



The Twenty-fifth Century of His-Story: The Church in Bondage to Egypt

Life in Egypt had been good. The children of Israel had homes. They had plenty of good food. Their large families were well supported with a prospering business in cattle. They were strong, healthy, and robust. As a people, their numbers were growing exponentially into the hundreds of thousands. But the astounding growth and prosperity of the children of Israel brought new temptations and spiritual oppression for the church. This growth had the attention of the new Pharaoh as well, and life quickly began to change for the children of Israel. Peace and prosperity turned into terror as Pharaoh first subjected the people to forced labor, then tried an undercover plan to kill the baby boys at birth, and finally implemented an open policy of killing the Hebrew boys. The Egyptians were told that these babies posed a threat to society and must die for the sake of a united and strong Egypt. After eighty years of this horrible life of hard labor, fear, hiding, and losing covenant children, we read in Exodus 2:23–24 that “the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.”

Immediately following the verse describing the prosperity of the children of Israel, God reveals to us in Exodus 1:8–12: “Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph. And he said unto his people, Behold, the people of the children of Israel *are* more and mightier than we: Come on, let us deal wisely with them; lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, when there falleth out any war, they join also unto our enemies, and fight against us, and *so* get them up out of the land. Therefore they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh treasure cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they afflicted them, the

more they multiplied and grew. And they were grieved because of the children of Israel.” Those before this new pharaoh remembered the terrible famine, and how Joseph had saved the people and in fact brought power and control to the central government of Egypt. But this pharaoh was alarmed and saw a real danger to Egypt. Unless these Hebrew people joined heart and soul with Egypt, they now had the strength to side with an enemy and overthrow Egypt. He began to implement a plan to assimilate this people into the nation and harness their strength for Egypt. But this dealing “wisely” was not so wise after all. Perhaps if the children of Israel had been any other people, and not the church, this policy would have been wise. But the world must recognize a sovereign God who is gathering a people unto himself. He is a God who will turn the plans of man upside down and accomplish his purpose in all things.

As the new pharaoh began to implement these new policies for the Hebrews, we find Amram, the father of Miriam, Aaron, and Moses, over fifty years old. He had married Jochabed (Exodus 6:20), who was actually his aunt—a daughter of Levi (Num. 26:59). Their daughter Miriam was not yet born, but the oppression of the church had rapidly become intense, and Amram and Jochabed were very concerned about bearing children of the covenant under this time of terrible persecution. When their first child—a girl—was born, they named her Miriam, which in the Hebrew means “rebellion” and “bitterness.” Some years later when a son was born, they named him “Aaron,” which means “light bringer.” Perhaps it seemed to them as though things were changing for the better, but within a few short years, by the time Moses, their third child, was born, the new pharaoh had implemented an open policy of killing the boy babies, and they resorted to hiding the child until it was impossible to keep him hidden.

These days were indeed dreadful for the children of Israel, especially for those who were clinging to the promise of covenant children and the savior who would be born of the seed of the woman. In the middle of this dark time, God provided two remarkable women, Shiphrah and Puah, who served to thwart Pharaoh’s strategy. These two women were the head midwives who oversaw the work of a large team of midwives who delivered babies for the Hebrew women. Pharaoh had instructed them to see to it that the boy babies did not live. Exactly how this went is not clear, but it would seem that the plan was somewhat secretive, and the midwives could perhaps make the

deaths appear accidental. But these two head midwives disobeyed the king and preserved the life of all the babies. They did so because they “feared God” (Ex. 1:17). They are not included in the list of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, but we do read that “God dealt well with the midwives”(Ex. 1:20).

We are not told how long this went on before pharaoh realized that the midwives were not obeying his orders, but we are told that God used their bold actions to strengthen the homes of his people. We read that “the people multiplied, and waxed very mighty” (1:20), and that “he made them houses” (v. 21). The idea of “houses” here is not simply the external structure of a nice house, but rather strong, godly homes with many children who were being instructed in the fear of the Lord. Whether the parents in Israel were aware of Pharaoh’s horrible plot or not is not clear, but while these families were but two women away from the loss of multitudes of covenant children, they were active in establishing covenant homes. Soon pharaoh’s plan was delivered to the public and it became a criminal offense for anyone to preserve the life of a baby Hebrew boy. Under this terrifying policy in which anyone could be a spy and everyone was out to save his or her own skin, even timid parents might be inclined to give up their own child to save their neck.

Into this scene a third child was born to Amram and Jochabed ... and it was a boy! Exactly what they were thinking when they built a little floating cradle and placed it with this baby in the river is impossible to tell. Some view their actions as cowardly and unnatural, but God reveals in Hebrews 11:23 that faith was at work behind their actions. We read, “By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid three months of his parents, because they saw he was a proper child; and they were not afraid of the king's commandment.” Their older daughter Miriam stayed nearby to keep watch, and perhaps to distract the alligators or snakes that might come too close. But imagine the bittersweet joy and amazement of these grieving parents as Miriam came home with the baby and the daughter of pharaoh herself! Under the protection of the royal house, his mother would be allowed to nurse the child until he was weaned. They would have a few years to teach this child the precious promises of God and instill that knowledge into his soul before they would have to hand him over to the rearing of Pharaoh’s daughter.

Eventually the time came for the child to leave his father and mother, and Moses disappeared into the palace and the best life that Egypt had to offer. Time went on, and the policies of Pharaoh appeared to be having the impact upon the children of Israel that Pharaoh desired. Life was much more difficult than before, but it was still tolerable and perhaps preferable in the minds of some to a life of wandering in Canaan like their fathers. God reveals nothing of any plans of the children of Israel to organize and rebel against Egypt, as the Egyptians feared; on the contrary, they seemed to be very much attached to the life and food of Egypt. We get a brief glimpse of life for the Hebrews some thirty-five years later when Moses began as a young man to understand his identity. By the grace of God he “refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward” (Heb. 11:25-26). It was pride, however, that drove him to kill an Egyptian and to try to deliver Israel by his own strategy. He found that the people were reluctant. Later, when they faced hardship in the wilderness, they wished they were back in Egypt. This new Pharaoh could perhaps have relied on the allurements of the earthly pleasures of Egypt to keep the people within Egypt and under its control. But God was pleased to bring this oppression upon his people in order to wake them up spiritually, make Egypt ripe for judgment, and demonstrate his power and love for the salvation of his church.

After Moses fled the country and went to live in Midian, life went on as before for the children of Israel. Pharaoh persisted in his oppression and the people began to give up, groan, and despair. Those years of booming business opportunities in Egypt were distant fanciful memories. The thrill of seeing the people multiply with busy families despite Pharaoh’s attempts to crush them had disappeared. All these children, now grown up, were only the multiplication of misery as they served their enemy. Pharaoh had won. The promises of God seemed to have failed. It looked as though faith had died, and that these people whom God called his own were spiritually dead. We read in Exodus 2:23 “And it came to pass in process of time, that the king of Egypt died: and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage.” We do not read that they cried in faith to

God, but simply that they cried; and when they cried, God heard his people. The time had come for God to demonstrate the power of his grace and love, and to breathe life into this people who were dead in the bondage of sin. The time had come for judgment and the overthrow of Satan and his powers. Ironically (or rather, for the purpose of giving God all the glory) just when Satan seems to have the victory and God's people are utterly helpless, God turns the efforts of Satan upside down and works salvation and deliverance.