

EXODUS

תומ"ש פ.ס.י

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Exodus Sermon #1 - Bitter

Exodus 1:1-14

September 9, 2018

We are going to go to the book of Exodus today, and Lord willing, we'll be there through spring with a couple of small breaks.

Let's start by reading today's passage - we believe this is God's word, so it's good to hear Him speak:

Exodus 1:1-14 "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 All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt. 6 Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. 7 But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. 8 Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. 9 And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. 10 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." 11 Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. 13 So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves 14 and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.

To get the message of this book, it's important to know the back story. Exodus is book 2 of a 5 book set, all written by Moses, a set called the

pentateuch (which means 5 books). This includes Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

And the book of Exodus picks up right where Genesis left off. And at the end of Genesis, Jacob (a man God has renamed 'Israel') had 12 sons. Those 12 sons had families that became known as the 12 tribes of Israel, and the people that descended from them became known as the Israelites or the children of Israel.

And Jacob and his extended family of 70 peoples (according to verse 5) had moved to Egypt to escape a famine. There was food there because Jacob's son, Joseph, had wisely governed as the #2 man in the land, and prepared them for the coming famine that God had warned them about.

So when the family moved there, because they had a connection in Joseph, they were given a good chunk of land there called Goshen, where they could carry out their profession as shepherds and enjoy the protection of Egypt.

So they move in, it is a comfortable arrangement for the sons of Israel because they have a friend in high places. And, with God's blessing, they thrive. They were multiplying and enjoying the protection and good favor with Egypt.

And the ultimate reason they all moved there was because God told Jacob he should do it. Back in Genesis 46, Jacob was seeking the Lord, and this happened:

Genesis 46:1-4 "So Israel took his journey with all that he had and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. 2 And God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, "Jacob, Jacob." And he said, "Here I am." 3 Then he said, "I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. 4 I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes."

So this was God's plan. God wanted his people to move to Egypt where he would bless them and make them a great nation. They moved there in response to God's provision, in response to God giving them the go-ahead, and in response to God's grace.

And God did what God always does, He kept his word.

God had promised Abraham, way back in Genesis, that he would multiply them and make them a great nation:

Genesis 12:2 "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."

In another place he promises him descendants as hard to count as the stars in the sky. And when it looked like famine could wipe them out, God had been working for years before the famine hit to make sure there was provision so they wouldn't starve and so they would become that great nation.

So the book starts with God's leading the people to food and land and protection, they respond, and they are blessed abundantly in that land.

But, verse 6:

Exodus 1:6 Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation.

So Joseph dies, and they lose their key connection. They no longer have their political power. Would this be the end of the thriving? Did they thrive because they were politically connected.

Not at all, because God keeps blessing them:

Verse 7 again: **7 But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.**

Now Moses here wants us to get the point - these people are multiplying, big time. He says it six times in the original Hebrew. One translation of this verse is:

"As for the Israelites, they grew, they were fruitful, they swarmed, they increased, they got powerful more and more, and the land was filled with them."¹

¹ Stuart, Douglas K. The New American Commentary on Exodus. (B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 61.

They were fruitful and blessed by God. What started as a handful of hungry people coming down from Egypt had now become a swarm of people in the land because God was blessing them.

God was blessing them because God is faithful. And God used Joseph, but Joseph wasn't the source of those blessings. They just kept coming after Joseph died. God is making his people fruitful even in this foreign land.

But then the music changes to minor key because something happens in verse 8:

8 Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

A new king arose.

When Joseph came to power it was under the Hyksos Pharaohs - they were kings from Asia who had come in to Egypt during a power vacuum and started ruling. This wasn't welcomed by most of the native Egyptians.

And then those Hyksos Pharaohs were kicked out. Some Egyptian nationalism welled up, and they booted the foreign Pharaoh's to put one of their own people back on the throne. The native Egyptians who didn't want foreign Pharaohs reigning over them, and now there is a new native king in charge.

So the Egyptians are probably celebrating, but this is a scary day for the Israelites.

This new king didn't know Joseph, and wasn't going to be eager to honor any deals that the government he overthrew had made with the Israelites.

So now you have a new government made up of native Egyptians who had already demonstrated a strong dislike for foreigners. And their land is swarmed with these foreigners, the jews.

So this is trouble. The jews had been protected when everybody knew Joseph and when the king honored the deal they made with the jews. But now their safety disappeared.

So they are living as foreigners in a country that has a renewed dislike of foreigners.

It's a natural human sin to see foreigners as a threat - they will take our jobs and our resources. We have natural fears that cause us to treat people as "other" and keep "them" out of "our place."

