

Jacob's descendants in the land of Egypt. His final command was cynical and destructive. He gave permission for any Egyptian to take a young male Hebrew and throw him into the Nile. In this way, Pharaoh intended to disperse the growing national identity of the Hebrews. Without boys, there would be no marriages or family life. The young women would be free to be taken into mixed marriages or harems, and all the cultural foci of the life of the Israelites would be gradually filtered away into greater Egypt. Apparently, Pharaoh was not really concerned about the supply of labour for his building projects; but that subject comes up in the next part of the story.

God was not going to allow His own people, charged with the message of faith and hope for the whole world and through whom He intended to bless all peoples, to disappear. The first chapter of Exodus has the function of building up a picture of God's people in increasing need of faith, hope and salvation themselves.

Application

There are parts of this passage which relate to the great Gospel themes of surviving by God's power in the midst of persecution, the defeat of evil by standing steadfast in the power of God, and salvation itself. We will find that these themes are present through most of Exodus, but they are introduced at an early stage. God is consistent, and these themes are as relevant to us today as they were to the Hebrews. We often find ourselves to be in similar places either physically or spiritually (or both) as the Israelites in this passage. We talk today about 'raising our head above the parapet', which describes the action of becoming more noticeable in a particular social setting. The Israelites were becoming numerous and more noticeable, and paid a price. Their name was altered by others (possibly), and in a manner which may not have been complementary (originally). They were persecuted and threatened with annihilation by the cruel method of extinguishing hope within their families, through the loss of male children. In this passage, they were inspired by the example of two midwives who 'feared God' and stood against the evil in their midst.

This is a challenge to us. Can we take our stand against the evils in our midst with the same courage as these midwives, making fools out of Pharaohs? Persecution may well not stop, and faith and hope will be required for longer periods of time before God brings deliverance, but such inspiration helps people hold on when persecution and trouble appear insurmountable. Who will stand and demonstrate their fear of God today?

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does it matter whether the midwives were Hebrew or not? Today, does God work only through His chosen people, the Church, or through others as well?
2. Discuss in your group the effects of genocide upon a country, using examples from recent history.
3. What are the main features of hope within this story, and what are the main features of persecution? What can we learn from them?

Discipleship

Each of us will know that in the past, there are times when we have had to stand firm in the face of evil. What we cannot do is predict when such circumstance will arise again. They nearly always catch us awkwardly and 'off guard'. The best spiritual preparation for such spiritual battles is to know that they will happen, and that we have One who will stand by us and see us through. Our faith and our hope is not in vain!

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, when we struggle to do what we know to be right, please stand beside us and help us. When we need courage to face the evils of this world, grant us the spiritual strength to stand firm. Then, when salvation comes, may we rejoice with all our heart and soul and voice; and give thanks to Him who has saved us! AMEN

Prayer

When we come to You in frailty and need, good Lord, deliver us. In Your deliverance, set us free from the perils of our age, the evil wiles of the enemy, the tensions of uncontrolled stress, and the demonic trials of temptation. You have the right and the authority to set us free; so may we yield to Your liberation, through Jesus Christ: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Church Triumphant

Pray today in thanks for all those great missionaries who have given their lives for the Lord in service and sometimes martyrdom. Each generation and each country has its own stories of such people, and they are to be treasured. If you do not know of such people, an internet search may help, but please pray to thank God for their work and the testimony of their lives.

Meditation

The power of the Lord is present and active in this age.

The Holy Spirit touches lives and changes them everywhere;
The faithful love of the Lord brings peace to troubled souls;
The Word of God inspires people wherever they read it;
The healing hand of Jesus Christ restores body, soul and spirit;
The renewing power of the Lord brings the dead to life!
The Creator of the world sustains life, even with global warming!
The imprisoned are set free as Christ delivers them from evil!

The victory of the Cross is implanted in human history,
And it can never be removed, stained or blotted out.
The power of the Lord is present and active in this age!

Bible Study - Exodus 1:15-22

¹⁵ The king of Egypt instructed the midwives of the Hebrews, whose names were Shiprah and Puah, ¹⁶ 'When helping Hebrew women give birth, watch them on the birth stool so that if it is a boy, you must kill him; but if it is a girl, then let her live.

