

Deliverance From Slavery

Message 1

Attack Against God

Exodus 1:1-22

Slavery

Three years ago some of us found ourselves involved in backbreaking labor. There we were, out in the hot sun, breaking up concrete with sledge hammers. It was our second mission trip to Acapulco, and we were demolishing a concrete building. The pillars that supported the roof were solid reinforced concrete, two feet thick. They were easy to knock over, but then we hammered on them for an hour with little discernable effect. Finally they began to crack up. But it was fiercely hot and terribly exhausting. Dehydration was a grave threat, and we were constantly reminded to drink. We were glad to be able to serve the orphanage this way, but no one would want to spend his life in such hard labor.

Perhaps this gives us a taste of the plight of the Hebrews in the opening chapter of Exodus. I grew up on a farm and am familiar with hot work. Gabe West worked for a concrete contractor one summer, and he knows what it is like to toil in the sun. Perhaps some of you have experienced hard work out in the sun, but none of us have been slaves. Gabe did not really care for pouring concrete, so he found a job in an air-conditioned office the next summer. I like farming, but felt God calling me into other work – which I was free to pursue. Those of us who went to Acapulco freely chose to go, and we returned home after one week. But the Hebrews in Egypt had nowhere to go. They were trapped in Egypt.

Slavery is a familiar concept to us, but a totally foreign experience. Slavery was abolished in this country in 1862 and is illegal everywhere today. That does not mean slavery does not exist. It does – primarily as indentured servitude in poor countries and in the sex industry. But such things are far out of sight for most Americans. Perhaps the closest we can come to understanding the situation of the Hebrews is to read the stories of those who endured slavery. I was very much influenced by reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which, if you have not done so, I recommend you also read. It is a vivid description of the horrors of slavery in America. Some slave owners were kind, but others were cruel. Slaves could be forced to work in the most difficult conditions, and whipped if they did not perform as expected. It is no wonder that American slaves saw their situation as similar to that of the Hebrews

The Road to Slavery

But before we continue with the story of the Hebrews, let us remind ourselves how they ended up in Egypt. When God created the world, everything in it was good. There was no slavery then, no hunger, no thirst, no suffering at all. But man rebelled against his Creator and brought evil into the world. God made man good, but now he was corrupted by sin – and as people grew more numerous, sin grew worse. The Bible tells us that society became full of violence. The picture here is of a whole world like the worst of our urban slums. Gang warfare, murder, rape, theft – were all part of everyday life. So God destroyed that world with a flood and began again with Noah. Noah was a good man, but the sin that was now part of the human race again led to a society in rebellion against God. This time God chose one man to be the means of rescuing the human race. God called Abraham to leave his home, forsake the sins of his fathers, and move to the land of Canaan. God promised to bless the whole world through Abraham and his descendants.

Abraham faithfully served God. So did his son Isaac and his son Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons, and they did not get along. One day they sold their youngest brother, Joseph, into slavery – and he was taken to Egypt. There Joseph interpreted a dream of the king of Egypt about a coming famine, and recommended a wise plan to guard the nation against this impending catastrophe. As a result Pharaoh made Joseph the second most powerful man in Egypt – after Pharaoh himself. Pharaoh's judgment was not misplaced, and Joseph did save Egypt from disaster. When famine struck his family in Canaan, Joseph reconciled with his

brothers and brought all of them down to Egypt. There they settled in the region of Goshen. Joseph served Pharaoh well, and out of gratitude he provided richly for Joseph's family. All this is told in the book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. So when the book of Exodus opens, the Hebrew people – descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob – are all in Egypt.

Time has passed. Many generations have come and gone, and with each generation the Hebrew people grew more numerous. They were obedient to God's command to be fruitful and multiply. And as the years passed, the memory of Joseph and his amazing service to Egypt grew dim. With each passing year, the Egyptians began to worry about the power of this large foreign people living within their borders.

