

The God Who Hears – Exodus 1-6 (Part 2 of 7)

"I Drew Him Out of the Nile"

Exodus 1:15-2:10

Mark Vroegop

¹⁵ Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶ "When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." ¹⁷ But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. ¹⁸ So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and let the male children live?" ¹⁹ The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." ²⁰ So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²² Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live."

¹ Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as his wife a Levite woman. ² The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months. 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. ⁴ And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him. ⁵ Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her young women walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it. ⁶ When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby was crying. She took pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children." ⁷ Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" ⁸ And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹ And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. ¹⁰ When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "Because," she said, "I drew him out of the water" (Exodus 1:15–2:10 - ESV).

This summer our family took a trip that we had been planning for years. We traveled out west, visiting the Badlands, Custer State Park, Yellowstone, and the Grand Tetons. We are one of the "strange families" that Kevin DeYoung disparages in the opening chapter of *The Hole in our Holiness*. Yes, we worked hard all year so that we can live outside and camp. It was a vacation that none of us will ever forget.

One of the places we visited was Mount Rushmore. If you've never visited this site you at least know what I'm talking about. Etched into the granite in the hills of South Dakota are the faces of four Presidents: Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln. Each of them was chosen because

of their unique contribution to the formation of our Republic. Their faces symbolize more than just their individual lives; they represent monumental moments in American history.

Today in our study of Exodus we are introduced to a “Rushmore” figure in biblical history: Moses. He is a reluctant leader who God calls to lead the nation of Israel out of Egypt and into their new identity as God’s people. He is the one who receives the Law and mediates for God’s people. God heard the cry of His people, and He delivered them through the leadership of Moses.

Exodus is About God

However, this book of Exodus is not primarily about Moses; it is about God. As I said last week, Israel is the canvas upon which God paints a portrait of His own glory. Over the next nine months, each section will show us something new about who God is and what He does. Every part of this book is another angle on God. The first six chapters of Exodus fit well under the title “The God Who Hears.” Eventually we will cover the following:

- The God Who Redeems (Exodus 7-12)
- The God Who Provides (Exodus 13-18)
- The God Who Commands (Exodus 19-24)
- The God Who is Holy (Exodus 25-32)
- The God Who is Near (Exodus 33-40)

So I hope that as we study this book together, you not just know the stories of Israel. My prayer is that you’ll know what God is like and then understand how that fits into your story.

Hopefully you’ll remember from last week that this book is important because of how foundational it is. Salvation as we know it in the New Testament dawns in Exodus. Prior to this book there was no understanding of “the Lamb of God,” Passover, unleavened bread, the Ten Commandments, the sacrificial system, the priesthood, or God as the “I AM.” This book is vital for your understanding of life-changing truths in the Bible. It even shows us the foundations of what we talked about in August with the mortification of sin: slavery to sin, freedom in Christ, positional righteousness through the blood of Jesus, and the seriousness of sin.

Our text today is Exodus 1:15-2:10, and we’ll see how **God delivers His people in dark days through surprising ways**. God has heard the cry of His people. He is on the move to deliver them, and this divine assistance will come through the birth of a baby into a very dangerous environment.

The Dark Days in Egypt

The first chapter of Exodus set the stage for us. Last week we learned that as Israel grew numerically in Egypt, they became a threat to national security. As a result, the nationalistic-minded government began to deal shrewdly with them, afflict them, oppress them, and then

ruthlessly made them work as slaves. Egypt feared that Israel would become too powerful, side with her enemies, and become an enemy in their midst.

Therefore, there was a governmental policy of oppression with the hopes of suppressing the growth and the influence of the Israelites. And when bitter conditions did not work, Pharaoh resorted to a program of killing Israelite male babies.

In verse 15 we find that the “King of Egypt” called upon two Hebrew midwives: Shiphrah and Puah. It is very interesting to note here that these women were personally named in the text. They were probably in charge of the other Hebrew midwives and were likely childless themselves. Without giving too much of the story away, it is believed that they are personally listed because of the courage that they displayed in the following verses. They are hailed as heroes and blessed by God.

