

WHEN LIFE IS NO PARTY

Exodus 1:1–22

Dr. George O. Wood

Today, we begin our exposition of the Book of Exodus. It'd be impossible for us to understand this book or any book in the Bible except we enter into it in a vivified imagination. We must not simply let words of description remain as words. We must enter into the experience.

Scripture is given to us so that great events in the past should not remain unexamined. The words are given that we might reopen the experience, and by literally reopening it, gain some insight for our lives. For example, when we read Exodus 1, we see the hovels in which the people lived, the buildings they constructed with their hands, the soil they tilled through sweating long under the hot sun, the drainage ditches and canals they built, the dirtiness, the dustiness, the heat, the busyness, and the slavery. The sights and sounds and smells of ancient Egypt come alive as we read God's word.

“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 fruitful and multiplied greatly and grew exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them. Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. ‘Look,’ he said to his people, “the Israelites have become much 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

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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 hard labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their hard labor the Egyptians used them ruthlessly. The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were 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; 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. Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: ‘Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live’” (Exodus 1:1–22, NIV).

This chapter we may divide into two parts—Israel in Egypt by choice, verses 1–7, and Israel in Egypt by captivity, verses 8 through the end of the chapter. Israel really did get to Egypt by choice. We read when we connect the Book of Exodus to the Book of Genesis that it was the occasion of a famine in Palestine that initially brought Jacob and his sons to be joined with Joseph in Egypt. When the famine was over, neither the sons nor Jacob decided to return; they remained in Egypt. That eventually sets up the condition for the slavery. Israel came into Egypt by means of choice. They would become acclimated to Egypt. Settled in Egypt. Satisfied with Egypt.

I think of the 1930s, in the history of our own country, when persons came west from the Dust Bowl. Persons settled in the west became accustomed to the California climate, the life. When

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the Dust Bowl days were over, most chose not to return. They chose to stay in California. The children born after them likewise have chosen to remain. They made the switch to an urban culture or suburban culture. The living is different, the style is different. Once the cultural change has been made, people settle down and don't want to go back.

That's the way it was with Jacob and his sons. They settled in Egypt. Why go back?

It was perhaps immaterial to them as the days came and went in Egypt, that Canaan was their Promised Land. That was the land which God had given to Abraham and his generations. Jacob did not forget the promise, though. His sons might have, but he did not. When the time came for his death, he chose to be identified with the past. He said, "Let me be buried where Abraham is buried. The same place where Isaac is buried and where my wife Leah is buried. Let me go back." So they carried him in a coffin out of Egypt into Canaan.

His sons had that experience of returning to Canaan again. Would Canaan, or as we know it, modern-day Israel, have enough attraction for them that they might wish to stay there? No, just enough to bury their father and then get back to Egypt. Joseph, when he dies, prophetically also chooses to be identified with Jacob. It is his bones, which four hundred years will be carried out with the children of Israel from Egypt when they leave. As far as we know, none of the other children wished to identify with Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham.

There were changes that came to Israel as they lived in Egypt. Changes which inevitably happened as a result of their choices.

I. One key change is numerical.

We read at the beginning of Exodus that there were a total of seventy of Jacob's offspring that came into Egypt. The twelve sons in the Book of Exodus are seen rapidly as becoming a nation. It is no longer a family, it's a nation. Israel identified first as a family with God. The order in

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which the sons are listed in Exodus 1:2–3 is the order they were born to their respective mothers. The seventy, which are given as those who accompanied Jacob into Egypt, were mostly males. The writer of Scripture is not giving the chronicle of women who would have been in the group. The impact of the process is to indicate those who are alive and who are the carriers of the genetic seed of Jacob. Alive at the time Jacob comes into Egypt. These persons will double. There's been some controversy as to how many Children of Israel were in Egypt. I'll just take it as the biblical text describes—a total by the time when they're ready to come out of slightly in excess of 600,000 males. If you make 70 as representative of the group with Jacob when he comes and double the number of males every 30 years, which would be the span of a generation, by thirteen generations, or 390 years, you would have 573,000 males. As you're figuring geometrically, before you know it you're into great numbers. Thus between the twelfth and thirteenth generation, using the figure of doubling the males every thirty years, there would have been a jump from nearly 300,000 to nearly 600,000. Thus perhaps the concern on Pharaoh's part. Regarding the numerical changes, the Scriptures lightly pass over hundreds of years. Verses 1–7 describe hundreds of years of Israel in Egypt and people come and the only significance that is attached is that another generation came along. It's a tremendous thing to see from the Scripture that while generations come and go, scarcely meriting a mention of any significant accomplishment, God's purposes remain firm.