¹⁷ However, the midwives feared God. They did not do as the king ordered them and they let the boys live. ¹⁸ The king of Egypt then summoned the midwives and asked, 'Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?' ¹⁹ The midwives replied to Pharaoh; 'the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; they are lively and strong, and give birth before the midwives can get to them!'

²⁰ God was good to the midwives, and the people increased considerably in number and became strong; ²¹ and because the midwives feared God, He gave them their own households.

²² Pharaoh responded with a command to all his people. He said; 'You must throw every boy that is born (to the Hebrews) into the Nile; but you will let every girl live.'

Review

The story of God's people in Egypt suddenly enters a dangerous new phase. Oppressive work and the control of taskmasters was a severe life for Pharaoh to impose upon a people (1:9-14), but a policy of genocide was something else. In a wonderful section of this passage (1:15-19), we learn about the way in which the Hebrew midwives circumvented the command of the king and therefore must have saved many lives. They were rewarded by God in a unique and

privileged way (1:20,21). These verses close the first chapter of Exodus, however, with the angry and deadly threat of the king, issued as a decree to all the people of Egypt. Hebrew baby boys were to be killed by throwing them into the Nile. Pharaoh was intent on pursuing his racial hatred of the Hebrew people.

There is little obvious logic in what Pharaoh did, however, and this shows the irrationality of his hatred and racial abuse. He was not the first or the last leader in history to demonstrate such absurdity. Having set the Hebrews to work in building essential supply cities (1:11f.), the king of Egypt's desire to kill all the Hebrew boys was entirely contradictory to his objectives. Big building projects in ancient times, such as the building of cities, took many years, if not generations. Moreover, there is ample evidence in ancient records that under these conditions, those required to work had a significantly low life expectation. There would be a constant need for new young labour in order to keep the projects alive over the generations it would take to complete. Pharaoh's commands however, were dominated by his feelings rather than the strategic needs of Egypt for which he was responsible.

The small story of the Hebrew midwives is fascinating, and is tucked into this passage like a small gem. The naming of the midwives is significant, for few women are honoured like this in Scripture. This is because their actions directly protected God's Covenant heritage, and the record of their actions is told with relish. The king of Egypt informed Shiprah and Puah to keep an eye on women in labour, and then kill the male children even as they were born. It was an extraordinary demand which required the midwives to go against every fibre of their moral, social and religious convictions. It is no wonder that they easily found a way of getting around the command, using an excuse which, in those days, could not easily be checked. The king attempted to turn the Hebrew midwives against their own people, but the midwives would have none of it, and deceived the king rather than their own people. It is no wonder that the king reacted to this with venom and hate, ordering the first general slaughter of male children in the Bible. Later, such terrible human vengeance would come to be associated with circumstances in which God worked in power for the salvation of his people (Jer 31:15) and points forward to Herod's slaughter of the innocents at the time of the birth of Christ (Matt 2:16-18).

God's reward to the midwives is recorded in verses 20 and 21. To our ears, the record of this suggests that He enabled them to have large families, and some Bible translations strongly imply this; but it is not what the text says. God rewarded these remarkable women with headship of their own 'households'. It is very rare for Scripture to identify a woman as the head of a household, let alone two; for this position was normally held by a man. However, this is clearly what this passage says, and it was a great honour.

Lastly, the passage is an example of the contrasts we saw yesterday in the opening verses. On the one hand, Israel was a nation small enough to be served by two midwives (perhaps only a thousand or two). On the other hand, we are told that the nation was thriving, with growth outstripping the expectations of the day (1:20). However, no numbers are given. All Scripture wants us to know is that despite the persecution, the people of God grew and thrived.

Going Deeper

This passage continues to build the story line of Exodus by giving us more insight into the blessings of God on His people despite their circumstances, and the growing xenophobia of the king (Pharaoh). Each element of the story is told for a reason, and though it is tempting to read quickly through Exodus 1 in order to get to the well known story of Moses' birth in chapter 2, these verses help us understand God's perspective on what was happening.

