

Let My People Go • Exodus 1-14

Joseph was a Hebrew slave who rose in power to become the Prime Minister of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. He moved his family from their famine-ridden homeland of Canaan and into the Egyptian province of Goshen. They were saved from destruction and promoted to prosperity and prominence.

Joseph grew old and died at the age of 110. Then Pharaoh died. New generations were born and Joseph was forgotten. The new Pharaohs didn't even know who he was.

Long before all this happened God had made a promise to Abraham, the great patriarch of the Hebrew family. God had promised that he would multiply and grow the Hebrew people until they became a great nation. This was the time. Egypt was the place. Over four hundred years the family of 70 multiplied until they became a nation of more than a million, perhaps as many as three million, people.

Prosperity brought persecution. God's blessing on the Hebrews became a threat to the Egyptians. They feared having so many people with such solidarity within their borders. They were afraid that the Hebrews might side with an enemy in a time of war. The new Pharaoh decided that something had to be done.

You see, few people are tolerant of God's blessings on others. Most of us tend to resent the success of others. The fear and resentment of Pharaoh was not at all unusual.

The Egyptian government adopted a strategy to deal with the Hebrew threat—turn them into slaves by forcing them to perform difficult manual labor. They were forced to make brick and mortar, to build cities for the government and to labor long hours in the fields. They were treated ruthlessly with harsh punishments and few rewards. They were turned into slaves.

Perhaps the government thought this would contain and control the Hebrews but it did just the opposite. The worse they were treated the more they

multiplied. God was determined to make them many and no Egyptian government was going to thwart God.

Pharaoh decided to limit the population growth of the Hebrew people by ordering the midwives to kill all newborn baby boys. After all, infanticide was a popular form of birth control in ancient times. But the midwives refused. They chose to disobey their government for the sake of the babies' lives. (We sometimes may be tempted to think that opposition to our country's legalization of abortion is unprecedented, but it is not. Those Hebrew midwives valued human life more than government authority. As a result they refused to commit murder even if the emperor ordered it.)

Pharaoh expanded the attack by ordering every citizen of the land, not just the midwives, to kill newborn Hebrew babies. It was attempted genocide through infanticide. It was the worst of times. Their labor was long. Their treatment was cruel. Their children were dying. The future seemed bleak. We read this in Exodus 2:23-25:

The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.

God gave hope. It came through one amazing little story. A woman named Jochebed became pregnant by her husband Amram. She gave birth to a son whom she hid as long as she could.

In a terrible act of desperation she abandoned him in a basket that was floated on the Nile River. Jochebed's daughter was told to watch the baby in the basket. Amazingly, the daughter of Pharaoh came to the same place along the Nile to take a bath. She saw the basket and liked the baby. She defied her father's orders and asked the nearby girl to find

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a Hebrew woman she could hire as a nurse. The girl brought the baby boy's mother. So, Pharaoh's daughter used royal funds to hire the baby's own mother to nurse and raise him. Jochebed had protected her boy, Moses, and he grew up on government welfare. When he was old enough the princess moved him to the palace where he learned Egyptian culture and language.

You may say that this didn't change things. They were still slaves. They were still oppressed. They were still beaten, abused, enslaved and their children were still threatened and killed. So what if one boy beat the system?

Here is a grand principle that is very hard to understand and even more difficult to accept. God was doing something grand. God was growing a nation. God was doing this over generations. They were part of something great but they suffered just the same and most did not live to see the eventual success.

Sometimes we face the same situation today. We're part of God's great plan for eternity but we're caught in the misery of the moment. What are we to do? May we be encouraged by the small signs of hope God gives for now. Trust God for the fulfillment of his great purposes in the future and be faithful to God in the meantime.

The Hebrew people pleaded with God for help. God prepared a leader to be his agent in setting them free. Almost always God uses leaders to accomplish his purposes. But leaders are not quickly made. Leadership takes time.

God prepared Moses from before he was born. He was uniquely equipped to represent the Hebrew people to the court of Pharaoh because he grew up in the palace. One day he wandered from the palace and witnessed the despicable treatment of Hebrew slaves. It triggered something deep in his soul. Moses felt a greater kinship to the slaves than to the slave masters. He knew in his heart that he belonged with his people and not in the palace. He was so outraged when he saw an Egyptian slave master beating a Hebrew slave that he intervened, killed the Egyptian and buried his body in the sand. He thought no one saw what he had done, but someone did. The grapevine quickly informed Pharaoh and Pharaoh ordered Moses' execution.

Moses was 40 years old. Volume I of his biography came to a sudden end and he fled the coun-

try. He went from living in the palace to living in tents with nomads in the land of Midian. He learned to be a shepherd and to make his living with his hands, working long hard hours. He probably thought he would never see Egypt or his people again. Far from home he married a Midianite woman and raised a family. He learned the ways of the desert and he experienced God. Yahweh God revealed himself to Moses through a voice from a burning bush that was not consumed by the fire.

Volume II of Moses' life had lasted another 40 years. At 80 years old Moses was finally ready to lead. God called him to confront Pharaoh to set the Hebrew people free. God had prepared him for law, politics and literature in the palace of the most sophisticated kingdom in the world. God had prepared Moses for the desert and survival and hardship in the tents of the Midianites. Yes, he was finally ready, but he didn't feel ready. Moses had a speech impediment. He was shy and reserved. He was scared. He was 80 years old. He didn't want the job.

