

## **ON EAGLES' WINGS**

*"I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Ex. 19:4).*

### **I. "When God Seems Absent"**

9-11-05

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Exodus 1

*TEXT: 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. (Ex 2:23-25).*

### **SERIES INTRODUCTION**

I've been gratified to have heard a few enthusiastic comments on this series of sermons from Exodus that we begin this morning. When I began thinking about this series a few months ago I had some concern about whether it would hold people's interest. The other day, secretary Phyllis said it was her favorite book and she was really excited about these sermons and I've heard other encouraging comments from others as they've seen the preaching plan for this fall.

I love the book of Exodus. It contains the story and the model of our salvation. In it we get a feel for how God's salvation works in real life. It begins with God's people groaning in bondage, under terrible oppression. They are confused, feeling forsaken, and wondering where God is in the midst of their suffering. They need to be saved. And they are questioning the truth of God's promise to their ancestors to save them. But God, true to His promise and at exactly the right time, delivers them. He patiently reveals His nature to them so they can know Him and begin to trust in Him. As He delivers them from seemingly hopeless circumstances they learn about the power of God that nothing in this world can thwart. Then, He enters into a covenant with them at Mt. Sinai and teaches them how to live in harmony with their creation. The book ends with careful instructions on worship culminating in the glory of the Lord filling the tabernacle. Old Testament scholar, Dr. Ronald Youngblood, writes, "Exodus lays a foundational theology in which God reveals His name, His attributes, His redemption, His law, and how He is to be worshiped."

Please give your attention now to the reading of God's Word in Exodus 1.

### **THE CRISIS**

The date, 9-11, will always live in our memories, won't it? Today is the fourth anniversary of that horrifying attack by terrorists on the World Trade Center in New York. Another tragedy is currently in our thoughts with what is being called America's greatest natural disaster in Hurricane Katrina. Such catastrophic events inevitably seem to bring people to the big "God questions," whether they are Christians or not. "Where was God when this happened?" Unbelievers use it as an excuse for their unbelief. Believers also struggle with the seeming absence of help, knowing God could have intervened and yet did not. Of course, the same questions come to us when we face personal problems that seem like they will wipe us out: a life threatening illness, a marriage unraveling, or when people with evil purpose come against us.

But if we have a well-informed Biblical framework, we will realize our confusion has much Biblical precedence. And in the seeming absences, for God's people, something far bigger is going on than we can imagine. It is all part of God's greater plan of salvation.

These opening chapters of Exodus should strip away any naive thinking that just because we belong to God, our lives should be free of adversity. On the contrary, it is often the case that we may face even more difficulties as God works out His salvation history in us and our world. While it is true that God has wonderful plans for our lives, that doesn't mean that they are not difficult.

Exodus begins with a reminder of how it is that the nation of Israel is in Egypt. Jacob, who's name was changed to Israel, had twelve sons. You remember the story from Genesis. Almost the last half of Genesis is taken-up with the story of Jacob and his sons. And half of that is centered upon one of Jacob's sons, Joseph, who is the reason they all end up in Egypt. The story of Joseph is filled with terrible evil: murderous betrayal by his own brothers, lies, framed by Potiphar's wife because of his virtue, imprisoned, and promises forgotten. Yet, in and through it all, in spite of evil's heyday, we see God's hand working through it all for salvation. God has placed Joseph in Egypt to be able save His people when terrible famine comes to the land of Israel. Joseph brings his father and sons all down to Egypt, 70 people in all, and they are given good land to live on. It is now 400 years later. God has used Egypt like a protecting cocoon to nurture and grow the nation of Israel within it's borders.

Now, a new Pharaoh comes to the throne for whom the history of Joseph and his valuable service in saving Egypt from famine 400 years earlier has no importance. He can only see the threat of this separate nation within his nation. So this king, in order to keep them in their place, takes away Israel's freedom and forces them into bitter slavery, providing the labor for some of Egypt's huge building projects. Through these verses we read words like "oppressed," "hard labor," "used ruthlessly," "forced labor," and "made their lives bitter."

Things go from bad to worse. The more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they multiplied (12). Fearing their sheer numbers, the king of Egypt now orders the two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, "*When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him and if it is a girl, let her live (16).*" You can see why one leading Old Testament scholar says this is the darkest moment in all of Israel's history. They are in bondage, enslaved by the most powerful nation on earth. And now, their children are to be systematically killed. Just as an aside, for the sake of you who have given birth, the Hebrew word here for "delivery stool" literally means "two stones."

