

Exodus 1:8-22
Pharaoh Opposes the Purposes of God

Every four years, the United States goes through a series of changes

- The Presidential campaigns ramp up

Will the current President be re-elected?

- If his term is up, who will be the new President?

Everyone has questions

- What's going to change?
- How will my life be different?

There is some level of change when a new leader takes over

- That isn't just the case with the President

New leaders must deal with new challenges

- Different people respond in various circumstances

This morning, however, we will see how a new Pharaoh responded once he was in the position of power

Let's read Exodus 1:8-22

In this sermon, a new Pharaoh resumes control over the land of Egypt

- But what will he do to the people of Israel?

As you have already heard in the reading, he is not compassionate

- Rather, he is demeaning, cruel, and murderous in his intentions

In this portion of God's Word, we will see three (3) waves of persecution that the Israelites faced at the hands of the new Pharaoh

- 1st wave – hard labor (1:8-14)
- 2nd wave – private murder (1:15-21)
- 3rd wave – public murder (1:22)

As we will see, these phases grow more and more intense

- Motives become more and more apparent

I. Hard labor (1:8-14)

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

In verse 8, we are informed that “a new king arose over Egypt”

The problem is that we are not told who this new leader is

- He is not named

Trying to figure out who this new king is can be tricky

- Not many clues are given in the Text

This does not imply that the new king was the one directly after the Pharaoh in Genesis 50

- Many, many years passed from the time of Genesis 50 to Exodus 1

What is in focus here is a new dynasty of kings

- A new regime and administration

Many think that a group of outsiders named the Hyksos invaded and controlled Egypt around the time of Joseph entering Egypt¹

- Eventually, the native Egyptians took over the Hyksos people around the time of Exodus 1

So we can understand why the Egyptians would be concerned with the Israelites

- Like the Hyksos, the Israelites were foreigners who could be viewed as a threat

What is important is not who this new king was²

- What is important is this king's policy and attitude toward the Israelites

We are told that this new king “**did not know Joseph**”

- Certainly, this king had heard of Joseph
- Certainly, this king was aware of what Joseph had done for Egypt

But verse 8 begins to sound the toll of trouble for Israel

- The favor that they had enjoyed because of Joseph is now gone
- What will happen now?

Israel was in Egypt for 430 years (Ex 12:40)

- That may not seem like a long time

But consider the fact that the United States declaration of independence was adopted on July 4, 1776

- That is 234 years ago – in July

So double the time that the US has been in existence

- And you begin to get a better understanding of how long the Israelites were in Egypt

Hundreds of years passing tends to lead to forgetfulness

- That seems to be the story with this new Pharaoh

We would sit here this morning and ask, “How in the world could this new Pharaoh refuse to acknowledge what God did through Joseph?”

- From a human perspective, without Joseph, Egypt would not have survived the seven years of famine!

Yet the tape of history is fast-forwarded enough to allow us to see a time in which Joseph's memory is forgotten

- Joseph is not longer viewed as a national hero
- He is simply viewed as an icon from the past

¹ Douglas K. Stuart, *NAC, Exodus*, 62.

² John L. Mackay, *A Mentor Commentary, Exodus*, 34.

Furthermore, Joseph is viewed as being identified with the people of Israel

- Foreigners
- Aliens
- Outsiders
- Strangers

But God never intended Egypt to be the Promised Land!³

- God was in the process of removing Israel from Egypt

This leads us into verse 9

9 He said to his people, “Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we.

Pharaoh is seen speaking “to his people”

- We don’t know how widespread of a speech this is

Perhaps it was just to his inner circle of political and military advisors

- Perhaps it was spoken to a larger audience
- We are not told

But Pharaoh is beginning to make his concerns known

- And he is very concerned about “the sons of Israel”

The king speaks of the Israelites as being “more and mightier than we”

- In other words, he sees the descendants of Jacob as being a threat!

Notice the words that this Egyptian ruler uses, “the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we”

- These two words were used back in Exodus 1:7, “But the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them” (emphasis mine)

What we are seeing is a misunderstanding and misinterpretation

- God’s promises to His people are being viewed as a threat to Egypt
- This will definitely cause problems!