Pharaoh’s instructions were clear and sinister: *“When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live”* (Ex. 1:16). It seems that Pharaoh’s first step was to quietly figure out a way for the male babies to be killed. Since word would likely spread around the Israelites if these women were suspected of actively killing babies, it seems that Pharaoh wanted these women to figure out a way to deceive the birth parents into thinking that their male babies had died in childbirth. Pharaoh, for his own protection, is advocating the private and deceptive killing of infants. Mass graves would raise too many suspicions. So killing them one at a time is better plan.

Verse 17 tells us what the midwives did: *“But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live”* Ex. 1:17 (ESV). Notice that the text says they “feared God.” This means that they had a respect and honor for obedience to God that was greater than their fear of Pharaoh. They engaged in civil disobedience, something every believer should be prepared to do if and when it is necessary. They chose to obey God rather than man. Biblical history is filled with courageous men and women who refused to violate their conscience and chose to disobey rulers who asked them to disobey God. For example, when Peter and the apostles were told to stop preaching in Jesus’ name they said, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

Rather than take the lives of innocent children, Shiphrah and Puah refused to obey the orders of a wicked ruler.

Does this sound familiar to you? It should. I cannot pass by this text without saying a few words about our own cultural issues. I read a statistic this week from our ministry partner Life Centers that 274 babies were saved from abortions because of their efforts in 2011. I hope you hear that number as more than just a statistic. Each life is important and valuable. Part of the problem is that there are no mass graves to raise our outrage. But it is a tragedy nonetheless that over a million babies a year are aborted on our country.

Further, I hope you take note of the fact that Pharaoh’s rationale sounds familiar. It is a very unnatural thing to desire the death of a defenseless infant. In order to justify the murder of these children, something has to eclipse the conscience. And in Pharaoh’s case it was the protection of

the nation. The male children had to die in order to protect their way of life. Sound familiar? Our cultural problem is not that we don't value life; our problem is that we value other things more. This was exactly the problem in Egypt. The lives of these children were expendable because there was something more important.

Finally, I want you to notice that these women were prepared to take action even at great personal risk. While culturally we are not at a point where civil disobedience is required, it feels like that day is getting closer and closer. Until that day comes, I would encourage you to do two things 1) give financially to organizations that are on the front lines of this battle, and 2) vote for people at every level of government who match your values, especially when it comes to clear biblical issues like the sanctity of life and the preservation of biblical marriage. Please understand that I am not attempting to be political here. I know that these are political issues here, but long before they were political issues they were spiritual issues. I am fairly certain that Shiprah and Puah would have used every legal means available to them before having to directly disobey Pharaoh. So should we.

In verse 18 we discover that Pharaoh learns that his plan was not working. Biblical scholars think it may have taken some time for the government to realize that there were still as many boys as there were girls. When it was clear that he was not being obeyed, he called the two women and confronted them: *"Why have you done this and let the male children live?"* (v 18).

The midwives gave an answer that some people view as a lie: *"Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them"* (v 19). Some argue that the women lied and that there was nothing wrong with it because Pharaoh, as a wicked ruler, had given up his right to be truthfully obeyed: *"a lie was told to protect innocent lives from a man who had no right to the truth."*¹ The other possibility is that the women were in fact telling the truth. The Hebrew women started giving birth without the midwives perhaps because Shiprah and Puah sent word that they ought not to use midwives or perhaps they aided delivery until the very end. Regardless, it is clear that these women made the right choice:

²⁰ So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families (Exodus 1:20–21).

God blessed the women and the nation of Israel because of their choice.

Pharaoh then ramped up his campaign of death. Rather than only use the midwives to accomplish his evil plan, he enlisted the entire nation: *"Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live"* (1:22). Pharaoh issued a nation-wide decree of genocide. No male baby would be safe. Certainly there were official military sweeps of the Israelite residents, but there was also the fear that anyone could take matters in their own hands and cast a male baby into the Nile to be drowned.

