

God's Faithfulness and His Silence

Exodus 1:1 – 2:10

Turn to Exodus 1, please. This is called “God’s faithfulness and his silence.” Our Scripture today tells a story of a time when God was keeping old promises to his people in a miraculous and powerful way. And at the same time God’s people felt like he was silent and absent.

1 What God had Promised: Become a Great Nation – Genesis 12:2; 15:5, 13–14; 46:3; 48:4

I will read you a promise God made and repeated in Genesis. In Genesis 12:2, God told Abraham, *I will make you into a great nation.* That’s the key promise here: *I will make you into a great nation.*

Genesis 15:5, 13–14 *The LORD took Abram outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” ... The LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions.* So many offspring that they cannot be counted, and also enslaved for 400 years.

In Genesis 46:3, God speaks to old Jacob as he begins to move to Egypt where his son Joseph is prime minister. *“I am God, the God of your father,” he said. “Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there.”* God will make Israel great while in Egypt.

In Genesis 48:4, Jacob was old and dying in Egypt, and he reminded his son Joseph of this promise. *God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and there he blessed me and said to me, “I am going to make you fruitful and increase your numbers.*

These promises take us straight into the beginning of Exodus.

2 God Keeps His Promise – Exodus 1:1–7

These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each with his family: Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali; Gad and Asher. The descendants of Jacob numbered seventy in all; Joseph was already in Egypt.

Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.

The writer of Exodus here does not just report growth, he emphasizes growth: *the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, they increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.* God was keeping an old promise, and he was not skimping! God was Faithful with a capital “F.” In Genesis, Abraham’s line had so much trouble having babies, but not any more.

3 Pharaoh’s Fear and His Plan A: Slavery and Hard Labour – Exodus 1:8–14

Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”

So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.

The NIV says, “*they have become far too numerous for us.*” The NRSV says “*they are more numerous and more powerful,*” and that’s what the Hebrew says. There are more Israelites than Egyptians, and they are stronger. For some reason Pharaoh does not want them to leave. We don’t know exactly what his thinking is there, but he sure meant it. They shall not leave.

The Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. There are so many Israelites that the Egyptians are really afraid. “If these people ever decide to come after us, we’ve had it. They’ll wipe us out.”

So the Egyptians basically decide to work the Israelites to death. Here again we have emphasis: *worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor; ... in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.*

That’s the Egyptians. What is God doing? *The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.* Pharaoh and the Egyptians did everything they could to weaken Israel, and the more they tried to weaken them, the stronger Israel got. The Egyptians were sick with fear.

Pharaoh and the Egyptians plan to weaken Israel, and God plans to strengthen Israel. It is no contest. Pharaoh’s plan should have succeeded, the way things normally go, but God had a different plan, and Pharaoh failed. The Israelites were suffering and miserable, but God was being faithful to his promise, and they continued to overwhelm the Egyptians.

5 Pharaoh's Plan B: Midwives Kill the Boys – Exodus 1:15–21

Pharaoh's plan A was to weaken Israel with slavery and harsh labour, but that did not weaken Israel. It actually had the opposite effect. Here's Pharaoh's plan B:

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, "When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?" The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive." So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

Kill the baby boys. The midwives feared God and would not do that. This is the kind of situation where we are right to fear God rather than submit to the government. The central truth here is that although Pharaoh gets more vicious and more desperate, it still does not work.

The midwives tell Pharaoh, *"Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before midwives arrive."* These two midwives have no intention of killing any Israelite boy, but we need to assume some truth in what they say. They work with Egyptian women as well, it seems, and Israelite women are different. They give birth quickly, compared to Egyptian women. Very short labour. This is part how God makes the Israelites numerous. Bearing children does not take much out of the mothers, so they keep having children.

How did Pharaoh's plan B go? *The people increased and became even more numerous.* God had decided to make Israel more and more numerous, and no power on earth could stop that from happening.

6 Pharaoh's Plan C: All Egyptians Shall Kill Every Hebrew Boy – Exodus 1:22–2:10

Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it. She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said. Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?" "Yes, go," she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."

The Egyptians are certain that if they don't kill Israelites, sooner or later the Israelites will kill them. The Egyptians dread the Israelites. So they have motivation to obey Pharaoh and throw the Hebrew boys into the Nile.

Pharaoh orders all his people to throw baby Hebrew boys into the Nile to kill them. So what happens? A Hebrew mother puts her baby boy in a basket in the Nile, to save it. Egyptians throw Hebrew boys into the river to kill them. Pharaoh's own daughter takes the Hebrew boy out of the Nile to save it. That's called irony, especially since Moses was the one who eventually led Israel away from Egypt. Biblical writers love irony.