Out of this darkest, most hopeless situation, God begins to move. The great salvation story of Exodus begins with two courageous midwives.

### **SHIPHRAH AND PUAH**

Midwives in that society were from the lowest of the social and economic strata. My brother,

Eugene, in his book, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places, gives significance to the fact that the first personal names to appear in this story are those of two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. Their defiance of the king's order sets in motion the paradigmatic account of salvation for all of history. We are not even told the name of the king of Egypt, the most powerful world ruler at that time. He is simply referred to as Pharaoh. "Pharaoh" literally means "Great House" and was a title for the kings of Egypt, not a personal name. There were of course many Pharaohs. So, this king is not even dignified with a name. But these two lowly midwives are named, and in the naming of Shiphrah and Puah God reveals what is really important.

We live in a world that is impressed with the big deals, the flashy, the popular, and the successful. We look to the movers and shakers for help and salvation in our world. But that rarely, if ever, seems to be God's way. We're all aware of the ancient splendors of Egypt with its pyramids, huge tombs, temples, and the Sphinx. The splendors of King Tut's tomb toured the United States 26 years ago with eight million people often standing in lines for hours to catch a glimpse of the gold, the wealth, the art—standing in wonder at the accomplishments of this ancient nation. Now the tour is back. The likely period of time covered in Exodus is only a king or two before King Tut, so you get a feel of the splendor of Egypt at this time. Isn't it amazing that the Biblical account written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by Moses ignores all this? Moses spent his first 40 years immersed in the splendor and treasures of Egypt, reared in Pharaoh's palace—so he knew it all. But, when it comes to writing salvation's story, the things that impressed the world of that day are counted as nothing.

Shiphrah and Puah stand at the head of a long list of other surprising "nobodies" in this salvation story. Next week we'll meet Jochebed, Moses' courageous mother. People like the prostitute Rahab, the foreigner Ruth, and the shepherd boy David becoming Israel's greatest king, and countless others figure prominently in the continuing story of God's salvation. The story of the birth of our Savior, Jesus, begins with two women taking center stage, Elizabeth and Mary, surprising us because of their insignificance in the culture of that day.

All this reminds us that God is in charge. His work of salvation culminating in Jesus is worked in and through the humblest agents and circumstances. As Paul later affirms,

*But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (1 Cor 1:27-29)*

The point is, God works in, around, and through ordinary and unremarkable people. That way, there can be no doubt it is God's work. Here's how Eugene puts it:

*Salvation is not imposed from above or without; it emerges out of the conditions in which we find ourselves as life is confronted with death. Shiphrah and Puah, working daily at the times and places in which human life breaks out of the womb into history, are defiant of the command to kill babies. The will to life crosses with the command to kill. The command to kill comes from the impersonal anonymity of privilege and power; the will to life comes from the marginal but very personal Shiphrah and Puah, representatives of the oppressed and powerless.*

This idea of God's saving activity emerging out of the conditions in which we find ourselves, using ordinary people is very important for us to understand. Let's just take an informal survey here this morning. How many of you were brought to salvation by a big name evangelist like Billy Graham? How many came to Christ through one of the famous TV evangelists? How many made that choice through their pastor? For the rest of you, the vast majority, I expect we'd hear about God using a parent, a grandparent, a brother or sister, a friend, or a business acquaintance—ordinary people becoming agents of God's plan in moving His kingdom forward.

Rosa Parks comes to mind— that little woman who began the Montgomery bus boycott that led into the civil rights movement. She was not trying to start any revolution. She was just tired that day in 1955 from a long day's work when she got on the bus and refused to give-up her seat to a white man— too tired to go along with the injustice of it all— a Shiprah.

William Carey is often regarded as the father of modern missions. But he failed at business and when he tried being a pastor he was denied ordination for two years because of his poor preaching. The church where he then served said their pastor continued to be “in considerable straits for want of maintenance.” Trying to supplement his income with teaching, his teaching was so poor his students deserted him for another teacher. But he had a vision for missions. When he finally went to India as a missionary in 1793, it was without denominational support. It was seven years before he baptized his first convert. Later, reflecting on his life, he wrote, “I can plod. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything.” The gift of plodding, keeping at it with small obediences in spite of failure after failure— a Puah.