We are so uprooted in our California culture that we fail to see the breadth of years and centuries in a given place, and fail to tie in to the past and look forward to the future. So our lives might be more of an island as people here than having the kind of continuity which persons in a premedia culture might have had. Yet while one generation comes and another goes its life is not without significance, because God's purposes are being accomplished even when nothing is being

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written about the exploits of a generation. Generation after generation is buried, but God's call will still go on.

II. There are cultural changes which occur also with Israel in Egypt.

Jacob's family, when they left Canaan and entered Egypt, entered a far more advanced society or civilization they had been used to. They came to a society, which because of the particular climate and the river flow and the flooding of the Nile River, was very advanced in agriculture, and they settled there. In fact, four crops could be planted in a year in cycles, in the twelve-month period, thus making it very fertile in the farm area, the delta of the Nile. They came to a society that was very advanced in engineering. Canaan's buildings were nothing like Egypt. A thousand years before the Exodus of Israel, the pyramids had already been built. Great cities were being built. Canaan knew nothing of the engineering feats of the Egyptians. There was also scientific endeavors, one of which we know of, the mummies. In Israel, they *buried* the dead, but in Egypt, they *embalmed* them first.

They come into this more advanced society and inevitably changes are going to take place.

Jacob's family is given settlement in the best of the land of Egypt, according to Genesis 47:6.

They're given settlement in the best of the land because they are herders of cattle and sheep and the Egyptians did not prefer the herding type of life. In the wilderness of Canaan, in the more primitive area of Canaan, perhaps they developed toughness and resilience. But in Egypt it may be they lose some of the toughness.

We know from the Scriptures the cultural changes bring changes in their diet. For example, when they're going through the wilderness and they are cut off from the Egyptian delicacies they begin to cry out to return to the foods of Egypt. They can't get used to a stringent diet. Just like all you diet watchers know how tough it is to break off from all the nice foods you've been eating. In the

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wilderness march they resented the lack of gourmet delights. So Numbers 11:5 finds them saying, “We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.” They had gotten used to that.

The easy life in Egypt which they enjoyed for some years held for them the potential for great spiritual danger. There comes a time when as a result of their choice they are in Egypt and made slaves. They do not have the ability to escape that. The easy life always holds potential for damage. You may be in this category—in a sure position, an increasing income, prospects that are brightening, goals that you had in the material area which are now being realized in your own life. The possibility exists that with the softening or the advancing of the material comes a softening of certain fibers of your heart. Goals and dreams that you had spiritually and morally as a younger person so easily can be laid aside. In Egypt, Israel settles down to an easy kind of life. They will then be made slaves and will have to toughen. And the toughening is necessary if they are to go through the wilderness. First the slavery to get them back into discipline.

III. There is another change, however, that happens to Israel in Egypt, and that is a spiritual or religious change.

Of those seen entering Egypt in the Scripture, only Jacob and Joseph are seen as having faith. And even Joseph’s faith undergoes the effect of being married to the daughter of the priest. She therefore would not have shared his Hebrew tradition or faith.

We know from the Scripture that when Israel was in Egypt they began worshipping gods other than the one God, whom Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob served. They did not have the Bible. All they had in the way of religious knowledge was what was passed down from one generation to the next. But what if there comes a generation that does not transmit the story, which has been learned? What if somebody didn’t communicate that? And generations began to grow up who

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knew nothing of God's dealings in the past. It is important to transmit the faith that you have as a believer to your children, so that the faith might be carried on. Transmission is crucial. When the transmission process is cut off for a generation or generations then gradually something else comes in its place. We never read of Israel in Egypt calling out to Jehovah God. Moses didn't even know who God was, so that he even had to ask Him His name. It was a crying they made when they were in slavery in Egypt but to Him that they knew not. Thus the writers of Scripture will later describe how they were told to put away the gods their fathers served beyond the River (the Nile).