Listen to what Stephen recounts in his account of Israel’s history in Acts 7

- “But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH” (Acts 7:17)

As we saw last week, this momentous population explosion is due exclusively to the promises of God being fulfilled⁴

- Promises that were given to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

The sons of Israel were increasing and multiplying so fast that the Egyptian ruler is concerned

- So he takes action

³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Preaching the Word, Exodus*, 31.

⁴ Ronald F. Youngblood, *Everyman’s Bible Commentary, Exodus*, 26.

10 Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land.”

Exodus 1:10 is the new government policy on how to deal with the growing population of Israel in Egypt

- This is the king’s best way of dealing with the new threat

The king says that the Egyptians should “deal wisely” with the Israelites

- Another word could be “craftily”
- This can be used of political craftiness or worldly wisdom⁵

The problem, however, is that this type of worldly wisdom is totally contrary to the wisdom of God

- “the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be concealed” (Isa 29:14)
- “I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE” (1 Cor 1:19)

But this doesn’t make sense, does it?

- If the Israelites multiply, join the enemies of the Egyptians, and “depart from the land,” isn’t that a good thing?
- Then the problem would be eliminated!

There is nothing in the Text that would alert us to the fact that the Israelites were aligning themselves with foreign nations

- From what we see, they were quite pleased to remain in Egypt

Pharaoh’s tactics were all about power⁶

- They were all about controlling the people of Israel

This Pharaoh certainly knew about the fact that the Israelites wanted to return to the Promised Land

- He didn’t want to lose a valuable resource
- He didn’t want to give up on free labor

11 So they appointed taskmasters over them to afflict them with hard labor.

We see very clearly the first phase of Pharaoh’s oppressive policy toward Israel

- That of hard labor

A wall painting in an Egyptian tomb portrays the type of inhumane behavior many Israelites must have experienced during this time

- Overseers frequently beat slaves with long sticks

When we think of the pyramids, we think beauty

- But for the Israelites, they thought of brute work

The Israelites were treated as property at the disposal of the Egyptians

- They were treated like animals

⁵ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 273.

⁶ Mackay, 36.

And they built for Pharaoh storage cities, Pithom and Raamses.

The Israelites were forced to build two storage cities, “Pithom and Raamses”

- There is much debate about where these cities were located

They were used to store grain that was produced in the area⁷

- They would also serve as strategic military outposts along the road to the North, where the threats would most likely attack

This is the first mention of “Pharaoh” in the book of Exodus

- This term originally referred to the royal palace
- It eventually came to be known as a way of addressing the king of Egypt himself

Pharaoh claimed to be the incarnate Son of Re – the sun god⁸

- This was the primary god in the Egyptian religion

So we have a very clear understanding of what will play out throughout the book of Exodus

- Pharaoh will set himself up as God when in reality, he isn’t

12 But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out, so that they were in dread of the sons of Israel.

Pharaoh’s plan, however, backfired

- His mistreatment of Israel didn’t break them down
- Rather, it only strengthened them!

Notice that it was during the test of affliction that the Israelites truly exhibited their character

- “the more [the Egyptians] afflicted [the Israelites], the more [the Israelites] multiplied and the more [the Israelites] spread out”

Again, we see the hand of God at work

- Even though He hasn’t been mentioned yet in the book of Exodus, we see Him fulfilling His promises
- God is faithful!

Even though the sons of Israel were persecuted greatly, they continued to multiply!

- This caused the Egyptians to be “in dread” of them

The Egyptians should have seen the hand of God in this

- Any other people would have been crushed by this type of oppression

Pharaoh quickly saw that his tactics could not overturn the promises of God⁹

- He was unable to thwart the fulfillment of those Divine promises

This has been a repeated principle over the years

- When persecution comes, the people of God are strengthened and purified¹⁰

⁷ Mackay, 38.

⁸ Ryken, 34.

⁹ Cornelis Houtman, *Historical Commentary on the OT, Exodus, Vol 1*, 223.

