

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 1:8-22

To understand more about the new king of Egypt.

The Times They Are A-Changin’

1964 was a pivotal year for the human experience. America mourned the recently assassinated John F. Kennedy. Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Race riots became commonplace in the United States. Famed boxer Cassius Clay changed his name to Mohammed Ali following his conversion to the so-called *Nation of Islam*. The British band The Beatles took America by storm. Perhaps it was the combination of all of these things that led singer-songwriter Bob Dylan to write the title track of his 1964 album of the same name: “The Times They Are A-Changin’.” Truly and suddenly things looked very different.

The very same thing could be said of Exodus 1:8-22: *Truly and suddenly things looked very different*. The Hebrew people were embraced and welcomed into the kingdom of Egypt at the end of Genesis on account of Joseph’s rise to power as the second most important person in all of the land. They were welcomed and given land to live in and cultivate (Gen. 47:27). The sons of Jacob that entered Egypt were recounted in last week’s study of Exodus 1:1-7, and there was no sign of ill-will towards the Hebrew people in Egypt. And then suddenly, in verse 8: “There arose a new king in Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” The rise of this new king and the decisions that he makes against the people of God eventually pave the way for God to judge the kingdom of Egypt and lead His people out of their lands, just as He promised He would (Gen. 50:24-25).

A New King, A Growing Problem

Verse 8 begins with a rather harrowing announcement: “Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” The Hebrew experience was built on Joseph’s long-lasting impact on the kingdom of Egypt. Because of Joseph, they had survived a famine that would have otherwise destroyed them (Gen. 41:53-57). Verse 8 implies that long after Joseph and that generation had died, the following Pharaohs continued to honor the legacy of Joseph in Egypt. This new king, however, did not “know” him. Interestingly, the term “know” in Hebrew is the same word used to describe the intimacy of a sexual union. In other words, this new king didn’t merely lack knowledge about Joseph, but had no intimate concern for him and the people he represented. The question is, “Why?”

A NEW ADMINISTRATION

There are some historical details that perhaps help us understand why this happened. Joseph’s rise to power happened almost certainly during the time of the administration of the Hyksos pharaohs, rulers of the Fifteenth Dynasty of Egypt. The Hyksos were outsiders who had invaded and conquered Egypt but were eventually purged by a nationalistic Theban group that embodied the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Dynasties of Egypt. It is likely that the new king in Exodus 1:8 was either Theban, or strongly influenced by the Theban ideology. Since they were so hostile to the idea of foreigners in general because of their hatred for the Hyksos

Dynasty, this likely also meant that they were hostile to every foreign people group as well, including the Hebrews. In other words, the Hebrew people were now living in a foreign land with an administration that hated foreigners.

PLAN A

This hatred for the Hebrews is verbalized and a new plan, what we will refer to as *Plan A*, is made to deal with them: “And he said to his people, ‘Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. 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.’ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses” (Ex. 1:9-11). The dynamic between the Egyptians and the Israelites changes dramatically. They are no longer welcomed guests but indentured servants who are looked upon with fear of what might happen if they continue to multiply.

A CONTINUED BLESSING

The Egyptian oppression didn’t halt their obedience to the creation mandate to “be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28; Ex. 1:7); the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied (Ex. 1:12). This spiral of Egyptian fear of the growing number of Israelites and the growing number of Israelites that sparked more Egyptian fear only intensified the oppression until the Hebrew people had become full-blown “slaves” (Ex. 1:13-14). This cycle is a cautionary tale against fear that is true even today. When fear of anything leads to an action that will only further serve to amplify the thing that leads to more fear, it rarely ever ends well. There is a reason why Paul wrote to Timothy: “For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.” Fear never serves God’s people well unless it is a fear of God (Prov. 9:10).

Call the Midwife

After Plan A fails, Pharaoh is left to figure out his next steps. Below are some of the details that follow.

PLAN B

Because manual slave labor did not slow down the increasing numbers of the Israelites, Pharaoh now deploys his genocidal *Plan B*: “Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ‘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’” (Ex. 1:15-16). One immediate detail that stands out in these verses, apart from the horror of genocide, is the naming of these two women. When one considers that the Pharaoh, his court magicians, the elders of Israel, nor any other characters with the exception of Moses’ and Jacob’s families are named by name, the importance of these two women becomes a bit clearer. They appear to be regarded as heroes of sorts in the early history of Israel. They are heroic not simply because they choose to disobey the orders of Pharaoh and thus save the lives of countless Hebrew newborn boys, but because of the reason why they chose to do this: “The midwives feared God” (Ex. 1:17).

One of the more controversial details in this passage is whether or not the midwives were lying to Pharaoh when he asked them why they let the male children live (Ex. 1:18). Their response follows in verse 19: “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’” (Ex. 1:19). This is followed in verse 20 by God blessing them and continuing to multiply the Hebrew people. However, if they are lying to Pharaoh, is God blessing this? Two possible answers have been suggested.