You hear this in verses 9 and 10:

9 And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. 10 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."

So you can hear the fear: if there's ever a war, these mighty people will join our enemies. They're a threat.

So the Pharaoh, in his fear, says they need to do some population control to keep them from multiplying anymore.

So these Israelites are blessed by God, and because they are, they are feared and hated by the Egyptians. God is making his people fruitful, and the Egyptians are becoming enraged.

So the stage is set for what follows. And it is far more awful than you might think:

11 Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses.

So they were enslaved. But remember the point of the slavery: it was to correct the problem they identified in verse 9: the people of Israel are "too many and too mighty." It was slavery designed to stop them from multiplying.

Which means it had to take husbands away from their families for long periods of time: probably for months and years they were taken away to Pithom and Ramses - and that would keep them from procreating. On top of that, the labor would be so hard and the conditions so brutal that enough Israelites would die on the job-site to keep the population under control.

These were the heavy burdens. It was brutal.

And from Pharaoh's practical perspective, it was a good plan. He would get free labor, and he would eliminate a threat.

But - verse 12 -

12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel.

It wasn't working. God had made a promise to make them a great nation. God kept blessing despite the cruelty of the Egyptians.

Husbands are barely seeing their wives, but still they're having babies. The Jews aren't dying at work as quickly as they thought. The crippling poverty of slavery isn't stopping these people who are confident in God's provision from building families.

The population control plan isn't working.

And now the Egyptians are terrified of these people - it's dread. They can't eradicate them. So they try harder:

13 So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves 14 and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.

So twice Moses tells us the Egyptians are ruthless to the Israelites. They are sparing no cruelty in their treatment of them, conditions couldn't get much worse, and their lives are bitter.

And we tend to quickly move on to the next verses because we're looking for the happy resolution, and that salvation is certainly coming. But we'll wait until next week to read farther so we can sit in this for a second. Because the conditions described in verse 14 didn't just last a little while.

This is not just a bad year for the Jews. It's not just that the other party is in power and after 4 or 8 years an election will send the pendulum swinging back the other way as things typically work here.

There are some arguments about how this oppression lasted. But a conservative number is 144 years.²

So if you were a Jew when Joseph died and things went south, life never got better for you. Or for your kids. Or your grandkids. Or your great grandkids. Or your great-great grandkids. And maybe even longer.

So the Jews experience generations of bitter lives. Generations of slavery, generations who are oppressed because they were blessed by God, generations that never know anything but a bitter life, kids being raised without hope because this is all that their dad and grandpa and great grandpa ever knew so it is all they will know. Ruthless mistreatment of the Jews is a way of life in Egypt.

There is long-term suffering, and so far, there's no mention of God.

So what is going on? Why is this happening to them?

Why would the covenant people of God have generations of miserable lives?

And this is a relevant question to us. Because we too are the covenant people of God. We have been given the promises, the future, the reminder that Jesus will never leave us or forsake us. But still, sometimes surprisingly, we go through long seasons when God seems silent, when God seems far, and when suffering seems like it will never end.

We have a lot to learn from these Old Testament stories.

1 Corinthians 10:11 "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come."

These stories are for our instruction.

And here you have a long dark season of suffering for God's people.

So what is God doing in their suffering? In ours?

Some would say He is punishing them. He gave them the land of Canaan, they ran out of food, and faithlessly went to Egypt. So God

² <https://answersingenesis.org/bible-questions/how-long-were-the-israelites-in-egypt/>

punished them by allowing them to be slaves for generations. And likewise for us, when life is going poorly, it must be some punishment from God.

But that's not true to this story. Remember what we read in Genesis 46, God said don't be afraid to go.

They went there in response to God's grace: God had provided food there. They went with God's blessing. They went as part of God's plan. It would only be the cruelest god that would punish them for doing what He said to do.

So it's important to note that their suffering wasn't God's discipline or punishment. And neither is all of ours.

Now sometimes we like to say that to get ourselves off the hook too easily, so that we can always blame someone else for our suffering.

But there are times that our suffering is because of our behavior.

God is a good Father who, scripture says, disciplines His children.

Deuteronomy 8:5-6 "Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you. 6 So you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him."

So it isn't true that we never go through hard times because of our sin. God, at times, does allow the pressure to come in to our lives so that we let go of a sin we're clinging to.

But good discipline is always clearly connected to the offense.