¹⁰ John D. Currid, *An EP Study Commentary, Exodus, Volume 1*, 49.

But instead of acknowledging the hand of God, the Egyptians became more resolute in their efforts

- They merely cranked up the heat

13 The Egyptians compelled the sons of Israel to labor rigorously;

The Egyptians made the descendants of Jacob “labor rigorously”

- The meaning behind “rigorously” is to crush; to crumble; to smash; to damage
- Hence, a violent slavery is in focus here

The Egyptian rulers had reasons why they made the Israelites work so hard¹¹

- They wanted to reduce their numbers
- They wanted to lower their morale
- They wanted to crush their spirit

14 and they made their lives bitter with hard labor in mortar and bricks and at all kinds of labor in the field, all their labors which they rigorously imposed on them.

Life was certainly not easy for the Israelites

- Just observe the various words that Moses uses in verse 14
 - o “made their lives bitter”
 - o “hard labor”
 - o “all their labors”

Even today, the task of making bricks is very laborious and dirty

- But it was even worse during the days in Egypt

Mud from the Nile would be gathered and dried in the sun

- Water would have to be extracted from the Nile

Working extremely long hours under the scorching heat¹²

- With probably very little relief

Back in Genesis 15:13, God told Abram, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years”

- Israel was literally seeing Scripture fulfilled before their eyes

The Egyptians were trying to do whatever they could to make the lives of the Israelites bitter and hard

- They were trying to break them down

Years later, God would have Israel celebrate Passover to commemorate their deliverance from Egypt

- Part of Passover was eating the bitter herbs (Ex 12:8)
- These bitter herbs would remind Israel of the bitter oppression that they suffered at the hands of the Egyptians

Pharaoh’s first phase of oppression failed, however

- The more the sons of Israel were afflicted, the more they grew!

¹¹ Mackay, 37.

¹² F.B. Meyer, *Devotional Commentary on Exodus*, 20.

So Pharaoh brought in phase 2

- This was much, much more personal of an attack

II. Private murder (1:15-21)

15 Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah;

The scene switches to Pharaoh interacting with two women

- These women are called “the Hebrew midwives”
- We are even told their names, “Shiphrah and...Puah”

It is significant that the names of these women are mentioned¹³

- But we are not told the name of the Pharaoh in Exodus

This is Moses’ way of highlighting the significant players in the story

- Not the evil Pharaoh
- But the underdog midwives who courageously stood up to the ruthless leader

But isn’t it strange that only two midwives are mentioned?

- How could two women possibly serve so many Israelite women?

Most likely, these two women were the heads or supervisors over other midwives¹⁴

- They would have been in a position of telling other women what to do

In this case, Pharaoh tells them to carry out phase two of his oppression against Israel

- That is told in verse 16

16 and he said, “When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see *them* upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live.”

The king of Egypt is very clear in what he expects the midwives to do

- When they are helping the Hebrew women, these midwives were to determine the sex of the baby

They were to kill the boys

- But spare the girls

No mention is made of how the midwives were to kill the boys

- But it is clear that they were to “put him to death”

If the midwives had carried out Pharaoh’s orders, it would have been devastating to the Israelites

- Egypt would have the upper hand

Why did Pharaoh target the men instead of the women?

- Several reasons could be given

¹³ Stuart, 73.

¹⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Exodus*, 306.

Men were the warriors in the armies

- Fewer warriors, fewer battles

If there were fewer men, then the population would not increase as significantly

- Fewer men would mean fewer children

In a few years, there would not be enough Israelite men to marry the Israelite women

- Thus, Pharaoh hoped that the Israelite women would intermarry with the Egyptians
- Thus, the Israelite nation would eventually cease to exist

But there was a major problem with Pharaoh's plan

- The midwives refused to carry it out
- They deliberately disobeyed him and his agenda

17 But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live.

We are told that the midwives “feared God”

- These were brave women!

This is the first mention of “God” in Exodus

- He was there all along
- He just wasn't mentioned

What does it mean to fear God?