Labor Day and a vacation day provided Polly and I with an opportunity for a quick visit with our family in Montana. Driving home through Coeur d'Alene, we stopped a bakery specializing in great bread. It's probably only a couple of times a year we make it through Coeur d'Alene at a time when this bakery is open, but when we can, we get a loaf or two of their wonderful bread. Originally we discovered it by accident, but ever since it has become an essential stop. This time, when they gave us a copy of their baking schedule, on the other side was a letter highlighting some blessings since Becky and Wade opened their business five years ago. Well, it blessed us because in a soft, unobtrusive way, they were acknowledging God's hand in their business. They mentioned the role of prayer and miracles of provision in help from people at critical times, and opportunities to bless hurting people in the store. Here's just one paragraph from their letter:

*The day before we opened in June of 2001, our oven stopped working. ... The problem it seemed was a thermal couple. We couldn't locate a replacement part anywhere. Wade fashioned a makeshift temporary repair, hoping it would hold until we could find the part. With the grand opening the next day, we asked our friends and family to say a prayer on behalf of our oven.... That oven has continued to work until this summer when we located a man who made a replacement part. We both consider this a blessing and a miracle.*

There is nothing “preachy” about this letter— just a quiet witness. It struck us as an offering of obedience that God could use in a powerful way. And, it also explained the peaceful, caring atmosphere we found in that place.

Shiprah and Puah can inspire us to take the ordinary duties of our lives and insist they serve

God's purposes. They call us to shun expediency and selfish gain and work in obedience to God in small, ordinary ways day in and day out. That often takes courage and commitment. But those are the building blocks of His kingdom.

## GROANING

While we are not far enough in the story to realize the full implications of what is taking place here, I've included the ending verses of the next chapter as our focal text:

*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. (Ex 2:23-25).*

Here is the assurance that God is aware of the predicament of the Israelites, He is concerned, and He will be true to what He promised. Just because things look bad and seem to be getting worse doesn't mean God doesn't care. Things are in motion, subtly, quietly, unseen by most. The Pharaoh-defying actions of Shiphrah and Puah are slowly gaining momentum in the boys being born, one of whom God will anoint to set His people free.

This should encourage us when we encounter difficulties and suffering. It does not mean that God has abandoned us. Often the fact that life is not working the way we'd like is a necessary step to make us willing to change. Israel had it good in Egypt for most of their 400 years there. Now, as God wants them to move out to give them something even better, their own nation, the Pharaoh makes things miserable for them. Otherwise, they may have never been willing to leave. God is getting them ready for His salvation.

Isn't that true for us too? I'm sure most of us can give witness to adversity that proved a blessing because of the changes it forced us into. Sometimes the changes are external. But almost always they involve issues of spiritual significance: new levels of trust in God, repentance from sin, and encountering the power of the Holy Spirit to change us from the inside out.

But all this takes time. While there are the dramatic moments in the spiritual life, most transformation of character is slow work— learning to love, gaining patience and perseverance, forging self-control. As we see the beginnings of God's Exodus deliverance here in this chapter, remember it is another 80 years before Moses leads them out and then they spend another 40 years in the desert being prepared to receive the promised land.

One reason things take so long is that God is working within the medium of our humanity. God could impose His ways and His salvation on the world, but that is not His way. Instead, He created us to partner with Him in redemption. That involves the slow work of heart-changes. There are choices we make, acts of courage, living in obedience to Christ's call. And, we become little channels of grace to our world, giving expression to the love of Jesus.

In the next few weeks, we'll come to appreciate that God has more of a problem than just getting the Israelites out of Egypt. Their hearts need changing. They need to come to know who God

*really* is. They need to learn to trust Him. And, while getting them out of Egypt is one thing, getting Egypt out of them is quite another process.

### **CONCLUSION**

Remember, God cares, is aware of our groaning, and hears our cries. He is at work in our world. Mostly it is not in the most obvious ways. But He does have his faithful Shiphrahs and Puahs living in obedience to His call. Through such people, within the conditions we find ourselves, God's purposes are realized.

What would it mean for you to join forces with Shiphrah and Puah in response to God's call? Are there little acts of courage, words to speak, and other ways to show-forth the life of Christ in the context of your world?