I'm not going to say to one of my kids, "Go to your room, you're in trouble," without them knowing why they're being sent to their room. They'll know exactly why. If they don't, and they ask, "Why am I in trouble," I wouldn't say, "You know what you did." That would just be torture, because any of us could think of any number of things we might be receiving discipline for.

So in examining suffering, you don't typically have to wrack your brain to figure out why God is doing it if it is His discipline. There's usually a close connection. If you move far from Christ in pursuit of an idol, God will let that

idol be frustrating for you. A man leaves his wife for another woman, and that other woman then leaves him. Someone obsesses over money, and stuff keeps going wrong financially. Those can be taken as the Lord's discipline.

But if there isn't any connection between your hard times and your sin that's fairly evident, you shouldn't assume it is discipline.

Sometimes God disciplines with hard times.

Sometimes our misery is simply reaping what we sowed.

Galatians 6:7 "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap."

You don't wake up with a hangover, and in the midst of the splitting headache, cry out, "Why, God, is this happening to me?" That suffering is very clearly the consequence of your own sin.

God's commands do often keep us from unnecessary suffering.

Psalm 19:11 "Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward."

God's commands warn us of danger. And they're not a burden when we keep them, but burden-lifters:

Deuteronomy 32:45-47 "And when Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, 46 he said to them, "Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. 47 For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess."

God gives commands for our good. And when we disobey them, we can expect not to receive the good. We do reap what we sow.

Which is why we have to be careful about calling striving for obedience "legalism" and mocking it.

Legalism is when we think obeying commands gets us right with God - it doesn't - or when we think what we need are more rules added to scripture to help us live right - that doesn't work. I hate legalism as much as anybody in all of its forms. Legalism, at its heart, is not trusting Jesus, it is not trusting that God was loving enough to provide all we needed to be right with Him when He gave us His son on the cross. It is saying God isn't good.

But another way we say God isn't good is saying His commands aren't good. He's not good enough to give us good commands, He just wants to take from us and restrict us. When we mock his commands, ignore his commands, treat them like they're old-fashioned and not relevant, we are saying He isn't good.

But because He is good, his commands are good, and to ignore them is to miss his helpful warnings, to miss the blessing of His restrictions and guidance that He gave for our good.

So suffering can be discipline. It can be reaping what we sowed.

But often, it isn't either of those. That's not what it was for 144 years for the Jews.

There is other suffering, and a lot of it, that happens in our lives for reasons that are mysterious. It isn't the direct consequence of our sin, it isn't discipline from God, we don't deserve it anymore than anybody else deserves it, but we still suffer.

This was Job's situation in scripture. He was a righteous man compared to others, but God still allowed huge suffering: he lost his wealth, his family, and his health.

And his friends came along and said, "You must've done something to deserve this. God hands out suffering in proportion to sin." Basically, "It's karma." But Job had no secret sin. He was suffering as a righteous guy.

The Prosperity Gospel, a major error in our day, says that the faithful don't suffer. God grants health, wealth, and prosperity to his faithful. Therefore any suffering must be because of something you did wrong. So cling harder to God's promises, renounce those sins, and expect the cash and good health and great relationships to flow.

And like all popular lies, it is a twisting of truth.

When someone does prosper financially without sinning, they should see that as a gift from God. When someone has health and great relationships, they have things to be profoundly grateful for. God gave them that prosperity and that is a good gift when it comes from Him.

But it isn't true that if we're faithful we will always prosper in those ways. Because faithful people often don't prosper in those ways. Godly people suffer.

And how cruel is it to tell someone who is going through mysterious suffering, like the jews were, that it must be somehow their fault. If you just had more faith. If you could just figure out what secret sins you've committed. If you were just better at doing this God thing you'd be much better off.

Alot of suffering just isn't our fault.

For at least a century and a half, the jews suffered mysteriously. They did what God told them and it went badly. They had no answers from God for why they were going through all of this. They had no evident sin to repent of. It wasn't discipline, it wasn't karma, it wasn't reaping what they sowed. But life was bitter.

And maybe you've been in a long dark season. God seems far. God seems quiet. And the suffering seems brutal and life seems bitter.

Certainly, examine yourself, and do so with friends and pastors to help you see if blind spots and sins and habits did get you there. But in the absence of those causes, what do you do?

First, don't feel like you have to figure the whole thing out. Their suffering was mysterious to them. And sometimes ours is too. Sometimes it takes ten years before we can look back and see what lessons we learned in it. And don't think that "If I could just figure out why I'm suffering then the suffering would end." Sometimes we just can't figure it out.

But we do know a little bit.

We do know that suffering, even the suffering we can't fully understand, can teach us to rely on God.

