SHE PUT THE CHILD BY THE RIVER BANK

Exodus 1:1–2:10

Key Verse: 2:3

“When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank.”

Do you ever feel hopeless? Like whatever you may try to do is useless? The book of Exodus, recounting an amazing event in the history of God’s people, begins with a really hopeless situation. Yet in these opening verses we find women who take unusual actions, overcoming the darkness around them. Sadly, the world we live in can still seem hopelessly dark. What can we as Christians do? Does it even matter? We want to learn from the examples of faith in today’s passage. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words.

1. God’s blessing and Pharaoh’s oppression (1:1–14)

Look at 1:1–5. The author begins by summarizing what had happened at the end of Genesis. Through his own sovereign plan God had brought Jacob and his twelve sons and their families to live in Egypt. By causing them to live as foreigners there, God was fulfilling his promise to make them into a great nation. In verse 6 the author mentions that Joseph and all that generation died. But God continued fulfilling his plan. Read verse 7. These words remind us of God’s blessings in Genesis. At the beginning of creation God blessed human beings to be fruitful and increase in number (Ge1:28). After the Flood, God blessed Noah and his family to be fruitful and increase in number (Ge9:1). God’s plan for Abraham’s descendants, Isaac’s descendants and Jacob’s descendants was to be fruitful and increase in number (Ge13:16; 26:4; 28:14). Though the generation of the patriarchs of faith was gone, God was still blessing his people. God’s blessing is especially seen in the description that they became “exceedingly strong.” This was no ordinary population increase; it was unusual, striking, noteworthy. Their fruitfulness and strength was a sign that God was with them.

But then things change. Look at verses 8–10. Over time there was a new king in Egypt, and it says that he “did not know Joseph.” It means he had no sense of history. He forgot how God used Joseph to save Egypt from a terrible famine. Without this sense of history, he was no longer thankful for what God had done through these people. This affected the way he saw what was happening. He felt threatened by God’s blessing on the people of Israel. When we look at his words carefully, we see that he has many kinds of fear: he’s worried about future unknown enemies, betrayal and loss. He thinks he’s being very clever, very wise, very shrewd. In fact, as we’re going to see in this book, Pharaoh’s plan turns out to be a total disaster for Egypt.

So what happens? Read verses 11–14. The Israelites as foreigners were defenseless against this injustice. Their status in Egypt dramatically changed, from favored guests to abject slaves. We also notice something here. It says that “the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied.” What does this tell us? It shows how God was working even in the midst of their suffering. God had a plan to form the people into a great nation through their common experience of suffering as slaves in Egypt (Ge15:13). God’s plan for his people could not be thwarted. Still, the author emphasizes the hardships the people had to live through. The word “ruthless” is repeated twice. It says the hard service made their lives bitter. Hard work is a really good thing; it can make life feel full and meaningful. It also can help us be healthy and sleep well. But being used ruthlessly is quite different; it can make life seem bitter and miserable.

This description speaks to our fallen human nature. If we’re given some power over others, our sins tend to make us abusive. Why is that? It’s because our sins cut us off from God our Creator. God made us in his image to be gracious shepherds of his world. But sin causes us to disregard God and disrespect other human beings. Sin makes us value making money more than people. Sin makes us proud, selfish and cruel. We may complain about modern-day “Pharaohs,” but given the opportunity, in our sin we would do exactly the same thing.

We also notice something here in Exodus. It may seem like Pharaoh gets away with all this ruthless abuse. But he doesn’t. Though God is silent, he’s not dead—he’s very much alive. He’s watching. He’s listening. He’s responding, and he’s working, in his own way and on his own time schedule. Though in this world there may never seem to be full justice for all the gross injustice people experience, in the end there is real justice with God. This is our faith.

1. “But the midwives feared God” (1:15–21)

Pharaoh didn’t feel secure even with all the ruthless treatment of his Hebrew slaves. Look at verses 15–16. He went one step further, with a secretive form of genocide. Even though he achieves the height of power in this world, a godless man can only fall into such diabolic paranoia. Commanding his power as king of Egypt, Pharaoh told the Hebrew midwives to kill all newborn Hebrew baby boys. It highlights the hardness of this man’s heart, for who could even imagine doing such a thing to newborn babies? Fear makes people’s hearts more and more wicked. But this evil man is only the background of the story.

Who are the focus? Read verse 17. Midwives may seem insignificant, but the author tells us their names: Shiphrah and Puah. And these ordinary women had more horse sense than the king. The king put tremendous pressure on them to do his will. But these women feared God more than they feared the king. They were not just being rebellious. The fear of God kept them from committing such a sin. We see this same truth in Genesis (Ge20:6,11; 42:18). Proverbs 16:6 says, “…by the fear of the LORD one turns away from evil.” A healthy fear of God enables us to keep serving, obeying and following him faithfully, even after those whom we depended on spiritually are gone (1Sa12:14,24). Our Lord Jesus said, “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!” (Lk12:4–5). When we face great pressure, from without or within, to do something wrong, no matter how great that pressure is, we need to remember that, though people may not know, God is watching.

