

*Series - Exodus: The God Who Guides and Provides*

*“Trusting God in Challenging Times”*

Introduction: My hunch is that with the temperature rising up into the eighties last week, and the feel of warm sunshine on your face, and the news that the coronavirus continues to diminish, at least around here, you might have started to think about doing some traveling this summer. Going on a trip can be great fun, from the early planning stages, to the expectation and anticipation that increases as your departure date approaches, to the joy you experience when underway and upon reaching your final destination.

Whether you’re going to go on an actual trip this summer I do not know. But I would like to invite you to take a virtual (we’re pretty good at that now!) journey with the Israelites, one which our VBS program will be taking this summer as well. Such a journey is laid out for us in the book of Exodus. Broadly speaking, it is a journey from bondage to the Egyptian king to worship of the King of kings. It’s a journey from the enforced construction of buildings for Pharaoh to the willing building of a house for the Lord. It’s a journey from slavery to the ruler of Egypt, to service the Lord of the universe.

Unlike the journeys that we tend to take, this was a journey for which there would not be a lot of planning, nor was it a long-anticipated departure or even an expected trip. Moreover, it did not entail a great deal of fun along the way, or even upon arrival. But this journey from Egypt, through the wilderness, and on to the Promised Land would be an incredibly forming journey for God’s people. It would be a journey in which they would come to know the depth of God’s love for them and be reminded of his desire that through them, his name would become known, not just to them but to the entire earth. It’s a journey the people of God would regularly look back to at those times when their trust needed to be strengthened and their hope secured. Importantly, it’s also a journey that we can benefit from, as it’s a journey the NT writers use to describe both the ministry of Jesus and the continuity and call we have as a church with that ancient people of God to trust in his goodness and reveal his glory.

Exodus 1 sketches for us the situation in Egypt which led to the need for this journey. [READ]

I. From a Family to a People

A. At first, it didn’t seem that any kind of journey would be necessary. As Exodus opens, it’s apparent that the people of God were enjoying great comfort in Egypt. As the last half of the book of Genesis reveals, God had led his people (at that time just the extended family of a patriarch named Jacob, whose father was Isaac and grandfather Abraham), to Egypt during a time of great famine in their homeland. One of Jacob’s sons – Joseph – had been sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, but God had enabled Joseph to gain favor in Egypt to the point of his assuming a role of second in command to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt himself. Joseph brought his entire family to live with them, they came through the famine remarkably well, and then, living in great comfort and security, they spent a lot of time being fruitful and multiplying – exceedingly so, our text reveals – until the land was filled with them. Twelve families, numbering 70 people, became an entire people group, beginning to fulfill the promise God made to Abraham that he would become a great nation through which the world would be blessed (Ge. 12:1-3).

B. One of the challenges for Jacob’s descendants as they became fruitful and multiplied was to be careful not to trust in their comfort. For comfort, as we have experienced over the last 18 months or so, can change in a moment! One never knows what the next day will bring. Furthermore, there is a temptation to believe that if circumstances are good, then God is present. But if circumstances are hard, then we can be inclined to think that God has somehow left the party. And circumstances did turn for the Israelites, but importantly, God did not.

## II. There’s a New King in Town

A. Circumstances turned as we have just heard, because not all were thrilled with the fruitfulness of Jacob’s descendants. It began when a new king came to power who did not know Joseph. It likely doesn’t mean that he’d never heard of Joseph and how Joseph had taken care of the Egyptians in time of famine and what the former Pharaoh had promised Joseph and his clan. It means, as our text translates it, “Joseph meant nothing” to this new king. That is, the new Pharaoh had no relationship with the “chief of staff” (as we might think of Joseph) of the outgoing administration, nor any desire to view the Israelites as friends and neighbors. Just the opposite. This new king feared that if a time of war ever came, this people might very well turn from Egypt and fight for her enemies.

B. So, a new policy was passed. It was oppressive, and it escalated. The Israelites were turned into slaves. Then they were forced into harder and harsher labor. Then the Hebrew midwives were instructed to kill any boy baby born to a Hebrew mother. Pharaoh wanted to put an end to the growth of God’s people. In effect, he was putting himself into direct opposition to God’s plan to create a people and form them into a nation which would reveal the love and mercy and goodness and beauty of this God to the world. In fact, sixteen verses into the text, and throughout this entire description so far, the name of God is not mentioned.

C. You wonder what the Israelites were thinking as their circumstances grew worse and worse, going from comfort to oppression. Who could blame them if they thought, “Has God stopped loving us? Does he care about what is happening to us? Is his power not enough to confront this enemy?” Such are the kinds of questions we might begin to ask when favorable circumstances change in our lives, whether it’s a new but nasty boss at work, or a politician whose policies we view as unjust, or the sudden death of a loved one, or the various forms of suffering caused by a pandemic . . . the change in circumstance can cause us to doubt God’s goodness. In the face of such change, we want to ask: In what have I put my trust? Have I put my trust in my circumstances, which can change, or in the God whose plans and purposes never change? Am I using my circumstances as a barometer that tells me whether God is at work in my life, or not? Am I tempted to believe that if things are going well, God is at work, but if they’re not, God has taken the day off?

## III. The God Who Is Still at Work

A. If we look closely, we can see that even though there’s a new king in town whose policies are oppressive, God’s faithful hand is still at work behind the scenes. For instance, the harder and harsher the Israelites were worked, the more they multiplied! And when the Hebrew midwives were instructed to kill the boys, but instead, let them live, explaining to the king that they couldn’t help it, the Hebrew moms were just in far better shape than their Egyptian counterparts, it was because they “feared God” (v. 17)—that they desired to bring their lives and actions into harmony with the God of the universe—that they stood up to the king of Egypt instead of fearing him.

B. Don't miss these two amazing women! Shiphrah and Puah are their names. Their names are remembered while Pharaoh's is not. These relatively lowly ladies outwit the king of all Egypt! These women were likely not leaders in the community or persons who had influence with government policy, but neither were they powerless. Instead, despite changing circumstances, they kept their trust in the Lord and aligned their actions accordingly. Through them, God was making his presence known. He was using, as Paul puts it to the Corinthians, what the world considered foolish and weak and lowly to shame the strong. God was still at work. He had not abandoned his people, or his redemptive purposes.

C. One helpful barometer of God's unchanging commitment to his people and his purposes is to notice how, throughout the Bible, God uses the birth of a child, especially in difficult circumstances, to deliver his people, or keep that process on track. Next week, as the story continues, we'll see the birth, and protection, of Moses, aided, remarkably, by Pharaoh's very own daughter! And it would be through Moses, as you are no doubt aware, that God would lead his people out of slavery, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land.

Ultimately, it would be the baby born in the difficult circumstances found in Bethlehem, who, through his life, death and resurrection, and his ascension and gifting of the Spirit, God's commitment to his people and his purposes would be sealed. With Exodus images in the background, we see this Jesus come to "tabernacle" with us. He is the Passover lamb through which we are spared the righteous judgment of God. He is "called out of Egypt" and tested in the wilderness. He is the Rock, and the bread of life, whose presence accompanies and nourishes us on our journey. He teaches the law (Sermon on the Mount) that the Spirit has come to make possible. He calls us as God's chosen people, his church, to declare and reveal the light of his goodness and glory. And he is the one through whom the Promised Land of God's new creation is reached.

This is the God who has come to be with us, who promises never to leave us or forsake us, and who promises to bring to completion the good work he has begun, in us and in the world. May our journey with him as he accompanies the Israelites, help us to know more of his love and deepen our trust in him.