Ezekiel cries out centuries later the message of God concerning idolatry: "I said to them, 'Each of you, get rid of the vile images you have set your eyes on, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.' But they rebelled against me and would not listen to me; they did not get rid of the vile images they had set their eyes on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in Egypt" (Ezekiel 20:7-8). Here's God speaking centuries later saying that His attitude toward the religious idolatry of Egypt was such that He was ready to judge them as well as Egypt. Israel was never saved from Egypt because they was good or because they merited deliverance. Or because they had shown that they stayed true to God in the midst of difficult times. Israel was delivered from Egypt because God had made a covenant, which He was not going to go back on. God had made a promise, which He was not going to forget. That promise was to Abraham that He would cause from his seed a race to develop which would settle in the land, and God, for the sake of His own name, would bring Israel out.

How easy it is to become dislocated. People move from one community to the next. In one community they've been vitally involved in the work of the Lord and serving the Lord. All of a

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sudden in a new community they find themselves in strange circumstances and environment and may just leave off. Once having been faithful to the worship of the Lord, faithful in the work of the church, faithful in loving the Lord, now in a new place in a strange place it's all put aside.

When it's put aside, not only does that generation suffer, but generations yet to come.

IV. Israel is in Egypt by choice. Its choice turns to captivity.

There was really no future for Israel in Egypt. Even if they had not gone into slavery. Israel would need to be in the land of Canaan for priests and prophets and kings to emerge and eventually the Messiah himself. These aspects of nationhood could not develop while Israel was somewhere else. It needed to come into being as a nation, to make the translation from a family and a people to a society where God would be ministered to, where there would be priests.

Where God would speak to persons where there would be prophets. Where there would be rulership and kings, where the Messiah Himself would later come embodying all these roles of prophet, priest and king. Therefore it is out of Egypt that God must call His people in order that His purposes might be accomplished. Israel must come out of Egypt if Christ is to be born. To Abraham God had told that captivity would come. Now God, for His own name's sake, will turn Pharaoh's action of slavery into eventual good for the people of God. That which oppresses them now will become the means by which God awakens them to be led out and to want deliverance and to want out of Egypt. As someone has said well, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, but shouts at us in our pain." Israel does not want out of Egypt until they are in pain. I would not be so callous to think that every affliction which happens, or even the majority, are directly sent from the hand of God. But God's judgments can often be acts of mercy, which He uses at last to shout to us that in the pain we might really hear Him and be sensitive to Him and feel Him. It is in Israel's pain of slavery that they come to long for something else.

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It may be that you're a captive to something, and in the pain of that God is bringing you to say, "There is another way for me, the way of the Lord." Sometimes we are embarrassed or feel ill at ease to come to God when we're in trouble. We say, "Lord I'm taking advantage of You. I didn't serve You when everything was going ok. Now that things are really bad I'm coming to You. I couldn't do that to You. I won't presume upon You." But you can. That's the great thing about the gospel of Jesus Christ. About the nature of God. He says, "It's ok. I will accept you in your day of trouble. If you neglected Me all the time when life was good My heart was grieved, but come to me now. I would you rather have you come to me on any terms than you stay away from me."

There are three phases to Israel's captivity in Egypt which are described.

A. The first phase is that when Pharaoh sees that they are multiplying he brings them into a position of slavery. That is described in verses 8–14. Pharaoh's name literally means "big house." The man in the big house was the first, but certainly not the last, to claim a "Jewish conspiracy" in order to bring about an anti-Semitic type of action. He said, in effect, that the Jewish people are growing and growing and before you know it they're going to take the place over. If we don't check them now we're going to be lost in the future. Therefore ,let's have a persecution, let's take care of the situation, let's take care of the Jewish question. Let's take care of the Jewish problem. Let's do something about it. Pharaoh is the first. He is certainly not the last.

