

Exodus 1

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[0 : 00] I want you to try and imagine if you can what it would feel like to be enslaved to somebody, to be under their control, to have your freedom taken away.

One of the news stories that has really stuck with me from this summer is that awful story in Ohio, in the United States, of those women who were being held captive in their own homes.

I think it was three women, wasn't it? And they were discovered after a decade of slavery in their own home. It was a really harrowing story if you read the details of that.

But in Exodus chapter 1, we find that slavery, that enforced captivity and even enforced abortion, is the reality, it's the grim reality for the people of God in slavery.

The good old days of Egypt, of Joseph even, good old days of Joseph, the vice president of Egypt, are over.

[1 : 19] He has died long ago with that generation and we get a sniff of the trouble to come in verse 8, don't we? Have a look at verse 8.

Now there arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph. See, this new king has no regard for Joseph's Hebrew relations, does he, who live in the land now.

And out of a misplaced fear and paranoia, his political agenda is to crush the church, to oppress them.

So, he effectively begins an ethnic cleansing campaign, doesn't he? He wants to make sure these Israelites don't reproduce.

So in verse 11, phase 1 of the campaign, the Israelites were afflicted with heavy burdens with forced labour.

[2 : 22] Verse 14, they were used ruthlessly. Now the word ruthlessly is a word that is only used five times in the whole of the Bible.

It's a unique word for a unique kind of suffering, a unique kind of oppression. So I guess the logic is, isn't it, from Pharaoh's point of view, that hopefully they'll be so tired and low and oppressed and ruthlessly treated, they won't have any desire to reproduce and have children.

They'll get smaller and smaller and eventually they'll disappear. But then phase 2 comes, doesn't it, in the campaign. It gets even darker.

Pharaoh orders the enforced abortion of the male children. Look at verse 16. Pharaoh says to the midwives, Listen, when the Hebrews give birth, when it's a girl, that's fine, they can reproduce more Egyptians.

But when it's a boy, kill him. Let's just say that there are complications at the birth, if you know what I mean. You can do that, can't you?

[3 : 42] The joy of childbirth, it's turned into an ordeal, isn't it? It becomes the moment to see whether the newborn will live or will die. And if you look at verse 22, the NIV actually uses the words boys and girls.

But I think, more helpfully, the ESV is right. It talks about sons and daughters, doesn't it? Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile.

Every daughter shall live. Do you see, we're talking about sons and daughters. We're talking about real families, real people, real relationships, real suffering, real emotions.

So, imagine the Israelite worker. He goes to work, doesn't he? And it's hard. Slavery. But there's no respite when he gets home.

There's the emotional strain of family life, of losing children. They were ruthlessly made to work. And I want you to try and feel that this morning, if you can.

[4 : 55] To feel the hopelessness of this chapter. And you know, what makes it even more unpalatable for us to read this morning is that these people we read about are supposed to be

God's people, aren't they?

They're his people. And we wonder, what is God doing? Where is he in all of this? There is suffering that we cause ourselves, isn't there?

Often, when we behave like idiots. Just watch me for the week if you don't believe me. But that is not the reason, is it? For their suffering. It's the suffering of being God's people.

Of being Christians. And you know, that is a pattern, isn't it? That we see throughout the Bible. That the very people who turn to God for protection seem to be the ones most at risk.

Time after time, God's people in the Old Testament and in the New too, are treated that way. Paul and Barnabas have to remind the other believers in the Acts of the Apostles in chapter 14 that Christians, that we must enter the kingdom of God through many tribulations.

[6 : 18] It's going to be hard. Being a Christian isn't a crutch for the weak, as some people say. To be honest, it feels more like a liability, doesn't it?

The more we go with Jesus in the boat, the more storms seem to appear. It can be emotional suffering, aren't it?

Or a physical suffering, or spiritual suffering. Well, as we look at this chapter, I don't want to dumb down the suffering that is in this chapter.

I think we've got the picture of that, haven't we? And I don't want to dumb down your suffering. For being a Christian. But, I'd like us to see the hidden reality of this chapter.

And to see, really, God's hidden providence in this chapter. Because there's something unexpected going on here.

[7 : 21] Now, as we read it earlier, as Penny read it for us, I don't know if you noticed the strange, repeated refrain in the passage. And I think it just about sums it up.

Joseph and his generation die, leaving the people vulnerable. And yet, in verse 7, the people of Israel were fruitful and multiplied.

They multiplied and grew exceedingly numerous. Verse 12, The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied.

And the more they spread. The liquidation is ordered, isn't it? But, verse 20, again, the people multiplied and grew very strong.

Now, if you think about it, this just doesn't make sense, does it? It doesn't make sense. Pharaoh knows what he's doing. He's a professional in these kind of things.