And the author of Exodus tells us more about these midwives. Look at verse 18. They got caught disobeying the king’s orders. It was an even more frightening moment. What did they do? Look at verse 19. When they feared God, God gave them wisdom to answer the king in a way he could not contradict. It reminds us of the famous proverb, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge…” (Pr1:7a). Even a very expensive education can’t give us such knowledge. And there’s one more thing here. Read verses 20–21. It may seem risky, even foolish, to resist the pressure to do wrong. But the Bible tells us that, in every nation, anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him (Ac10:35).

1. The birth of Moses (1:22–2:10)

It’s with this backdrop that the author introduces us to the main character of this book: Moses. But he’s just a shadow of our Lord Jesus. Like Moses, Jesus was also born with the backdrop of infanticide (Mt2). It tells us that even in the darkest of times, God is still working to accomplish his greatest salvation.

Look at 1:22. Pharaoh gave up trying to have a secretive genocide; now he’s doing it through a public decree. There are no details here of the great tragedy and grief going on, but we can only imagine how devastating it was for families with newborn baby boys. It was a really hard time for Hebrew young people even to get married. But look at 2:1. Despite the evil going on around them, these people get married anyway. And the author emphasizes that they are both Levites. Later we’re going to learn that God set apart this tribe of Israel to serve him as priests. This priestly background for Moses is part of God’s plan.

Read verse 2. Here we see another woman disobeying Pharaoh’s decree. What’s interesting here is what motivates her to do so. It says “…when she saw that he was a fine child.” What does it mean? This Hebrew word has been translated as “beautiful” (cf. Heb11:23). This word is used in Genesis to describe the appearance of both Rachel and Joseph (Ge29:17; 39:6b). So was baby Moses especially good-looking? To every mother, her baby is most beautiful, right? But this Hebrew word is also used throughout Genesis chapter 1, when God saw whatever he made, and it was “good.” Simply speaking, Moses’ mother saw that he was too good of a baby to just throw away. Maybe she could also sense God’s good purpose for him. Even in the midst of the worst, most senseless evil, God is always working out things for good (Ro8:28). Instead of focusing on the bad, we need eyes to see the good.

During the first three months of a baby’s life it’s relatively easy to hide because the baby mostly sleeps. But after that, things get noisy. Read verse 3. At first this may seem to us like a small thing. What mother would not do her best to save her baby? But this woman’s action is highlighting what faith in God looks like. Faith in God enables us to find a way when there is no longer any way. Faith in God enables us to persevere. Faith in God is also very practical. This woman could not do much, but by faith in God she found something she could do. There was no guarantee how long her efforts would last. But she was doing this in utter dependence on God. The Hebrew word for “basket” is literally the same as the word for “ark” used in Genesis 6 during the flood of Noah’s time. But this is not made out of cypress wood but out of bulrush, meaning papyrus used for weaving baskets. Just like the ark, the author describes here how the woman waterproofed her little structure for her baby. What an act of faith it was! She also found a place among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. These reeds could grow as high as 15 feet, so it was quite secluded. She didn’t send her baby down the flowing river as we might commonly think. She strategically found a place where he could be kept far away from what people could hear. Look at verse 4. It’s likely that Moses’ mother asked his older sister to do this. It was another act of faith to protect her baby. It was her faith in God that gave this woman the wisdom and the courage to do these things. And like Noah’s, this little “ark” with little baby Moses in it would become a seed of God’s judgment and salvation. It looks forward to God’s greatest acts of judgment and salvation in Jesus.

The rest of the story shows us God’s amazing providence. It just so happened that Pharaoh’s daughter discovered the baby among those reeds while she was bathing in the Nile. When she opened the basket and saw the baby crying, she had pity on him. Surprisingly, she was different from her father. She knew it was a Hebrew baby, she knew her father’s decree, but she wanted to save him. At this crucial moment, Moses’ sister, who may have been no more than 12 years old, stepped forward with a plan of her own, far wiser than her years. She offered to bring the child’s mother to nurse it. And so it happens that Moses’ mother gets paid by Pharaoh’s daughter to nurse her own son. How on earth could this happen? Clearly it was God’s work. In their culture, babies were nursed by their mothers until ages 3 or 4. Baby Moses would grow up safely with his mother until the time came for him to go and live with his adoptive mother in Pharaoh’s palace. It would be yet another moment when his mother would have to let him go and entrust him to God’s hand. And what a strange turn of events it would be! A Hebrew boy who should’ve been thrown away, raised right under Pharaoh’s nose. He’d be instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and become mighty in his words and deeds (Ac7:22). Pharaoh’s daughter named him “Moses,” meaning, “I drew him out of the water.” His name looked forward to how God would draw the whole nation out of Egypt by parting the waters of the Red Sea.

So what’s the moral of this story? Not only do we need to fear God, but also we need faith in God to find the practical things we can do, even in a hopeless situation. Let’s reflect on our lives honestly. What are we doing practically by faith in God? How can we persevere even when it seems time to give up and give in? The other lesson here is to see what God is doing. Can we see the good that God is doing and that he still wants to do? Are we willing to risk ourselves for it? Can we see the great value in doing even one seemingly small thing for God’s glory? Can we do small things by faith, simply depending on God to do the rest?