There are powerful lessons of leadership here. The leaders God chooses are not perfect people. They have histories. They have problems. They have flaws and sins and disabilities. Some of the very best leaders are reluctant to take the job. But, when God calls you to lead, the answer must be yes. Despite his fear, reluctance and uncertainty Moses agreed to go where God wanted him to go and do what God wanted him to do.

When Moses returned to Egypt he faced formidable challenges. The Hebrew people didn't want him to be their leader. Pharaoh didn't want to do what he asked. Leadership is more than knowing what to do and agreeing to do it. Leaders must convince someone to follow.

God blessed Moses with some minor miracles to get everyone's attention. The Hebrews slowly accepted him as their leader and Pharaoh agreed to listen to his proposals.

Moses asked Pharaoh to let his people go. The requests were worded in different ways. He asked for different periods of freedom. He tried to negotiate. Pharaoh refused. Pharaoh ordered more severe treatment of the slaves. They had to form bricks without straw. Their quotas were high. Their assignments were impossible. They were beaten if they did not comply. The Hebrews became discour-

aged and blamed Moses for their worsened treatment. None of this was working. Moses spoke for God in telling Pharaoh that defiance of God's orders inevitably brings unpleasant consequences but Pharaoh thought he could defy God and get away with it.

God used a strategy of escalating consequences. He started low and raised the stakes with each refusal from the emperor. God was giving Pharaoh every opportunity to do what God wanted him to do. When he refused God brought increasingly severe afflictions on Pharaoh and the nation of Egypt.

The first plague was blood. God threatened to turn the Nile River to blood, kill the fish and deprive the people of drinking water. And God did it. But, Pharaoh still wouldn't let them go.

Plague number 2 was frogs. Frogs, frogs and more frogs! Frogs were everywhere—from the palace to the fields and in every Egyptian home. But, Pharaoh wouldn't let God's people go.

More plagues followed. Plague number 3 was gnats. Plague number 4 was flies. Plague number 5 was the killing of livestock. Plague number 6 was boils. Plague number 7 was hail. Plague number 8 was locusts. Plague number 9 was darkness.

Plague after plague. God kept pushing. God threatened and then delivered on the threats. Pharaoh refused time after time. He pleaded with Moses to pray for an end to the plagues and Moses did. But Pharaoh never let the Hebrews go. His heart hardened rather than softened. He threatened to kill Moses. He would not do what God wanted.

God still uses this strategy today. He calls on people to obey his word but they refuse. He gently urges; they refuse. He pushes harder and they refuse. God increases the pressure. God multiplies the plagues. Amazingly, some people become harder and harder with the rising consequences that come from disregarding and disobeying God's commands.

Finally, God delivered the tenth and final plague. One awful night he sent his angel of death through the land of Egypt to take the lives of the oldest son in each Egyptian household. The Hebrews were forewarned and told to sacrifice lambs

and brush their blood on their doorposts. That way the angel of death would "pass over" their homes and their children would live.

As the entire nation of Egyptians waited in grief over the loss of their children, Pharaoh finally and reluctantly relented and let the Hebrew people go. In huge numbers they quickly mobilized taking payment from their Egyptian masters for their four hundred years of slavery.

God will do whatever it takes to save his people!

For the Hebrew people it was a new beginning. Free at last! They left with gold, silver, livestock and, most of all—their lives. They were on their way to a promised land where cities were already built for them, vineyards were already growing, the fields were waiting for them to harvest. It was to be a place of safety, peace, freedom and prosperity. God had built them into a nation of millions and now God was going to let them enjoy a future that would be as good as their past was bad.

However, it would take one more miracle to get them out. Pharaoh had a change of heart. He sent his army to capture his slave workforce and bring them back. Now the Hebrews weren't warriors. They had no training and no weapons. They were families with babies and senior adults, women and children. Once again God would have to deliver

them because they could not win a war against the superior Egyptian army.

God miraculously cleared a dry path through the Reed Sea. The entire Hebrew nation safely passed through. But when the Egyptian army tried to do the same their chariots bogged down, the waters flooded the dry path and they were defeated without a battle being fought.

The rest of the story is too often sad. Once free they kept looking back. They kept asking to go back. Somehow the certainty of slavery was more appealing than the uncertainty of a glorious future of freedom. Somehow they found Egypt without God more appealing than going to a promised land with God. Somehow they wanted what was worse more than they wanted what was better.

God wants us to be free. God wants the best for us.

It is a frequently repeated story. There are still too many whom God loves and redeems who want to go back. Somehow yesterday's sin seems better than today's righteousness. Somehow the slavery of Satan sounds better than the freedom of God. Somehow we do not appreciate the new beginnings for which we have long prayed and we look back to slavery as the better way.

This is the story of the Exodus. It is the story that gives the name to the second book of the Bible. There is a wonderful summary written in Exodus 14:29-31:

But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

God wants us to be free. God wants the best for us. He has shown his great power in our lives through Jesus Christ. Let's trust him. Let's live his way for the rest of our lives.

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
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