[8 : 25] It is strange. There's something unexpected going on here. The great fear for Pharaoh, in verse 10, was that the people would multiply. It's ironic, isn't it?

So he oppresses them. But, you see, the measure of oppression becomes the measure of multiplication, as we were learning this morning with the kids.

It does the absolute opposite of what Pharaoh intends, doesn't it? The more they are afflicted, the more they grow in strength. It's a bit like a game I used to play when I was a kid.

I don't know if you've played it. It's called Whack-A-Mole. So you'd get a hammer, and there would be these moles that would pop up, and you'd have to hit them on the head. But as soon as you hit them on the head, another mole would pop up.

You hit that one, another one would pop up. It's a bit like that, isn't it? The more that Pharaoh tries to oppress God's people, the more they just keep growing and appearing again.

[9 : 30] It must be frustrating for him. And we see that pattern over and over again in this chapter. Oppression, growth. Oppression, growth. Oppression, growth. So, as you see, as we look at this chapter in Exodus, and actually if you read through the rest of the book of Exodus, we begin to see that, as with every other hardship that Christians face, there is a hidden reality.

God works, sometimes in suffering, to quietly and secretly save, to lead, to protect, and eventually to dwell with his people.

And just think about it, the hands that are working so hard in the labour camps in Egypt, if you know the story, will eventually become the hands that build the tent of meeting where God dwells.

So, can it be that whatever you're going through this morning, as a Christian, as a member of God's people, could it be that it might be part of the Lord's plan to multiply and to grow and to bless you and his people?

It's the hidden provenance of God. So, in the rest of the time we've got this morning, I want us, if we can, to see why in Exodus the people are oppressed and yet growing, afflicted in strength and ruthlessly treating and yet they're multiplying.

[11 : 09] Why is this? Well, the first thing to say is that in one sense, God's people are not the real slaves. God's people are not the real slaves.

Now, the people of Israel, they have bitter lives, don't they? As we've already seen. And work is hard. And when we suffer, the question is often, isn't it, why?

Why allow this, God? Now, I don't know if there is ever an easy answer to that question. But what we can say for these Israelites is that it was all planned.

It was planned this way from the beginning. Now, just look back with me, if you will, to Genesis chapter 15 and verse 13.

Just turn there, if you will, for a moment. Amen. So this is the section, isn't it, where God promises Abraham, a great nation, he makes promises to Abraham, Moses' ancestor.

[12 : 29] And in verse 13 of chapter 15, he says to Abraham, then the Lord said to him, know for certain that for 400 years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and that they will be enslaved and ill-treated there.

But, I will punish the nation they serve as slaves and afterwards they will come out with great possessions. You see, even if we can't explain the suffering completely, what the Israelite knew at the time was that it was planned.

And the dark times were going to lead to blessing and possessions. And that justice would eventually be done. So you see, the tyrant Pharaoh thinks he's in control, doesn't he?

He thinks he's subduing God's people. He thinks he is the one calling all the shots. But he doesn't realise, does he, that everything he does to try and destroy the people of God is part of the plan.

He enslaves the people of God and yet, in reality, Pharaoh is God's slave. He is God's puppet.

[13 : 52] Pharaoh unwittingly does God's will, doesn't he? He fulfills God's plan. He carries out God's word from Genesis chapter 15.

Now, just notice in this chapter that it seems like Pharaoh is the one doing all the talking, isn't he? He's the one giving all the orders. And in fact, God remains silent.

God doesn't say anything. And that is so often how it can feel, isn't it? All the noise can come from the opposition, from the things that want to stop us from being Christians.

It can all come from the source of suffering and God can feel so silent in those dark times. But, he is the one in the background doing things, doing his will, fulfilling his plans.

I don't know if you remember there's another time in the Bible where this sort of thing happens like in Isaiah where he gives the account of the great king Sennacherib who is the great Babylonian king.

[15 : 05] And he's a warlord who besieges Jerusalem. And he sends messengers to taunt King Hezekiah who was the king in Jerusalem at the time.

And in Isaiah chapter 37, he says this, Surely you've heard what the king of Assyria has done to all the countries, destroying them completely.

And will you be delivered? Did the gods of the nations that were destroyed by my predecessors deliver them? Sennacherib, the great king, comes with all of his pomp and pride.

He thinks he's the one calling the shots to enslave God's people. But God replies in verse 26 of chapter 37 in Isaiah.

Isaiah, have you not heard? Long ago, I determined it. In days of old, I planned it. Now I have brought it to pass, that you have turned fortified cities into piles of stone.

[16 : 13] And I will put my pock in your nose, and my bit in your mouth, and I will make you return by the way you came. sometimes God doesn't give us all the answers, does he?

