

In the Days before Deliverance

Today's text is from the Book of Exodus, which defines the very existence of the Jews, and is for Christians "the Gospel of the Old Testament." This narrative of God's miraculous deliverance of his people from bondage in Egypt to the Promised Land is to the Old Covenant what the resurrection of Jesus is to the New. Today we look at the first chapter, which is a picture of the Israelites in the land of Egypt "in the days before deliverance." I'll read **Exodus 1:1-22**:

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: ² Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, ³ Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, ⁴ Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. ⁵ The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy. Joseph was already in Egypt. ⁶ Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. ⁷ But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

⁸ Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹ He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰ Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." ¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³ The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴ and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

¹⁵ The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶ "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." ¹⁷ But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸ So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" 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." ²⁰ So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²² Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live." *This is the word of the Lord.*

Egypt has been much in the news in the past few years, with its revolutions and counter-revolutions. About 3400 years ago another restive group, known as Israelites, dwelt as long-term sojourners in Egypt, longing to be free from an oppressive and cruel dictatorship of Pharaoh, the Egyptian king. Up until this time, these descendants of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had become comfortable with life in Egypt. Some 400 years before, Jacob and his other 11 sons made their pilgrimage there to escape famine. As we noted last Sunday, Jacob's favored son Joseph had become prime minister; and through Joseph's request, Pharaoh allowed his father and brothers to settle in the region of Goshen, near the present day Suez Canal. This is where our text finds these descendants of Jacob some 400 years later.

The descendants of Jacob's sons multiplied until Egypt was literally "swarming" with Israelites. Life had become basically good for the Israelites, since they enjoyed the favor of the government and society in general. They still benefitted from the good influence of the former famous and heroic Prime Minister of Egypt, Joseph. They enjoyed centuries of numerical growth and outward prosperity, but without evidence of any spiritual growth or progress in the faith that had characterized their forefathers. Their faith had become enculturated and complacent, somewhat like Christianity in our culture.

In some places it's still advantageous to belong to the local church, especially the largest and most influential one in town. When the church is identical with the culture, it's very easy for it to become individualistic, materialistic and even racist. Although church life can thrive and the numbers increase, the heart of the faith grows weak and the church loses its spiritual power and life-and-culture-changing influence.

But in the days before God's deliverance, circumstances can change quickly, as was true for the Israelites. Suddenly there appeared a new Pharaoh, a paranoid dictator, who cared nothing for these semi-nomadic shepherds called Israelites. For us also, with a heritage of biblical faith and a level of respectability and comfort with the general culture, things could change quickly. Jesus promised he'll return and consummate his kingdom on earth, but also warned of days of tribulation, which will create a longing for deliverance. And since the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, we have been living in the last days. As we move toward the final Day, we can expect things to become increasingly difficult for the people of God. Days of darkness are a reality for each of us personally as well as all God's kingdom people.

In the last days before our deliverance, we need to **remember whose we are**. The youth of my generation were the restless ones, and we learned to question tradition and authority. Some became hippies and turned to Eastern mysticism in order to "find themselves." Back when I was young, a daughter told her pastor-father as she left home for university that her goal was to find herself, "to find out who I am," she declared. Her father replied that it was more important that she remember *whose*

she is than *who* she is. Especially in difficult times, we need, like the Israelites, to remember whose we are—*children of the Father*.

These Israelites were God's chosen people, children of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who had come to the land of Goshen centuries before. When our circumstances change, darkness seems to surround us and God's voice seems to be silent, we need to remember whose we are, that we are "God's elect" and his "chosen people" (1 Peter 1:1; 2:9). Before God called us to himself through his Son Jesus, we were "not a people, but now we are the people of God" (2:10). Through our faith in Jesus, we enter an intimate relationship with the Triune God. We are the distinctly different children of God, and are called, like the Israelites, to live *in an unbelieving world*.

There came to power a new king, Pharaoh, who "did not know Joseph." Of course he lived centuries after Joseph, but his predecessors had kept alive the memory of Joseph's heroic, ingenious leadership during a worldwide famine. Because of his ingratitude and refusal to honor the heritage of Joseph and his progenitors, the king chose to ignore the significance of Joseph, which allowed him to turn against the Israelites. Because Pharaoh, in his sinful ignorance feared the growing strength of God's people, he launched his plan of attack to weaken them. He became paranoid of their potential threat and increasingly cruel in his efforts to subdue the Israelites. Pharaoh's Plan A was to break the backs of the Israelites through hard labor, a plan which resulted instead in their becoming stronger and more numerous yet (12). His Plan B was infanticide, instructing the midwives to kill the newborn male babies, an order they defied (17). His final and cruelest Plan C was genocide, an order to have all Hebrew boys drown in the Nile, eventually in time destroying the Israelite people (Durham, 9ff).