- It involves reverence, awe, worship and respect
- It demands obedience

These women had a tough choice

- Disobey Pharaoh and suffer the consequences
- Disobey God and suffer the consequences

It's a matter of commitment and priorities

- And these ladies showed that they had the right commitment and the right priorities

Jesus said in Matthew 10:28, “do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell”

18 So the king of Egypt called for the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this thing, and let the boys live?”

The king is furious and demands a reason why the midwives had disobeyed him

- One can only imagine how these women must have felt!

Government does not have the right to tell Christians to do something that is against the Word of God

- If this happens, then we must stand up and make our commitments known

The apostles demonstrated this when they said, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29)

- These women also demonstrate that same perspective and mindset

Pharaoh wants to know why the Hebrew midwives allowed the boys to live

- What would the women say?

Pharaoh had the power and authority to kill them!

19 The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife can get to them.”

Much discussion has arisen from the response of these two midwives

- Did they tell a lie?
- Did they exaggerate?
- Were they telling the truth?

I would venture to say that we don’t know¹⁵

- What we do know is that their answer satisfied Pharaoh
- There is no follow-up questions or concerns mentioned in these verses

We also know that God honored these women

- It would be hard to imagine that God would honor and bless a defiant lie – if these women were lying to Pharaoh

But I don’t think that this issue is the main lesson to be learned

- The women feared God, not Pharaoh

Faced with a threatening dictator, these women were resolute in their commitment to honor the Lord

- To protect life instead of taking it

It is entirely possible that God was assisting the Hebrew women in their childbirth

- It is possible that they were giving birth quickly and didn’t need the assistance of the midwives

20 So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty.

We are told how God blessed the midwives

- They were protecting life

What was the result?

- **“the people multiplied, and became very mighty”**

Is it surprising that these two verbs are the same two verbs from verse 9?

What was Pharaoh’s concern?

- That Israel was **“more and mightier”** than the Egyptians (cf. 1:9)

How did God bless the nation of Israel because of the midwives?

- **“the people multiplied, and became very mighty”** (1:20)

¹⁵ R. Alan Cole, *Tyndale OT Commentaries, Exodus*, 55.

This is the third time that Pharaoh's plan backfired!

- Hard labor didn't break Israel
- Telling the midwives to kill baby boys didn't stop Israel's population

21 Because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.

For the second time, we are told that the midwives "feared God"

- They revered and honored Him more than Pharaoh

God blessed the midwives by giving them "households"

- Families of their own
- Perhaps children

The irony here can't be overstated¹⁶

- The midwives save families
- So God blesses their families!

The first two phases of the Pharaoh's oppression have been noted

- Hard labor (1:8-14)
- Private murder (1:15-21)

III. Public murder (1:22)

22 Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, "Every son who is born you are to cast into the Nile, and every daughter you are to keep alive."

The third phase of Pharaoh's oppressive policy is no longer subtle or private

- It is public
- It is wide open for everyone to know

The orders from the king of Egypt are clear

- "every son who is born you are to cast into the Nile"
- "every daughter you are to keep alive"

Why does Pharaoh demand that the boys be thrown into the Nile?

- Several reasons can be given¹⁷

1. It was a convenient and clean way of disposing of the bodies

The Egyptians lived very close to the Nile River

- The Nile was their water source
- The Nile was also their sewer system

The Nile, with its running water, could take away things that were not wanted

- No cleanup was necessary

¹⁶ Currid, 54.

¹⁷ Stuart, 83-84.

So the baby boys would simply disappear

- Out of sight
- Out of mind

2. In the Egyptian mindset, the Nile was regarded as a god

In throwing children into the Nile, it was viewed as a way of appeasing the wrath of this god

- It was a way of making sure that the Nile would continue to supply the mineral-rich water that caused the land to be fertile¹⁸

The Nile was viewed as both a giver and taker of life¹⁹

- We can see how much they worshipped and personified this River!

This wholesale genocide is absolutely terrifying

- Can you imagine the fear that the Hebrews must have had in just walking in Egypt?