Irony is when there is a surface meaning which is expected, and also a deeper meaning which is quite different. On the surface, Pharaoh wants the baby boys put in the Nile to kill them. But what happens is that a mother puts her baby in the Nile to save it, and Pharaoh's daughter takes it out of the Nile to save it from Pharaoh.

Moses's sister asks Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I find a Hebrew woman to nurse the child?" Pharaoh's daughter says "Yes," and she has to know that the nursing woman will be the mother.

To summarize the story this far, God wants Israel to have a population explosion, because he promised their forefathers that he would do that. So Israel's numbers increase rapidly. Their numbers frighten Pharaoh and the Egyptians, frighten them more and more. Pharaoh and the Egyptians try so hard to weaken Israel, to bring their numbers down, but nothing they do works.

7 God's Faithfulness and Israel's Misery

God's people felt abandoned by God, and had reasons to think that. At the same time, God was working powerfully among them to make them strong. Their continued growth in numbers was miraculous, but they could not see any support from God at all. Israel prayed for rescue, and to them, all they were getting from God was silence. To Israel, God was silent and passive.

Pharaoh could not see a mighty God in this either. Pharaoh, the enemy of God's people, experienced great frustration as well as fear. He thought he had complete power over these people, and yet he could not manage to do what he was trying to do. He wanted to weaken them, and what he did should have weakened them, but they just got stronger.

God was working quietly and powerfully, doing exactly what he wanted to do, exactly what he promised Abraham and Isaac and Jacob that he would do. He was making his people strong, and he would not let anything stop that.

And, he had a plan to get his people away from their misery. He had promised that, too. But God was not going to take Israel out of Egypt until they were big and strong enough. Once they were, he would take them out, as we will see in a few weeks. (Or you could just read it in Exodus.)

Here's a question: could our lives sometimes be just like this? We are battered by circumstances that cause us distress, and we ask God to rescue us, and he is not doing that. It seems to us that God is silent and passive. He's doing nothing. We want him to start *doing* something.

What if, all this time that we were in distress and getting no help, he was actually doing a great work in us, miraculous even, to make us strong. What if he was keeping his promises to be with us and help us and be our strength? We don't have any sense of miracle. We have no sense of God's help or presence.

Our Scripture today shows us that God's people can be suffering and feel ignored by God, and at the same they are actually strong by the power of Almighty God, and their lives are an ongoing miracle. We feel weak and discouraged, and the same time God us pouring life and strength into us.

We can look back and see this for Israel in Exodus 1. But they could not see it for themselves then, and we cannot see it for ourselves now. What we see and understand about God just does not go that deep. We think and pray and live near the top. We don't see deeper. Scripture talks about the deeper reality, but often we don't see it.

I expect that if we could easily see and feel and understand this deeper level, we'd have a different picture of God's work in us. But we cannot see. So we trust him, we hope in him, we have faith in him, and we wait.

Make no mistake, God was distressed by what was happening in Egypt. This is only Exodus 1, which sets the stage. The next section of Exodus shows God's going after Pharaoh and the Egyptians to ruin them in stages and bring Israel out.

God had plans for a big rescue, he had promised that, too, and it all happened. We have the same kind of promises, even more impressive than what God promised Abraham and Jacob. He's the same God.

The Colossians 1 prayer includes this: “*Strengthen us with all the power that comes from your glorious might, so that we will endure everything with patience.*” That is a phenomenal line. God’s strength, God’s power, and God’s glorious might! For what exactly? Endure everything with patience.

Let’s give God the right to do this with us. He will do things like this with us whether or not we agree to it. Still, though, let’s submit to God treating us as he treated Israel in Egypt.

What if, while we flounder in our weakness, and we just want relief, what if at the same time, God is miraculously building up our hearts and minds and endurance? Our troubles not slowing down how he wants to pour himself into us, and they are no way of measuring how faithful and active he is.

And remember, he has plans to rescue. He had deliverance planned for Israel, and he has deliverance planned for us. God is doing things in us that no force can stop. Let’s assume that right now, God is unstoppable in each of us in ways we do not see, just as God was unstoppable in the Israelites in ways they could not see. Amen.

PRAYER: Strengthen us with all the power that comes from your glorious might, so that we will endure everything with patience. We give you joyful thanks, Father: you gave us a place in your kingdom of light. You rescued us from the authority of darkness, and you brought us safely into the kingdom of the Son you love. We give you joyful thanks. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God’s love and into Christ’s perseverance. May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.