It might be that they are lying to Pharaoh and that God blesses them because He recognizes the clear disparity in the dynamics of power between the midwives and Pharaoh. The midwife women would have no recourse against such a person as Pharaoh, but they also feared God and desired to see the lives of the young male Hebrew babies saved. Perhaps they felt their only option was to deceive Pharaoh in order to continue in their ploy to save more lives. While this answer feels admittedly uncomfortable, it's the same kind of reason that Christians during World War II used to justify lying to Nazis concerning whether or not they were housing Jewish people. To deceive them for the sake of saving their lives was seen as permissible. But what about examples in the Bible like Ananias and Sapphira who died because of their deception? Or passages like Proverbs 12:22 that explicitly condemn lying as an abomination? Like most matters in Scripture, much of this discussion comes back to the heart. Is lying for the sake of pride or to cover sin the same as lying to an evil king in order to save babies from being murdered? A similar dilemma can be found in the story of Rahab, a prostitute who deceives her people and is rewarded for her works (Ja. 2:25). The intentions behind the actions matter. The midwives, if lying, are not lying for nefarious reasons. They stand to gain nothing personally for their actions, and in fact risked their lives for this.

Another possibility exists, however. Instead of positing a full-blown lie, it has been suggested that perhaps these were half-truths. It's possible that the midwives, knowing the Pharaoh's direction to kill all of the male babies, had informed the Hebrew women to only contact them for labor help after the babies had been born. It is also possible that the Hebrew "method" of giving birth was different than the Egyptian women. In other words, it might be that a Hebrew woman would call the midwife at a much later time than an Egyptian woman would simply because culturally they did things differently. This, coupled with the midwife's instruction to wait, would allow the midwives to tell Pharaoh the truth without giving the underlying details. Regardless, God dealt kindly with them and "gave them families" (Ex. 1:21).

PLAN C

After a failed Plan A and Plan B, Pharaoh launches *Plan C*: "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'" (Ex. 1:22). At first Pharaoh subjected the Hebrew people to a life of slavery. When that didn't work, he subjected the Hebrew midwives to genocide, but they refused. Finally, he has enlisted everyone in Egypt to participate. Throwing the babies into the Nile might imply a kind of "sacrifice" as well. Because the Egyptian were pantheistic in nature to some degree, they might have viewed this as an offering of sorts which would have justified their actions.

What About Now?

One major takeaway is the way in which the past, and how we honor it, can easily fade away if we are not careful. The long standing tradition of honoring Joseph was commonplace in Egypt, and now suddenly, it was gone. It's easy to forget the past. Another major takeaway is the nature of sin and how it spreads when left unchecked. Pharaoh's assault against the people of God not only intensifies (from slavery to national genocide) but it also increasingly involves more and more people (Pharaoh alone to the inclusion of the midwives to the inclusion of all Egyptian people). When left alone, sin spreads through whole communities. Pastors would do well to recognize this and practice church discipline when necessary. As Paul says, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Gal. 5:9). Sin infects everything it touches and spreads without prejudice.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 1:8. What is significant about this new king? What does the word “know” indicate? (Hint: See above notes)

2. Read Exodus 1:9-11. What did Pharaoh say? What is his plan to stop the growth of the Hebrew people? What was his fear? Historically speaking, why was he afraid of their growing numbers? (Hint: See above notes)

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 1:12. Did the oppression stop the growth of the Hebrew people? How did the Egyptians respond to this?

2. Read Exodus 1:13-14. What did the Egyptians do to the Hebrew people in light of their continual growth?

Day Three

1. Read Exodus 1:15-17. What is the second plan of Pharaoh? Who does it involve? What were the midwives’ names and why is this significant? (Hint: See above notes) Why did the midwives disobey Pharaoh’s orders?

2. Read 1:18-19. What did Pharaoh say to the midwives when he saw that male-born babies were allowed to live? How did the midwives respond? What are the two possible explanations for their answer? (Hint: See above notes)

Day Four

1. Read Exodus 1:20-21. What did God do to the midwives as a result of their actions against Pharaoh? What continued happening to the Hebrew people?

2. Read Exodus 1:22. What is the final plan of Pharaoh? Who does it involve?

Week 2 Discussion: Sin Spreads

Throughout Exodus 1:8-22, the sin of Pharaoh to oppress the Hebrew people continues to spread to more and more people. First he tries to enlist the people to oppress them through manual labor. Then he asks the midwives to commit genocide. Finally he demands everyone in Egypt to join in on the genocide. When left unchecked, sin spreads to larger and larger groups of people. Talk as a group about how sin spreads and what is necessary to stop the spread.

1. Icebreaker: Does sin really spread when left unchecked? Why or why not?
2. Imagine a friend of yours is actively engaged in some kind of sin. What do you do first?
3. What do you do if someone you know has been called to repentance and refuses to repent?
4. Do you agree with church discipline? Why or why not?
5. Have you ever seen sin spread from one person to larger groups of people? How so?
6. How can the church better hold accountable people for their sin?

Takeaways:

1. The new king in Egypt did not “know” Joseph and was afraid of the growing numbers of the Hebrews.
2. The king first devised to enslave the Hebrew people in order to slow down their multiplying numbers.
3. The king then asked the midwives to kill all of the male-born Hebrew babies.
4. The king finally asked every Egyptian to join in the genocide by throwing all of the male-born Hebrew babies into the Nile.