We today as God's children need to remember that we're also living in an unbelieving world *that becomes increasingly hostile*. Who can doubt the increasing hostility against the people of God today, with massive persecution and martyrdom of our fellow believers around the world? This is what Jesus said would happen, on an increasing worldwide scale (Mark 13, etc.) but also to us individual believers, who follow in his steps (John 15:18-16:4). We can expect, when we live godly lives, to find alienation, ostracism, opposition and possible persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). . We're often a rebuke to those in darkness around us and a disturbing threat to their way of thinking and living.

There's a vital difference between suffering for righteousness' sake and suffering because of self-righteousness. I had a high school classmate, who also was a fellow member of our church youth group, who was persecuted at school, not because of godliness, but because of the obnoxious way he would thrust his Bible into his classmates' faces and quote Scriptures that condemned what he judged to be their sinful behavior. He created his own persecution and darkness.

We'll have personal "days of darkness," when God seems far away and maddeningly silent. Following Jesus is the way of sharing his sufferings in the way of the cross. But suffering and persecution do not deter God's people from being strong and loving. As we see in our text, the more Pharaoh oppressed God's people, the stronger and more numerous they grew. In our days before deliverance we can expect and should not be disheartened by hostility and opposition as we also **realize God is working.**

Although God seemed far away, he wasn't asleep. God had predicted this outcome (Genesis 15:13) and as someone said, and was present and active with his people to work out his purposes. It was imperative for God to deliver his children, else his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would have been null and void. But God's faithfully at work, though often *in hidden ways*. Faith alone allows us to trust that he's at work for our good when only bad things seem to be happening. God's ways are not ours and are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8). In time, the children of Israel could see that God was giving them grace and strength, and that his plan for them would be fulfilled (Genesis 15:13; 46:4).

We today and the suffering church throughout the world need grace to believe that God's at work for our good and his glory (Romans 8:28f), and his purpose and promise for our final redemption cannot be thwarted. Whatever is going on around us, happening to us and against us, we are nevertheless safe in God's sovereign and loving hand.

Jesus spoke of how the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, tiny and insignificant to human sight but growing secretly and significantly (Matthew 13:31ff). God's kingdom is growing today in the many lands of oppression and persecution, and is growing at Dale Heights and in your life. As you move toward the day of your final deliverance, the Kingdom is growing (Luke 17:21). Even when you think and feel you're making no progress in your faith during your time of spiritual darkness, God's at work in you. When it seems you're not close to God and he's not answering your prayers, he's present in you and at work through you. He may simply be leading you to a point of spiritual desperation or weaning you away from your complacency and comfort with the ways of this fallen world.

In the early 90's I took a medical missions team to Romania, where we enjoyed a lunch at the home of a pastor of a church whose people had been oppressed during the years of communism. The teenage son, mature beyond his years, asked us to pray for their church, which he feared would lose their zeal for and dependence on God now that their circumstances were far more comfortable. He feared the years of comfort more than the times of persecution when they were clinging closely to God.

God was at work behind the scenes, through wicked Pharaoh, to wean Egypt away from the pleasures and comforts of Egypt. Had they not been oppressed, they would have likely been absorbed into the idolatrous culture around them. Difficulties

remind God's people that this fallen world is not our home, and give us a longing for the eternal Kingdom.

God was at work also *through unlikely people*. In order to thwart Pharaoh's Plan B, God used the two "head nurse" midwives to save his people from the wicked king's order of infanticide (15ff). Although his plan was to outsmart the Israelites (10), Pharaoh was certainly outwitted by these two women, who revered God more than they feared the king. In fact, it didn't take much of an alibi for these women to cover their counter plot. As one has said, this Pharaoh appears a "few bricks shy of a pyramid"!

God's greatest deliverance came to the world in an unlikely way. Whereas the Jews were expecting a mighty political and military deliverer, Jesus came as a lowly carpenter and itinerate teacher. Instead of overwhelming the world with power, Jesus submitted himself to arrest, suffering, shameful treatment and death on a cruel cross. God fulfilled and continues to fulfill his promise to Abraham to create a great people through the great deliverance brought about through his Son, who emptied himself as a servant and spent himself through his death on the cross (Philippians 2:8).

Think of the utter weakness and desolation of the Son of God on the cross, when he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Darkness covered the entire earth, and especially the mind and heart of our forsaken Savior. When we think God is silent and that darkness has come over us, we need to remember the terrifying silence and darkness Jesus endured when he, the sinless one, for our sakes became sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). He brought deliverance to us through his death. God brings his deliverance to the world through the life and witness of his weak and broken people, who trust him in hours of darkness when he seems silent.

God is working in us and through us *for a certain outcome*. Pharaoh was no match for the living God, who would send a deliverer named Moses. God's at work, preparing you for your final deliverance, and he will bring your promised deliverance to fulfillment.

But today we're waiting for deliverance. Some may be waiting for deliverance from personal afflictions, or perhaps from guilt, oppression, or from depression. God delivers us from all that holds us captive. These are the days before the final deliverance, but God through Christ has won your deliverance. Trust in him!