Pharaoh's Attack Against God

It is hardly surprising that the Egyptians began to worry about the large population of Hebrews in their land. Although there is no evidence that the Hebrews caused any trouble in Egypt, it is clear they did not assimilate. After 400 they still spoke their own language, held to their own customs, and worshiped their own God. The surprising thing is that the Hebrews were welcome in Egypt for so long. It shows how remarkable Joseph's service was that the gratitude of the Egyptians should have lasted several generations. Look around the world today, and you see dozens of places where different people groups struggle to coexist. Some of the most notorious examples are the Israelis and the Palestinians, the Sunni Muslims and the Shiite Muslims in Iraq, and the Muslims and Christians in the Sudan. But there are also the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, the black Africans and whites in Zimbabwe, the Muslims in Europe, the Tamils in Sri Lanka, Christians in Indonesia, and so on. America is supposed to be the melting pot of races, but every large ethnic group that enters finds resistance. The current issue is the influx of Latino people. In all these cases the issue is not the presence of foreigners. The problem is foreigners who do not assimilate into the majority culture. As the minority swells, the majority begins to fear that their supremacy will be lost – and they take measures to drive out or suppress the minority.

So you would expect the Egyptians eventually to become uneasy about all those Hebrews living in their land. And pressing them into forced labor was rather expected. In fact, when the Israelites conquered Canaan years later, they put the Canaanites to forced labor. Slavery was a natural result of defeat in battle, and was a normal part of the ancient world. The problem for Pharaoh was the people he enslaved were not normal. They belonged to God.

There were three steps in Pharaoh's campaign to suppress the Israelites. Simple enslavement was first. Pharaoh saw the huge Hebrew population as a ripe source of free labor for his grand building projects. Pharaoh had in mind more than building a few temples or a palace. He built two whole cities with his slave labor. But part of the purpose of enslaving the Hebrews was to reduce the population. Even with this hard labor, the Hebrews still increased in number. So the Egyptians made the work very hard. They treated the Hebrews cruelly, hoping their childbearing would diminish. But the opposite occurred! The text says, "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." (Exodus 1:12) The worse they treat the Israelites, the more they multiply! The Egyptians began to panic. Continuing with verse 13, "So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves 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." (Exodus 1:13-14) Notice the vivid words here – ruthless, bitter, slaves. Pharaoh did everything he could to grind down the Hebrews – to so weaken them that they would no longer seem to be a threat. But nothing worked.

The second step to gain control of the Hebrews was to kill all the baby boys. To do this, he ordered the midwives to kill any boy baby, but to allow any girl to live. Why kill only the boys? It is the girls who will bear children. True, but it is the boys who may grow up to fight for their freedom. By killing all the boys, before long there would be no fighting men in Israel. At that point it would be easy to keep in

Hebrews enslaved forever. Besides, the girls could grow up to fill Pharaoh's harem!

Faithfulness Under Attack

This attempt to suppress the Israelites completely failed because the midwives totally disregarded the order. Now this was a dangerous move. Any man who would kill babies would also be likely to kill people who refused his orders. At least the midwives could expect to be imprisoned and tortured for their disobedience. In such situations most people follow orders. If the orders are immoral, they blame the authorities who issued the commands. You see this frequently in war trials. At the Nuremberg trials after World War II Germans who had gassed thousands of Jews pleaded that they were only following orders. The reason people follow orders is not only a sense of duty, but also fear of retribution. Those same German officers who ordered the Jews to be exterminated could just as easily exterminate an uncooperative soldier. Fear compels people to obey a ruthless authority.

But Pharaoh's attempt to curtail the Hebrew population failed because the midwives feared something more than Pharaoh. Verse 17 says, "But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live." This disobedience by the midwives was not prompted by patriotism or admiration for the beauty of the infants. It was an act of faith. They knew and believed in the God of their father Abraham. For these faithful midwives the command of God carried more weight than the command of Pharaoh.