2 Corinthians 1:8-9 For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers,2 of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

When everything is falling apart, when everything we were clinging to gets shaken out of our hands, we learn to rely more on Christ and find real comfort in Christ - not just when we understand the suffering. Not just when we see the end to it. But in it and through it - in our dying, we are learning to trust Christ who raises the dead.

We cling to Christ as though he can really comfort us forever, because He can. The Heidelberg Catechism begins by asking, "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" And the answer is, "That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ."

Sometimes our only comfort in the darkness is not knowing why we're going through it, not knowing when or if it will end in this life, not figuring it out, but trusting that we are Christ's.

And remember what Christ is like:

He's above us.

Isaiah 55:8-9 8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

At times He seems to hide - this is a normal part of the Christian experience. Sometimes He seems far:

Psalms 13:1 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

One of the ways we compound our suffering is we treat it like its a strange thing for God's people to suffer and to feel like God is hiding.

God is always near Christians in our sorrow. But He doesn't always feel near. God is always good, but sometimes we don't sense His goodness.

To be sure, some of the times I've sensed God's presence most closely have been times of suffering. But there are other times of suffering where part of the sorrow is that He seems far. His ways don't seem good. His care doesn't seem evident.

Then what do we do?

We don't know much about how the Jews handled the day-to-day of their suffering. But we do know that right up until the time that it ended they were still calling out to God.

When he does seem to hide, he invites us to pray our struggles to Him, dumping on Him all of the sorrow and doubts and frustration and everything we wonder about His goodness.

Jeremiah was a weeping prophet - weeping because God sent him to preach to people that wouldn't listen and wouldn't repent. A frustrating life of sorrow. And listen to how he prayed:

**Jeremiah 20:7 O Lord, you have deceived me,
and I was deceived;
you are stronger than I,
and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all the day;
everyone mocks me.**

This is a harsh prayer to pray to God. It isn't all true: God doesn't deceive. But it felt that way to Jeremiah, and He prayed it.

Psalm 88:

**But I, O Lord, cry to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
14 O Lord, why do you cast my soul away?
Why do you hide your face from me?**

15 Afflicted and close to death from my youth up,

I suffer your terrors; I am helpless.

**16 Your wrath has swept over me;
your dreadful assaults destroy me.**

**17 They surround me like a flood all day long;
they close in on me together.**

**18 You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me;
my companions have become darkness.**

They pray literally "darkness has become my only companion." Which is saying to God, "You aren't."

As these heroes fought to see God in their sorrow and prayed their fears and doubts, the Holy Spirit didn't dismiss their cries. Quite the opposite. He inspired them and inscripturated them - He put them in the Bible.

God didn't ignore their complaints as the cries of whining, entitled, millennial-BC-ers. He didn't treat them as a waste of time. In fact, by inspiring the questions of His people, God invites His people to question Him.

There's a faithfulness that confesses the thoughts about God that don't seem right, but that also trusts and clings and prays. And sometimes in the sorrow that's all we know to do.

But also remember that we have a better vantage point than the Psalmists did. We know Christ.

Christ came into this world according to His Father's will. He was sent from heaven into our Egypt to be fruitful for his Father and bring many sons to glory.

But while He was here, He was a man of sorrows. He was ostracized by the religious leaders, even by his own brothers and sisters for a time. He suffered the loss of a friend. He saw the effects of sin and the fall first hand and could look into the hearts of people who were hurting deeply.

And then He went to the garden of Gethsemane. And he asked his friends to pray with him, but they wouldn't stay awake. They fell asleep, leaving Him

alone to bear the sins of the world (nobody else could help Him with that anyways.)

And then He went to the cross and suffered and died - the innocent one, but the innocent one being punished by the Father. For our sin.

And when we go through sorrow, some things we know are:

- 1) God Himself, in His second person, in Christ, suffered far more agony than we ever could. So he gets it. He understands. He has been there.
- 2) Jesus was forsaken so that we never would be. He may feel far, He may seem to have left, but it only seems that way.
- 3) He came to restore the broken - so there is hope for our futures.

Exodus 1:1-14

Bitter

I. The Blessed Back-story (Exodus 1:1-6)

II. The Darkness Enters (Exodus 1:7-8)

III. A Bitter Existence (Exodus 1:9-14)

For Discussion in Groups:

1. What promises of prosperity does God make to his children?
2. In what ways does obedience keep us from difficulty?
3. In what ways might obedience make life more difficult?
4. How can you discern if a trial is discipline?
5. Do bad things happen to good people?