You need to take note of the reference to the Nile in Pharaoh's command. Why is this important? First, it was a convenient and easily accessible way for babies to be killed. "Throwing a baby into

¹ Philip Ryken, *Exodus – Saved for God's Glory*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Publishers, 2005) – quoting Goran Larsson, *Bound for Freedom*.

the Nile was a lot easier and quicker, involving no cleanup and leaving no evidence, than almost any other means of killing. The child would simply fall into the water and disappear – out of sight and hopefully, from the Egyptian point of view, out of mind.”² Secondly, it made the killing “easier” from a moral standpoint. The pantheistic Egyptians believed that the Nile was a god, a giver and taker of life. By throwing the infant into the Nile, the Egyptians may have believed (or were led to believe) that they were “doing the will of the gods and giving the Nile its proper due among the gods.”³ Egypt had become dark with death and it was mixed with their religious views.

This connection to the Nile and death by water is important to understand in light of what will happen later in Exodus. Turning the Nile to blood, the killing the firstborn in every family, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the drowning of Pharaoh’s army all have significant symbolic meaning. The Song of Moses picks up this nuance when it says that “Pharaoh’s chariots and his host he cast into the sea.” Even though the Egyptian army really rode into the Red Sea, from a “justice vantage point” they were cast into the sea like the babies of Israel.

You also need to know that water is often associated with evil or judgment in the Bible. The flood (Gen. 6) and the Red Sea (Ex. 14) are prime examples of this. Revelation 21 even describes the new heaven and the new earth in this way: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more” (Rev. 21:1). The Nile is more than just a river; it represents something far more significant.

When you put this together, there is a clear sense that these were the dark days in Egypt, and Exodus opens with a tragic, hopeless setting. The Israelites experienced increasing opposition, ruthless slavery, and finally a governmental policy of genocide. Like during the days of Jesus’ birth and the killing of children in Bethlehem, it is hard to imagine a more desperate situation.

These dark days in Egypt are a vital part of the story of redemption. The hopelessness of the situation makes God’s deliverance of His people even more glorious. In the New Testament, we hear a similar tone when it comes to the story of salvation. Our problem was not slavery to Egypt; it was our spiritual “deadness.”

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:1–6).

The story of Exodus is the story of redemption – in a hopeless, dangerous, and evil environment, God rescued His people. The days were dark, but God is about to move.

² Doug Stuart, Exodus – The New American Commentary, (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006), 83-84.

³ Ibid.

The Deliverer is Born

Immediately after the dark picture of chapter one, the birth of Moses is introduced. In a familiar pattern that we see in the New Testament with Jesus' birth, we have the deliverance stage set with the birth of a baby into very difficult circumstances. But we also see God's providential protection of this deliverer-baby at the hand of three women: his mother, his sister, and Pharaoh's daughter.

Verse one begins with the identification of the family lineage in which Moses was born. The child's father and mother were both from the tribe of Levi. This is important since later the tribe of Levi will be the tribe of the priests, those who were chosen by God to provide spiritual leadership to the nation. Moses will be the first of many mediator-leaders from this special tribe.

According to verse two, Moses' mother defied the Egyptian law about killing male babies, and she hid him for three months. After it was impractical and unsafe to keep him around their home, she determined to hide him in a basket – *"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"* (Ex. 2:3). The Hebrew word for "basket" is the same word that is translated "ark" as in story of the Flood.⁴ The parallels here to God's deliverance of Noah and his family (Gen. 6-8) should be obvious. Once again, God saved His people through the protection of an ark. However, this time it was through a small basket floating on the sacred Nile River.

Beyond the spiritual significance, the ark was very practical. After three months, a baby would be difficult to hide. So Moses' mother would likely put Moses in the basket during times of day when he could not be discovered or in the event of a search by Egyptian soldiers. And Miriam his sister (v 4) was posted nearby to be sure nothing happened.

What happens next is truly remarkable. Pharaoh had a large family and many outposts along the Nile River. One of Pharaoh's daughters came down to bathe in the river and discovered the basket. And after it was brought to her, she recognized that it was an Israelite baby (vv 5-6). You can imagine the uncertainty as to what would happen after Pharaoh's daughter learned it was an Israelite baby. But in God's providence, "she took pity on him."

Miriam, who was watching over the basket, quickly and wisely inquired if Pharaoh's daughter wanted someone to nurse him. The dramatic moment hinges on one word in verse eight: "Go!" And after an introduction between Moses' mother and his soon-to-be adoptive mother, Pharaoh's daughter says, *"Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages"* (v 9).