The answers that we want in a particular situation. But there is comfort in this, isn't there? That in the suffering, God's people, for God's people, it's never an accident.

He says to us, I determined it long ago. The heavy weights of the world, they think they are the ones in control. They think that they are the ones calling the shots, but Exodus 1 teaches us that they are the unwitting servants of God's will.

And in his wisdom and his care, he uses even their evil actions to bring about good purposes, to strengthen and multiply his people.

And of course, there can be no greater example and fulfilment of that than the cross of the Lord Jesus, can there? As evil men tried to destroy and oppress God's greater son, the Lord Jesus, he was ruthlessly treated and killed.

[17 : 36] And yet with oppression came growth. There came huge blessing, priceless blessing, countless blessing as a result.

God's people in suffering are not the real slaves because there is a plan and God is working. But the second thing to say this morning is that the Egyptians are not the real great people in Exodus chapter 1.

The Egyptians are not the real great people. Now, the Egyptians look pretty impressive in this passage, don't they? You may have noticed that while Pharaoh is the big cheese in everything that goes on with the Egyptians, the writer wants us to see that the whole nation of Egypt is behind him, is responsible.

So, in verse 10, the Egyptian people as a whole are induced, aren't they, into a frenzy of fear and misplaced hatred for God's people.

Let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply. And in verse 12, the Egyptians are named as a whole, ruthlessly making the Israelites work.

[19 : 02] And in verse 22 as well, Pharaoh commands all of the people to destroy the Hebrew sons. Pharaoh incites the whole nation of Israel against them.

And they, like Pharaoh, look as if they're the one calling all the shots, don't they? They're in the position of power and privilege. They are the taskmasters with the whips in their hands.

And God's people, well they are abandoned, stigmatised, without a leader. They are foreigners.

And it's Egypt who seems great in this passage. And that's the way that it will be for God's people in this world. That will be the pattern until Jesus returns.

the world will seem so great and impressive and powerful in comparison to the church as aliens and strangers in the world, as foreigners.

[20 : 12] And yet, don't we often get into a pickle by trying to be something that we're not in this world? Trying to take on some of the world's values, trying to look impressive and powerful.

We feel the pressure, don't we, of the whips and the taskmasters of the world to be like them and to jostle for power. But you see, in the midst of the colossal superpower Egypt is a group of people who aren't foreigners, really.

They have an identity. So, I don't know if you wondered why there was this family tree at the beginning of chapter 1 in verses 1 to 7.

There are names mentioned there, aren't they? I don't think that's just purely for historical interest. It's there to show us that these oppressed, weak people have roots.

They have a divine family tree. The writer wants us to realise, doesn't he, that Exodus is a continuation of the story of Genesis, where God made promises and covenants and sealed his people for blessing, to be his own people.

[21 : 31] And even when there is death, when the death of Joseph happens at the end of Genesis, those promises continue, because they are still his people and his people matter to God.

they are multiplying despite the odds, because they matter to him. Now in suffering in Egypt, it's not as if they've just been parachuted in and it's the beginning of the story.

No, they've been grafted in to this great family, based in the past, where God kept them and blessed them. In Genesis 46, God promises Jacob, one of Moses' ancestors, Joseph's father, Jacob, Jacob, I am the God of your father.

Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. And now, you see, they're living in the legacy of those promises, because they matter to him.

Remember the early promises that God made to Abraham even further back, that he would be the father of a great nation, that his children would be more numerous than the sand on the seashore, more than the stars even in the sky.

[22 : 56] And here in the suffering, God keeps his word. They're oppressed and yet they're growing. They're afflicted and yet they're strengthened, ruthlessly treated, and yet multiplying.

His promises are fulfilled and he promises to complete what he starts in us, despite the suffering.

There was a story on TV a couple of years ago, I don't know if you saw it, there was a documentary on Channel 4 about a guy called Mike Hastings.

Now he sounds like a normal guy. He was on this documentary, he's a British born man who'd moved to Australia in the 1960s. Mike Hastings works as a forklift truck driver in a factory in a small town just outside Sydney.

He lives in a simple house with a rusting caravan in his front yard. He seems like a typical fellow. That is until you read his family tree.

historians, so this documentary claimed, had recently found a document in a French cathedral which showed that Mike Hastings was a direct descendant of Edward III, King of England.

[24 : 24] The records show, I won't give you all the details, that King Edward IV, who ruled from 1461, was illegitimate, which, if you follow the ancestry down the line, it would make Mike Hastings the next in line for the throne.

He lives in a small town of about a thousand people just outside Sydney. He goes to see his mates in the pub after work and they don't suspect a thing.

But, if the historians are right, he has royal blood. they don't realise that they're in the company of a nobleman. The rusting caravan in his backyard, and you could not write this, ironically is made by a company called Windsor.