The king, the midwives, and God

In a highly structured and organised society, one would expect the Hebrew midwives to be obedient to a command of the great king of Egypt, and do his bidding which was to kill the male Hebrew children. This, however, is not a simple story of an event. It is a description of a spiritual battle played out between the only two authorities which mattered, according to Scripture. The king of Egypt was the earthly authority, but a man who believed he was a god, and whose trappings of power were all designed to make him appear god-like. Nevertheless, his words and

actions are treated with disdain by the two midwives. The other power is God Himself, and He appears twice in the story, reacting to the events that take place. In a verse which is central to the whole story, Scripture tells us 'the midwives feared God'; and then after the midwives have made a mockery of Pharaoh, God rewards them with 'households' (see above).

There is a great deal of scholarly debate about whether the midwives were Hebrew or not. The reason for this is firstly that the midwives are described, technically, as 'the midwives of the Hebrews' (1:15), which does not give us firm reason to say that they were Hebrews themselves; it just tells us that they were the ones who did this job for the Hebrews. Secondly, the midwives talked in verse 19 as if they were familiar with assisting the childbirth of both Egyptians and Hebrews, and for this reason were capable of comparing the two. Thirdly, the statement that they 'feared God' (1:17) stands out as if they were non-Hebrews who had come to accept faith in the God of the Hebrews! This debate, which you will find in most commentaries, however, sterilises the whole story. The story begs us not to try and ascertain the nationality of the midwives, but to compare the way that they respect the two authorities represented within the story. By fearing God, the midwives took courage to face the evil of the king directly, and refuse to do his will. They were prepared to face the wrath of the king of Egypt rather than the wrath of the God of all life!

Again, there is some debate about what the midwives were expected to do, with some indication in the Hebrew text that the midwives were expected to deceive the mothers by causing the baby boys to die in childbirth in what might have been perceived to be a 'natural' way. We must remember that infant mortality in those days was far higher and far more expected than today. But the underlying fact of the story is the fruitfulness and virility of the Hebrew people. They were God's own people, and God was present with them and blessed them whatever happened in the world around them and whatever their earthly circumstances.

Hebrews?

What is most interesting about this story is that God's people are called the 'Hebrews'. Previously, in the first fourteen verses of Exodus, they were called the 'sons of Jacob' or the 'sons of Israel', and also the 'Israelites' (1:1,7,8,12,13). Does the name change mean anything? Although we are used to thinking of 'Hebrews' as an alternative word for God's people, the number of places in the Bible where this wording is used is very limited. Abraham is once described as a Hebrew (Gen 14:13), and Joseph was called a 'Hebrew slave' by those who accused him of sexual misdemeanours with Potiphar's wife (Gen 39:14f.). Then, apart from this passage, God's people are called Hebrews in the description of a few of Saul's battle with Philistines (1 Sam 13,14), and there is one mention of them in Deuteronomy 15:12, and a couple in Jeremiah 34:9f. In comparison to the number of times the word 'Israelites' or 'Judeans' appears, this is very small, and the main place in the Bible where God's people are called 'Hebrews' is in Exodus 1 and 2.

The most likely explanation for this is that in the last century, scholars have found ancient letters from regional kings dating from the fourteenth century BC, and these talk about a nomadic group of people called 'Habiru', or sometimes 'Apiru'. Were these letters referring to the clans of Jacob? It is possible. However, a close reading of these ancient letters shows that the term 'Habiru' was used in almost a derogatory way, as some people (unfortunately) speak rather condescendingly about 'gypsies' today.

It may be that by using the term 'Hebrew' about the Israelites (surely the favoured word for the people of God), the king was speaking in a derogatory way. However, all his pronouncements backfired, and instead of being seen to act wisely and astutely (see 1:10), he was shown up as something of a fool himself. Some people suggest that the Israelites were not ashamed to accept the insult, for within the whole story of Exodus, it was they who insulted Pharaoh by escaping from Egypt after pillaging the land of its wealth (Exodus 14). They had the 'last laugh'. Meanwhile, in this part of the story, there is no doubt that the oppression of the Hebrews (Israelites) continued, and despite the almost comic nature of the first part of the passage (1:15-21), Pharaoh was not going to stop his campaign to wreak genocide on the growing number of