egypt for hundreds of years, were being given hard labor to wear them down because of the Pharaoh's paranoia that they were becoming too numerous and too strong. He was threatened by their size and strength, and when the hard labor didn't slow them down, today's text tells us that he turned to murder. The worst kind of murder, infanticide. Taking the lives of children firmly pits someone against the God of life.

In the first two verses, Pharaoh orders just two women to carry out his wishes.

#### **I. Pharaoh Orders Murder (1:15-16)**

<sup>15</sup> Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, <sup>16</sup> "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."

Shiphrah means "beautiful one" and Puah means "splendid one,"<sup>1</sup> so this gives you a clue as to how they're going to respond to the order to kill newborn baby boys. It's interesting that we get their names but we are never told Pharaoh's name! That's a beautiful reminder that God doesn't write history like we do. We focus on the powerful people, while God focuses on the faithful, whether they're rich or poor, powerful or obscure.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Exodus* (Nashville: Holman, 2014), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Dorst's sermon on Exodus 1:8-22 preached at Grace Church Stillwater, OK, previously available on their website.

It's probable that these two women were set over a number of other midwives, that they didn't actually attend to every single birth due to the large numbers involved. So they presided over a group of midwives, but were responsible to see that as soon as the gender was determined to be male that the child was killed. Why kill children and not adult males? He probably still needed the current adult male population for his building projects. Why kill the boys and not the girls? Pharaoh was more concerned about their future military strength, so killing the boys ensured they didn't grow up to become warriors. Perhaps he thought that the girls were not as much of a threat, or that they would grow up and marry Egyptian men and there would be no distinct Hebrew race to rebel against them.

There is a very clear continuation of a theme introduced right after the fall of Adam and Eve into sin.<sup>3</sup> In Genesis 3:15, God is speaking to the serpent who has just successfully tempted Adam and Eve: *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."* At first glance, that just sounds like people are going to hate snakes, and they'll always try to bite us and we'll always try to step on them. But it's much deeper than that: this is a theological framework for how history is going to proceed. It's saying, essentially, that Satan will continue to work to hurt God's people. That His forces will wage war and try to snuff out people who follow the Lord, but that the offspring of the woman will strike back. And this is the first prophecy about Jesus' redemptive work undoing Satan's work; that His death on the cross will defeat the curse of sin and Satan. But it's also a lens for us to view the struggles of the Old Testament. Pharaoh is acting as Satan's agent trying to snuff out God's people, and specifically one person (Moses) who will act as God's deliverer. And the midwives are the descendants of the woman who will resist and save God's chosen people.

So the next three verses show how they react to Pharaoh's order:

## **II. The Midwives Defy The Order (vv. 17-19)**

*<sup>17</sup> But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. <sup>18</sup> So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and let the male children live?" <sup>19</sup> 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."*

Have you ever been asked to do something that you felt was unethical or immoral by your boss or someone else in a position of power? There's a lot of pressure there, but imagine being asked by the most powerful person in the country. And not someone democratically elected, but someone born into the position and considered equal to a god. The courage and trust in the Lord that the midwives displayed was impressive, and contrasts with the paranoia and fear of Pharaoh.<sup>4</sup> One of the most powerful men on earth is thwarted by what is at best a half-truth – the Hebrew women probably were more vigorous than Egyptian women; but to assume that every birth happened that quickly is pretty naïve on Pharaoh's part. But he buys it and he doesn't lash out at the women; they get away with deceiving him.

There's an age-old debate about whether it's ever right to lie, and this is one of those lies that seems blessed by God. There are theologians down through history who have charged these midwives with sin, including John Calvin, who said, "the lying of the midwives was reprehensible and displeasing to God. Notwithstanding, since no action is free of sin, God rewarded their good works even if mixed with

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), pp. 39-40.

<sup>4</sup> James K. Bruckner, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2008), p. 22.

impurity.”<sup>5</sup> Most of us would not be so harsh, we would call this the “dutiful lie” or the “lie in faith.” It is a lie or a half-truth told to serve a greater good: to protect lives. Maybe the women should have just said, “Hey Pharaoh, we decided that your policy is wretched and we don’t want blood on our hands, so we’re not carrying it out.” But maybe they knew this was the only course that could protect themselves and the women who worked for them.