Pharaoh eventually noticed all the Hebrew boys that continued to run around Goshen, and he called the midwives in for an explanation. On the surface it appears that the midwives told a blatant lie. Their story was that the Hebrew women delivered their babies before the midwives could get to them. Some commentators suggest that this might have been the truth. But the previous verses tell us that the midwives disobeyed Pharaoh's order. It is too much of a stretch to think that the midwives explanation was the whole truth. But if it is a lie, doesn't that make the midwives guilty of, well, lying?

This is one of those passages in the Old Testament which disturbs people. We know that lying is wrong. But here you have God-fearing people lying. And to make it worse, God rewarded them for their lie! This seems like twisted morality to us.

The problem we have in understanding this passage is a failure to grasp the different ways God's law applies in different circumstances. Now as soon as I say that, some people will become nervous. It sounds like situational ethics, or twisting the truth to suit your own purposes. I admit, if we say we ought to apply God's law differently in different circumstances, we have to be careful that we do not make arbitrary decisions about what that means. There must be a clear method for making distinctions. In this passage the controlling issue is Pharaoh's stance toward the Hebrews. This was not a matter of convenience, economics, or freedom. The midwives did not lie to obtain a financial advantage, or because they were unjustly enslaved. The issue here is murder. Pharaoh was embarking upon genocide, and he was requiring the midwives to collaborate. Until now there is no comment about the Hebrews resisting their slavery – and there is no divine approval for such a resistance. It is murder that the midwives oppose.

At this point some people will argue that the midwives indeed should have refused to murder the babies, but that did not mean they should lie about it. But such an argument assumes that Pharaoh deserved to know the truth. We have established that Pharaoh intends to exterminate the Hebrew boys. This is an act of war. No one in his right mind would think that the ethics of war are the same as the ethics of peacetime. In war soldiers kill other soldiers. Even soldiers do not kill people in peacetime. In war each army tries to gain an advantage over the other. Deception is an ordinary part of warfare. People who are transparently honest in civilian life ought to deceive the enemy in battle when possible. So faced with a murderous king, the midwives acted in a wise and godly manner. They sought to protect life by deceiving the Pharaoh who

was trying to kill Hebrew babies. In this they provided an example for those Christians in Europe who lied to the Germans in order to rescue the Jews from the gas chambers. And the proof that this was the right course of action is God's reward. He gave the midwives husbands and children, too.

Pharaoh's attempt to kill the Hebrew babies at the hand of the midwives failed. His third step was publicly to attack Israel. He ordered all his people to kill any Hebrew baby boy they found. With this he declared open warfare on the people of Israel and their God.

The rest of this semester will be the story of that epochal conflict – Pharaoh attacking God's people, and God striking back to rescue them. The deliverance from Egypt is the most important event in history before the coming of Christ. It is sung in the psalms and referenced in almost every other book in the Bible. Far from being boring history, it is the exciting story of God's faithfulness to His people and His effort to save them from their oppressors. The exodus also provides a potent symbol for the salvation from sin that Jesus brings 1,500 years later.

Faithfulness Today

But tonight we want to consider two ways in which this chapter applies to us. First, we ought to follow the example of the midwives. We ought to refuse any authority which commands us to disobey God. In the case of the Hebrew midwives the issue was killing male babies, and you may be confronted with a similar issue. If you become a nurse, you may find yourself in a situation where you are asked to participate in killing babies. This is commonly done by abortion, but sometimes babies with birth defects are born, but then allowed to die in the birthing room. These babies could live with proper care, but without care die in a few hours. Many hospitals routinely perform such operations. If you become a nurse you may be required to assist in killing these babies. Doctors face similar problems. More and more doctors are deciding they do not want to abort babies, and in some places there is a shortage of physicians for this grisly task. Some places are considering legislation to force doctors to perform abortions. Abortion affects pharmacists as well. Some godly pharmacists refuse to sell medicine which aborts a newly conceived baby. The state of Illinois is attempting to force all pharmacists to sell this medicine – regardless of religious convictions.