Now just consider what happened in the story. In the midst of a culture where male babies are killed, this one is put into hiding, only to be discovered by someone in Pharaoh's house. Then he is put under the protection of the royal family as his mother is paid to nurse him until one day he is delivered to Pharaoh's daughter to become her adopted son.

Only God could have orchestrated these events. It is an amazing story of His providential protection and care. Every detail was directed by a gracious God who aims to rescue His people.

⁴ Stuart, 89.

Isn't it remarkable to consider all the divinely designed details in this story but also in yours and mine? For instance, my journey to College Park began with a conversation in the summer of 1992 on a beach in Gull Lake, Michigan. I was sitting next to a professor at Cedarville enjoying a beautiful July day when I asked if he knew of a church that was looking for an intern. Eventually that led to serving at Clearcreek Chapel where I met John Street who happened to be close friends with Dr. Jim Grier. That led to a lunch with Dr. Grier where he convinced me to complete my seminary in Grand Rapids and which led to a mentoring relationship. And that relationship is what eventually led me here to College Park.

Sometimes when I think about things like this it makes me tremble because it seems like life can go one direction or another with the smallest of decisions and events. But on the other hand, when you know a kind and gracious God is behind them, you can rest in God's sovereign plan. He knows what He's doing – even down to the finest details.

This section ends with the baby being given a name with which we are familiar. However, this is the first time it is mentioned in the book:

¹⁰ When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "Because," she said, "I drew him out of the water" (Exodus 2:10).

The Egyptian name "Moses" has significant meaning. It was chosen because it sounded like the word which means to "draw out." His adoptive mother gave him this name because "she drew him out of the water" (v 10). But don't miss the intended irony here:

1. Remember what I told you before out the connection between water and judgment, trial or evil? The name Moses implies that out of a season of great hardship and trial comes one who will deliver his people. Out of the very river into which Pharaoh ordered babies to be drowned is a baby drawn out by the daughter of Pharaoh!
2. The name Moses means to "draw out." And it is by this man that the people of Israel will be drawn out to meet with God and to become His people. Moses will be the leader of a "drawn out" people.

In the midst of very dark and difficult days, God orchestrates the adoption of Moses in order to eventually deliver His people from their slavery. From the ash heap of suffering comes a glimmer of hope. Looking back you can see it so clearly, but at the time no one knew that God had already set in motion the events that would eventually lead to the liberation of His people. From the banks of some nondescript place on the Nile River, God provided a deliverer for His people.

Moses, the greatest leader of Israel, was drawn out of the very waters used to kill their children. God delivers His people from dark days in surprising ways. God had heard their cries for help.

The Other Baby Deliverer

As you read this text, you cannot help but remember the way in which God brought about the ultimate deliverance in the New Covenant through Jesus. He also came as a baby, born from the right tribe and in the right city. His birth was equally nondescript, and He was also in great danger of being killed as an infant. He too is a deliverer.

Listen to the parallels in Exodus to what we read in Galatians 4:

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God (Galatians 4:4–7).

Exodus supports the overall story of the Bible which is about the deliverance that comes through Jesus Christ. He was *"born of woman, under the law to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive the adoption as sons."* Jesus was born into this world, lived in the brokenness of humanity while committing no sin, and then died on the cross in order to provide freedom and forgiveness for people enslaved to sin.

The Israelites were enslaved physically, and God delivered them through Moses. And that story is the foundation for the greater story of God's deliverance of anyone who puts their faith and trust in Christ. Listen to how Paul said it in Colossians 1:

¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:13–14).

Jesus delivers people from the domain of darkness. It is Jesus who provides ultimate redemption. It is Jesus who frees those who put their faith in Him from the slavery of their sin.

The story of Moses is about a baby who delivered his people from the slavery of Egypt to become God's people. But the ultimate story of the Bible is about another baby, the Son of God, who dies an undeserved death on the cross so that sins of those who believe in Him could be paid.

In Exodus the deliverer is named Moses because she drew him out of the water. But in the New Testament the deliverer's name is Jesus because He saves His people from their sins.

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