I would characterize this as the same impulse that drove Peter and John to tell the high priest and the council “*We must obey God rather than men*” in Acts 5:29 when they were strictly charged not to talk about Jesus. This is a clear case of “civil disobedience” where someone disobeys an authority for good reason. When the government or law enforcement; or teachers or bosses; or even pastor or parents asks us to do wrong, we must disobey. If you have to choose between obeying the king of your country and the King of the universe, I hope that you’ll follow the civil disobedience of these midwives.

And the last three verses show that

### **III. God Rewards Their Faithfulness (vv. 20-22)**

*<sup>20</sup> So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. <sup>21</sup> And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. <sup>22</sup> 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.”*

Proverbs 10:27 says, “*The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short.*” Proverbs 22:4 says, “*The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life.*” It took a lot of courage to defy Pharaoh’s orders, but the midwives feared God. It’s clear that God was pleased with the midwives actions of not killing the Hebrew boys. We don’t know if these women were unmarried before or if they were barren, but it says that God gave them families as rewards for their obedient actions.

Now Pharaoh doesn’t just give up when he’s told the Hebrew babies have survived and not been killed according to his instructions. He ratchets up the violence and tells the whole country, all of his people – throw the newborn Hebrew boys into the Nile. This is some serious foreshadowing, because (spoiler alert) the way Pharaoh is going to meet his death is going to involve a lot of water.

This story, as with much of Exodus and Moses’ life, has a parallel with the Gospel’s accounts of Jesus’ life. Every Christmas we’re reminded of the edict from Herod the Great to kill all the babies under the age of two, because he’s heard that a King is being born in his land and he’s threatened by that news. There is a little different motivations in these rulers: Pharaoh wants to kill the baby boys to slow down the growth of the Jews, a partial genocide intended to shrink their future numbers; Herod wants to kill all the baby boys to make sure that he wipes out a specific one. Pharaoh has no idea that in the midst of those babies is a deliverer and a redeemer for his enemies. And he certainly has no idea that that deliverer will grow up in his own household, which we’ll get to next week.

We end this first chapter of Exodus with things looking bleak for the Hebrews as they are enslaved and oppressed, but God has begun to show His power and His ability to use His people to further His purposes.

### **Conclusion: We Still Take Babies Lives Today But All Life Is Precious To God**

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<sup>5</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster, 1974), p. 23.

In 1979, China instituted a new policy for its people: every couple would be allowed one child only. If a woman got pregnant a second time, there would either be a forced abortion or a heavy fine to have the 2<sup>nd</sup> child. In 1982, that law was written into the Chinese constitution and continued until 2015. There is a documentary called *One Child Nation* that you can watch free if you have Amazon Prime. On the day that they ended the policy, the communist party of China announced: “the one-child policy has made the country more powerful, the people more prosperous, and the world more peaceful.” But the movie documents many of the awful side effects of the policy: not only were the forced abortions and sterilizations of these women awful, but children were discarded in the trash, at markets, or on hillsides, (particularly girls who were not as valuable to the parents since they could only have one child and a boy could provide for them and carry on their family name). Other side effects were the big business that grew up around international adoptions and the many children around the world who cannot reconnect with their birth families because of the lies and coverups surrounding their origins, and a generation of parents who felt guilty and helpless about their actions. The movie ends with the explanation that “the One-Child Policy lasted for 35 years. Now there aren’t enough young people in China to work and care for the elderly. So China has introduced a two child policy.” This is a modern day version of Pharaoh’s edict to wipe out a generation of baby boys, also driven by the fear of overpopulation, but in this case taken out on its own people.

But it’s not just China where people kill their children. In America and many countries of the world, it is legal to kill a child before he or she makes it out of their mother’s wombs. Before I get too far in this discussion, I want to make sure that you hear me clearly: abortion is not the unforgiveable sin, there is healing and forgiveness in Jesus. If you have had an abortion or encouraged someone else to have an abortion, I am not mad at you; there is no hatred or judgment here. More importantly, God does not hate you, He wants to heal you. You don’t need to be ashamed to find a counselor; I would recommend New Day Pregnancy Care Center in Dover or A Door of Hope in Middletown. I also am not mad at you if you disagree with me that abortion is murder. If you are pro-choice and feel that the reproductive rights of a woman are more important than the child’s right to live, I disagree with you, I still love you. You’re welcome at this church.