The whole emergence of the anti-Jewish feeling begins to surface here. Pharaoh has no fear of God. He's only afraid for his position, although Israel has never given him any reason for feeling they might rise up against him. It may be possible at this time that because of a change in dynasty that the Pharaoh currently serving is an Egyptian. There was a time when Egypt was

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ruled by Pharaohs who were non-Egyptian, invaders from the northeast. That group had been overthrown. Perhaps the antforeign feeling was still very strong and being directed against Israel.

One thing is certain from this lesson. When any person moves in a way such as Pharaoh moved to so clearly violate the law of God, to so clearly bring slavery upon someone else, that eventually the wheels of justice of God grind and that person who is active in judgment himself experiences judgment. Exodus is a great lesson. Scriptures are saying to us over and over again that the tyrants of this world may rule for a while but God's hand will eventually rule them.

Injustice may rule for a while, but there will be a time in which God smashes the injustice and brings justice. Exodus is saying to us that God will judge a nation which practices injustice. God will judge a nation and people which tolerate slavery. God will judge a nation and people which tolerate the kinds of things which are unacceptable to Him. In this nation today we are still paying the consequences of our own wrong and sinful acts of slavery. It is well to remember that some of the mistakes we see in Scripture have been repeated in our own nation as well and we continue to reap a harvest of what was sown in the past.

Pharaoh's first strategy was to bring them under bondage, thinking that somehow might cut the birthrate. Thinking that if he diminishes the quality of life, people will quit caring, quit loving, and quit having families. But the opposite becomes the case. When life is its bleakest the only thing that one has is personal relationships. When you have no money, when you have no houses, when you have no security, what you have is someone else. When you have people, those are your riches. It's no wonder that Israel continues to grow.

B. Therefore Pharaoh institutes a second procedure to have the male babies killed by the midwives, whose names mean "Beauty" and "Splendor." A "midwife" literally is one who helps

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to bear. These midwives, when faced with the whole issue of killing the male babies of the Israelite women, defer.

The command “Thou shalt not kill,” the Fifth Commandment, had not yet been inscribed on tablets of stone but it had already been inscribed on their hearts. They feared God. They may not have known much of God because, again, they did not have the Bible, they did not have writings. But they knew that the God who is one is against the taking of life. It would be unthinkable to them, as to us, to take a baby and kill it. So these midwives reckoned that to do that was an affront against the very God who is the Creator, and they deferred.

They got into trouble with Pharaoh for this. Evidently the process involved here was this: The baby, when it was born, was put on a stone stool by the midwife and then she went to tell the father if it were a son. Evidently it was during this whole process that instead of the midwives being expected to go tell the father, they were to kill the child. The midwives were called before Pharaoh, because Pharaoh sees his strategy is not working. The midwives used part truth and part situational ethics. The Hebrew women may have been more vigorous than the Egyptians. But that was a pretext. The midwives had chosen not to participate. So they were really giving Pharaoh the runaround.

In a day when moral revelation is more advanced maybe they would have found a different response. But without judging them in respect to their partial falsehood, God says, “I recognize where their heart is, where their fear is; they fear Me more than they fear Pharaoh and they’re willing to take this upon themselves.” So He prospers them. God rewards them for their loyalty, I think, rather than for their dishonesty.

As for Pharaoh, he is violating a fundamental human law, the law of life. It’s striking how this can happen, how a person can become hard so as to think nothing of murdering babies. But it’s

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not surprising if you look seriously at life as it is today. It is quite conceivable that the Pharaoh who ordered the death of babies himself had a baby. It is quite possible that the Pharaoh who ordered unsympathetically that the children of another race and another class were to be killed thought entirely differently about children close to him. It's possible on the one hand he could be iron-fisted and emotionless, yet toward his own full of emotion and full of pity.