I didn't make that up. Mike Hastings, while it's not obvious to those around him, is from regal stock. And while Egypt may seem great, God's people are still God's people.

They will become a great nation. Living in slavery, living in the world, as the real life royals, as God's people.

[25 : 47] So, who you are may not seem all too obvious now. It may be a bit of a Mike Hastings to the world. We were learning at 24-7 a weekend away, just a few weekends back, about how Paul tells us that our lives are hidden with Christ for the time being.

But when he appears, our true identity will also appear with him in glory. And it may not be clear that that's who we are when suffering arises in this world.

But you matter to God. Peter says, you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

So, kids, don't be paralysed by the need to be popular at school. That goes for us adults too, doesn't it, at work or at home.

Don't be paralysed by the need to be liked by everybody. Because God is saying, you matter to me. You're popular with me, the God of the universe.

[27 : 10] You are my royal people. Remember that. So, in the suffering, the Israelites aren't the real slaves in one sense, and the Egyptians aren't the real great people.

But thirdly and lastly, we need to see that Pharaoh is not the real king in Exodus chapter 1. Pharaoh is not the real king. Now, as we come to a close in this time now, we're going to look, just for a moment, at the heroism of these two midwives in verses 17 to 19, if you just look there.

Now, we're not told, are we, whether the midwives themselves are Egyptians or Hebrew women, just that they're in charge of delivering the Hebrew children.

Now, they have a dilemma, don't they? They're given this order to kill off all of the Hebrew sons. And this order comes from Pharaoh, the war machine leader, Pharaoh.

His power is undisputed. his will is taken with the force of the gods. You don't mess with Pharaoh. It's not optional, what he says. You don't simply just refuse to go with the program, hope that he doesn't notice.

[28 : 32] It's the king of Egypt commanding them here, but there is this lovely comparison, isn't there, in verse 17. It's as if, isn't it, the two kings are lined up together and the midwives in the dilemma choose to fear God over the king of Egypt.

Now that is a bold move, isn't it, in this circumstance. Some might say it's slightly naive. They refuse to kill the sons and God deals well with the Hebrew midwives.

He gives them families of their own. And the people multiplied. Two women, two obscure characters, in a great big story, who fear God over the tyrants.

It's funny, isn't it, if you read the book of Exodus, which is a great thing to do, that nowhere in the whole of the book of Exodus is Pharaoh's name actually mentioned.

We don't know who he is. He could be Brian, for all we know. We don't know who his name is. And yet, here are these two women, Shifra and Pua.

[29 : 51] And they are given, aren't they, special mention, right at the beginning, because they know who the real king is. They have pride of place right at the start of the book of Exodus, because in one faithful move, they can stop the war machine in its tracks.

Now, last Christmas, round at Emma's parents' house, they have a tradition. It is to watch the sound of music, and I had to watch the sound of music last Christmas.

And there is a scene in that film, just near the end, if you've seen that film, where the von Trapp family are locked in that big castle at the end, aren't they? And the Nazi German soldiers are after them, and they're just about to capture them.

But there is a great moment where the family run out of the castle, and then the soldiers get into their cars, and the cars won't start. Nothing happens, and they're there, and they can't go anywhere, and the family escape into the mountains.

But at that moment, the camera switches, it pans over to a scene in the nunnery next door, in the convent. and there's two nuns in there, and it's a great scene.

[31 : 13] One of them pulls out a bunch of spark plugs from underneath her habit, and she says to the other nun, forgive me sister, for I have sinned.

It's a great moment, but they were just two women who could stop the Nazi war machine. It's a great picture, isn't it? In the midst of suffering, because of the faithfulness of two obscure women, who know who the real king is, they stop Pharaoh's plan in its tracks.

And the real king deals well with those people. The people who fear him, even in the midst of suffering, they do the right thing in the face of oppression, and that's so hard to do, isn't it?

So, you don't have to be a notable person, you don't have to be particularly gifted, or remarkable, we're just told to fear him, even in the suffering.

Now, I don't know what your sufferings might be this morning, as a result of being a Christian, and maybe you want to ask, why Lord? Why allow this?

[32 : 35] And it may be, this morning, your only comfort to hear that there is a plan. I determined it long ago. There is a hidden reality, isn't there, to the suffering of God's people in Exodus, and there always has been, right through the Bible.

And you matter to him this morning. You are his royal priesthood, in a world where that might be not too obvious for the time being.

But no matter how obscure you are, how small you might feel, in those dark moments, you can be faithful where you are. Because as the real king, he always keeps his word.

We are not the real slaves in this world. Because there is a plan for God's people. people. And the world out there isn't where all the great people are.

Because we matter to God. And the Lord is the real king. Let's pray