This is just a sampling of the difficult issues present in the medical professions. Whatever you do, you will find similar challenges. I used to work in a laboratory. Once I was told to go to another lab and steal something we needed. If you become an engineer, you may be ordered to take shortcuts which could endanger people. If you resist the authorities you may lose your job. You may lose your reputation. Perhaps you may lose your professional license. Then what will happen to your career? What will happen to your family? How will you face your friends when all you have worked for disappears?

This brings us to the heart of the matter. The core question is this: Whom will you fear? Do you fear loss of career or reputation or friends more than God? Jesus said, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10:28) When we put it that way, the choice seems pretty clear. If you had to choose between a powerful master and a much greater master, you would obey the latter. Only a fool would obey man instead of God. Right? So why do so many people fall for the pressures of man and reject God's command?

A big part of the reason we are more diligent to obey men than God is that men are physically present, but God is invisible. That makes the whole issue a matter of faith. God says, "You shall not murder." Your boss says, "Kill this baby or I will fire you." His voice rings in your ears, his face glares at you, and his body projects hostility. The pen he will use to write your dismissal is at hand. But where is God?

Faith in God's Provision

Yes, where is God? If we obey Him, will God take care of us? This is the question that simmers in the back of our minds. What will happen if we risk career and reputation and friends, and even life itself? Will it be worth it? And surely this was the biggest question in the minds of the Hebrew midwives. What will happen to them if Pharaoh discovers that they are in rebellion against his direct orders? Will God come through for them? The story of the exodus from Egypt is the story of God's protection and care for His people. But we have a foretaste of it here in this chapter, when God protects and rewards the faithful midwives. This is always how it is with God. God is surprising. Often He does not act the way we would expect Him to. But in the end He cares for His people – even in slavery

Several years ago there was an article in *World* magazine about Christians who are enslaved today.¹ It is about a brickmaker, a Christian, in Pakistan. Technically Mr. Masih is employed, but in order to earn enough to feed themselves, everyone in his family must work at the brickyard. Even with all 13 of his children working, they earn at total of only \$6 or \$7 per day. Still this is not enough to buy food, so they resort to borrowing from their employer, which ties them to the brickyard for life. Even if they could leave, there are no other employment options in this Muslim land. Technically free, Mr. Masih and his family are virtual slaves.

Life in Pakistan is terribly difficult for anyone who is a Christian. The culture is hostile to Christian faith, and persecution is common. Education for Christians is limited or even denied outright. Political rights are sharply curtailed. An anti-blasphemy law enables the government to arrest and imprison anyone who speaks against Mohammed or the Koran – which makes Christian witness a dangerous activity. This article mentions but a few of the many Christians who have been imprisoned and prosecuted under this law. In 2001 “gunmen stormed a church in Bahawalpur during Sunday morning services and slaughtered 15 Christians, including the minister.” In 2002 five Christians were killed “in a grenade attack on the Protestant International Church in Islamabad.”

How would you manage in such a situation? Would you remain faithful to God, like Mr. Masih and the Hebrew midwives? Or would you cave in to the pressure to conform? Is Jesus worth enough to you to endure slavery for Him? Mr. Masih said, “I have a strong faith in Jesus Christ. We're happy in this situation also.” Could you say that?

The Hebrew midwives knew God. They knew that God had called Abraham and had promised to make a great nation of him. They knew how God had led Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. That was enough for them to entrust themselves to God. We have a much stronger basis for our faith. We have the knowledge of God's faithfulness to His people in the past, but we also have the assurance of God's love in Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God came to earth and lived as a man. He died a horrible death for our sins. Then He rose from the grave and ascended to His Father in heaven. There He rules all the affairs of earth. In the book of Hebrews we read,

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

And in Romans Paul says,

¹ WORLD Magazine May 04, 2002, Vol. 17, No. 17 <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/5972>
Accessed January 14, 2008.

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?...For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-32, 38-39)

Is the death of Jesus enough proof that God will care for you? If so, you must follow Him, even when it is dangerous to do so. And if the death of Jesus does not persuade you of God's faithfulness, pray for God to reveal Himself to you and enable you to trust Him.

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January 15, 2008