This recent turn of events definitely turns up the level of suspense in the plot

- But we will have to wait until next week in order to find out what happens with this third phase of oppression

We do see in the New Testament a parallel by Herod in trying to destroy every baby boy under two years of age (cf. Mt 2:16)

- Herod had been tricked by the magi, so this step was an act of rage and revenge

In the case of Pharaoh, it was the children of Israel in danger

- In the case of Herod, it was Jesus in a position of danger

But God was faithful in both instances

- God protects those who are His

Another touch of irony must be noticed here

- Pharaoh commands that Hebrew boys be cast or thrown into the Nile River
- In Exodus 14, Pharaoh and his officials are drowned in the Red Sea

What are some practical applications that we can learn from this?

- I hope that you have already noted some, but I want to give you a few²⁰

1. God is all-powerful

Could God have stopped the oppression of Israel?

- Most certainly!
- But God had His purposes in allowing Israel to suffer

Pharaoh was setting himself against the God of Israel

- God wins!

¹⁸ Michael Bentley, *Traveling Homeward*, 31.

¹⁹ Stuart, 84.

²⁰ Bentley, 32-34.

2. Opposition against God's people is really opposition against God Himself

Saul learned this in the NT

- Pharaoh learned the same lesson in the OT

Back in the Garden of Eden, Satan set out to deceive Adam and Eve

- He succeeded!

But God told the serpent, **“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.”** (Gen 3:15)

- We see this enmity demonstrated between Pharaoh and the children of Israel

Behind the oppressive actions of Pharaoh was the sinister heart of Satan

- Jesus said that Satan **“was a murderer from the beginning”** (John 8:44)

3. God's purposes will come to fulfillment, in His timing

At times in our lives, we find this hard to imagine

- We cry out with David, **“How long, O LORD? Wilt Thou forget me forever? How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me?”** (Ps 13:1)

The children of Israel must have felt deserted, abandoned, and forgotten

- But God was working

Think about Pharaoh's tactics

- His hatred was aimed at the boys, not the girls

This goes right back to the Seed promise in Genesis 3:15

- If Pharaoh could eliminate the boys, then perhaps he could eliminate the Seed of the woman, the Messiah!

With hindsight, we know that Pharaoh's timing was off

- But Satan has worked through many in history to try and kill this Seed

We think of Cain who killed Abel

- We think of Pharaoh who wanted to kill the Israelite boys
- We think of Haman who tried to have the Jews killed
- We think of Herod who ordered all boys two years and under to be killed

Outside of Biblical history, we think of other examples

- Hitler and his murderous regime
- Communist China

But God is more powerful than any and all of these attempts!

- God wins!
- God's purposes will succeed

4. Suffering is an inevitable result of the Fall

When we are persecuted or go through times of suffering, it is easy to blame it on God

- Why didn't You respond sooner?
- Why did You allow this to happen?

But we need to understand that God is not to blame

- He never does anything to hurt His people intentionally
- His purposes are always good, righteous, and holy

With the sons of Israel, God prepared them for deliverance through suffering

- If things had been happy and plentiful, then they might not have wanted to leave

All human suffering can be traced back to the Fall of man

- That wasn't God's fault
- Adam and Eve made the choice themselves

Instead of complaining and blaming God, we must come to the point where we worship God

- When Job lost everything, his wife told him to curse God and die
- But he responded, **"Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?"** (2:10)

Our hearts are so fickle

- We have no problem accepting good from God
- But we rebel when there is something that we deem "bad" in our lives

Some of us are suffering right now

- Others of us will face suffering in the near future

"Suffering helps us look for our Savior. If we never have any trouble along the journey, we would never have any reason to long for Heaven. Like the Israelites, we need the house of bondage to help drive us to the Promised Land."²¹

Without suffering, the Israelites would have never wanted to be rescued from Egypt

- God actually used the persecution to prepare them for deliverance!

As Christians, we would not have salvation without Jesus' suffering

- He had to suffer in order to bring about our redemption

²¹ Ryken, 37.