But abortion is the taking of a human life. I know that the text here is talking about taking the life of children right after they are delivered, but it is only semantics that a child becomes a child after it is delivered out of its mother’s body. As John Piper titled an excellent article about abortion back in 2013: “We Know They Are Killing Children – All Of Us Know.”<sup>6</sup> Just look at the laws: it is illegal to take the life of the unborn if the mother wants the child, but it is legal to kill it if the mother does not want it. Any pregnancy where the mother wants the child will refer to the developing fetus as a baby. Because it is! Anything that defines personhood outside the womb defines personhood inside the womb.

God is a God of life, He knows our lives from before we are born – Psalm 139:13-14, 16 – *“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made... Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.”* God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The same love and care for human life that moved Him to reward the midwives is the same love and care that He will show to those who keep their babies and who protect the unborn and the young and vulnerable today. Proverbs 24:11-12 reminds us of the midwives and

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<sup>6</sup> John Piper, “We Know They Are Killing Children – All Of Us Know” article from January 22, 2013, found at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/we-know-they-are-killing-children-all-of-us-know>

implores us to act like them: *“Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, ‘Behold, we did not know this,’ does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will he not repay man according to his works?”* We should do all we can non-violently to save lives, support those who run pregnancy centers, and help women who are going through crisis pregnancies.

Back to that documentary *One Child Nation*, there’s a powerful interview in it. The director, Nanfu Wang, grew up in the 90s during the height of the one-child policy and is now a mom herself. She wants to learn the scope of what happened, so she interviews the midwife from her village. The woman is 84 years old and she tells of how she had performed between 50,000 and 60,000 sterilizations and abortions on women. She says, “I counted this out of guilt because I aborted and killed babies. Many I induced alive and killed. My hands trembled doing it. But I had no choice: it was the government’s policy. We didn’t make decisions. We only executed orders... in those days, women were abducted by government officials, tied up, and dragged to us like pigs.” She was, essentially, the opposite of Shiphrah and Puah – she carried out the murderous orders of her government without question or resistance. But she goes on to say that since she retired 27 years ago, she decided to do the opposite: to help women who were dealing with infertility. Her entire house was decorated with flags that women had sent her as thank you’s for helping them conceive children. It was a beautiful sight – rooms and room filled with red flags symbolizing all the women she had helped. She is asked why she helped with infertility, and she says, “I want to atone for my sins for all the abortions and killings I did... the state gave the order, but I carried it out.”

This woman carried such shame and guilt over what she had participated in that she felt she had to “work off” her sins in some way. That if she did enough good it would outweigh the bad. It’s just as true for the rest of us, that inside all of us is a sense of guilt and justice that knows that we have fallen well short of what we should be. We can deny it, we can rationalize it, we can belligerently declare that we are good enough. But deep down we know that we are not. We know that we have to atone for our sins; we may not say it consciously like that, but its written on our souls. And the truth is that we can never make up for what we’ve done. As hard as that woman worked to bring more children in to the world, and as commendable as that work was, it would never bring back the children that she had killed. There is only one way to atone for our sins, and that is to have God forgive them. But God can’t just overlook our sins, Hebrews 9:22 says that *“without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”* A death has to take place to atone, to pay the penalty for the sin since *“the wages of sin is death.”* Seven verses earlier, verse 15 had said *“...a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.”* And earlier, verse 12 explains that, *“He (Jesus) entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.”*

His death on the cross is our atonement, the only way to have our sins forgiven and not counted against us. Jesus came to give us abundant and eternal life. *“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”* (John 10:10) He emphasizes over and over His connection to life: *“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”* (John 14:6) No matter what your past and your record of sins, that life is available to all who come to Him in humility and repentance. Amen.

Benediction - Psalm 121:7-8

*“The Lord will keep you from all evil; He will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.”*