How different it is to have one of our own affected by tragedy than to watch a television report where people are bombed out of existence, then followed by a toothpaste commercial. We live in a society where it is so easy, like Pharaoh, to become impervious, insensitive to human suffering and to human sorrow. It's quite easy if we're of one race to feel sympathetic if something happens affecting a member of our race, but to feel totally unsympathetic if it affects someone of a different race or a different nation or different culture.

Pharaoh's problem is that within his own family and culture he can be very loving and very sympathetic but towards someone who is different he has no feelings at all. His sympathies do not leap over class boundaries. He is an antiexample compared with God.

C. His third stratagem, when the first two do not work, is that he orders Egyptians to kill all the Hebrew male babies by throwing them in the river Nile. That same river which watered their crops, the same river in which they bathed, the river that was an object of worship for them, that river was to become the graveyard of the Hebrew male children. Notice that elsewhere in the Book of Exodus, when God's judgment comes upon Egypt, it does not come simply upon Pharaoh's house. It comes upon all of Egypt, for all of Egypt became associated with Pharaoh. God's judgment is executed upon the whole of the land.

What shall we make of this introductory chapter of Exodus in terms of some additional personal application to our lives? There are two things that really stand out to me. Both of them relate to

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the nation of Israel. They are simply this. Even when we have forgotten God, God has not forgotten us. Israel for centuries can go without having the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob living in its midst. It can forget even the nature of God, so that Moses must ask who God is. But all along God never forgets who His people are. Israel may stop loving God, but God never stops loving them. Just as you may stop loving God or not love God at all, but God never stops loving you. For God so loved the world that He gave Himself. God loves.

Hosea the prophet tells us this beautiful description of the delivery of the Israelites from Egypt. He says that “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son...I led them with cords of human kindness” (11:1,4). Israel, although in Egypt for four centuries, is seen by God through the words of the prophet as not an old person, but as a young child. A child which is being reformed. A child which is remembered, which is loved. He’s drawing with bonds, ropes of compassion. An earthly father would take his child and put his child in a wagon and tie a rope to it and draw the wagon. A drawing of love, playing with the child. So God takes His love and uses it as ropes to draw His children, His people out of Egypt. God loves. God loves you deeply. God loves you no matter if you’ve forgotten Him. God loves you no matter if you’ve stopped loving Him. God remembers you and God loves you. And God seeks to draw His people out. That is how we can look at the Book of Exodus from the New Testament perspective. For the Book of Exodus, it was God drawing Israel out. But in the New Testament and the work of Jesus Christ, it is God attempting to draw all men unto Himself. It is God seeking to draw each of us out of the chains of spiritual slavery, out of the chains of spiritual disobedience, out of the chains of ignorance and relationship to who God is, and drawing us into full knowledge of who God is and what He wants to do and what salvation He offers. God remembers, God loves, God knows

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your identity as a person. That is the God of which the Scriptures speak. And whom we worship here today. And who lovingly draws His people to Himself and to freedom.

Closing Prayer

Holy Spirit of God, we give thanks for the eternal nature which is Yours. You are ever seeking to bring us out of slavery into Canaan, into promise, into fulfillment. Seeking to tap the unrealized potential in our lives that has not yet been developed and bring it into completion. Seeking to bring us from the unhappiness of self centeredness and godlessness to the fulfillment of joy. Seeking to let us know that you are, that we who had in the natural no memory of You, no knowledge of You, should by the demonstration of Your power come to know who You are. That we too might have a personal “exodus,” an exodus from sin and death. Lord, You bring that to us. When we come to You, You bring us on an Exodus from sin and there is a point when You will complete that work by bringing us out from the power of the captivity of death. You are Lord over all things and You have power over the enemy represented in Pharaoh, the sin represented in captivity, and the death represented in the Red Sea. You have power. We give You thanks that You are calling us to Yourself. *Is God calling you out of bondage and do you wish to come with Him out of the bondage of sin, out of the bondage of death? And do you want to receive Jesus Christ personally into your life through a confession of faith in Him? God has put you here today to give you a call to freedom!* Lord we give this to You. You are the discernor of the secrets of the human heart. We commit each one here to Your care and Your love. In Jesus’ name. Amen.