

God vs. Pharaoh

Exodus 1:8-22

What are you willing to do in order to make it to the top? Or if you're already there, to stay at the top?

This week it was revealed that Wells Fargo Bank employees had opened 2 million fake accounts in clients' names. They lied and committed fraud, taking advantage of customers, in order to make it to the top, or stay on top. "Employees . . . said they were pressured to meet unrealistic sales goals and that they opened the bogus accounts so they wouldn't lose their jobs."¹ Meanwhile, "the head of the division where the fake accounts were created . . . is set to walk away with \$124 million in stocks and options, when she retires later this year."²

Last year Martin Shkreli became famous as the guy who bought a pharmaceutical drug that used to cost \$13.50 a pill, and then raised the price to \$750 a pill.³ He made it to the top, as epitomized by his eccentric purchase of the sole copy of a new Wu Tang Clan album, which he is so far unwilling to share with the world. But at what cost? At the expense of suffering people.

Sometimes people make it to the top out of hard work and true service. They find a way to contribute to society and secure a better life not only for themselves but for others. Success is not intrinsically evil.

But sometimes the easiest way to make it to the top, and to stay at the top, is to keep other people down. We have this vision or dream for our lives. And anything that gets in the way of that dream becomes a threat. We dream of a successful career; but a baby right now could jeopardize that. We dream of a quality education for our child, but that means lobbying to keep minority children from a low-scoring district from getting in. We dream of a certain lifestyle, but protecting that lifestyle means ignoring those around us who are hurting or in need.

It's not hard to see what's wrong with that picture. But what we don't often realize is that when we pursue our dreams, our own kingdom and glory, at the expense of others, we're not just using or exploiting people, we are setting ourselves up against the plan and promises of God.

God is a God of life. His plan for creation is one of human flourishing. "Be fruitful and multiply," as we talked about last week. And when we work against the flourishing of others for

¹ Matt Egan and Chris Isidore, "Wells Fargo CEO denies orchestrated fraud in accounts scandal," *CNN Money*, Sept. 22, 2016. Available at: <http://money.cnn.com/2016/09/20/news/companies/wells-fargo-ceo-apology/>.

² Egan and Isidore.

³ See James Hamblin, "Pharma Bro Is the Face of U.S. Health Care," *The Atlantic*, Sept. 23, 2015. Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/09/martin-shkreli-in-the-mirror/406888/>.

the sake of our own success, we are not just taking advantage of people, we are opposing the plan of God.

This is what we see in our passage this morning, Exodus 1:8-22. Last week we looked at the prologue to the book, vv. 1-7, which gives us the context for understanding the story of Exodus and the meaning of salvation. God's work of salvation is designed to fulfill his plan for creation and promises in covenant. What God planned for creation—that people made in his image would be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth—a plan compromised by human sin and rebellion, God promised to restore through a covenant with his people, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And Exodus began by showing us God's faithfulness to this promise, v. 7: "But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them."

But when we come to v. 8, we meet a new king in Egypt, who sees God's faithfulness and the flourishing of Israel as a threat.

When God's Plan Threatens Our Plan (1:8-10)

Verse 8:

Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." (1:8-10)

Pharaoh, because of his ignorance of Israel's past, makes an observation of Israel's present, that will forever change Israel's future.

He's ignorant of Israel's past: he does not know Joseph. As we talked about briefly last week, Joseph, Jacob's son, was the reason both Egypt and Israel survived a seven-year famine. God gave Joseph the wisdom to not only interpret Pharaoh's dream that a famine was coming, but also to plan for it in such a way that Egypt prospered and people were preserved, including Joseph's family, who came to Egypt as refugees.

The new king in Egypt doesn't know this about Joseph or Israel. He's ignorant of their past. And so he makes an observation about Israel's present. He sees that "the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us," and he's afraid they will "multiply." What's interesting here is that the Hebrew word translated "**many**" and "**multiply**" in v. 9 is the same word as "**multiply**" in v. 7; and the word for "**mighty**" in v. 9 is the same word as "**strong**" in v. 7. In other words, what is describes the fulfillment of God's promises in v. 7 is interpreted as a threat by Pharaoh in vv. 9-10.

And so Pharaoh makes a decision that will forever change Israel's future. He decides that he must stop Israel from gaining strength or multiplying, in order secure his own kingdom and glory. Verse 10 again: "Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

Pharaoh has a dream, a plan, a vision for his kingdom. The greatness of Egypt. To be on top, and to stay on top, as the greatest power in the world. And the flourishing of ancient Israel, which ironically is designed to be a blessing to all nations (cf. Gen. 12:1-3; 18: 18), is seen as a threat to that plan. What if they get so big that they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land? What if they no longer contribute to our greatness, our plan?

But what Pharaoh doesn't realize is that by oppressing Israel he is not just opposing a people; he is setting himself up against God. He is actively trying to stop God's plan from being fulfilled. Which means that not only is the future of Israel at stake; the fulfillment of God's plan for creation and all his promises to his people hangs in the balance. The scene is set not merely for a battle between Pharaoh and Israel, but for a cosmic battle between Pharaoh and God. And Pharaoh doesn't stand a chance.

But he thinks he can outsmart God. He says, "come, let us deal shrewdly...." He thinks he's crafty enough to thwart God's plan in pursuit of his own plan. Which is the definition of stupid. It's like trying to stop a train by standing in the tracks.⁴ That's not going to end well for Pharaoh.

But that's what we do whenever we put the glory of our own kingdom or dreams ahead of the glory of God. And all the more so when we pursue our kingdom at the expense of others. We fail to realize that there is no opposition in heaven or on earth that can stop God from accomplishing his plan through his people.

The Politics of Pharaoh and the Foolishness of Opposing God (1:11-22)

That doesn't mean Pharaoh won't try. So in vv. 11-22 we see the politics of Pharaoh, as he adopts two tactics to try and stop Israel from multiplying and gaining strength, each of which he attempts in two ways.

The Oppression of Israel through Slave Labor (1:11-14)

We see the first tactic in vv. 11-14: oppress Israel with hard labor. Verse 11: "Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses." Here is where we see the harsh history of Israel's slavery begin. To go from v. 7, finally becoming a people as God promised you would be, to being enslaved and oppressed, is not only a matter of physical brutality; it is an attack on their dignity, on their very humanity. As one author writes, "Under a regime of slavery, subjects become objects. The Hebrews, who have just been identified as a people, are in the process of losing their identity. They are slaves of another, not a people in their own right."⁵

But the irony is that as brutal and painful as Israel's enslavement was, it doesn't work. It doesn't accomplish what Pharaoh sought to accomplish. Verse 12: "But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel." To go from becoming a great people to becoming an enslaved people might *look* like God is losing. It might *look* like God's promises have failed. But there is no opposition in heaven or on earth that can stop God from accomplishing his plan through his people.

⁴ Shout out to "What's in the Bible" vol. 4.

⁵ Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 29.

And so Pharaoh doubles down. The Egyptians are afraid—they are afraid of losing control, afraid for their national security with all these foreigners in their midst. So what do they do? They act out of their fear, and increase the severity of Israel’s enslavement in vv. 13-14. And the brutality and heaviness of their oppression is emphasized by the repetition of the Hebrew word for “work,” “slavery,” or “service”—five times in these two verses: “So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel **work as slaves** and made their lives bitter with hard **service**, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of **work** in the field. In all their **work** they ruthlessly made them **work as slaves**.”

Even though Pharaoh stands no chance at outwitting God, that doesn’t mean he’s incapable of doing severe damage to God’s people. The suffering is real. And it’s wrong.

But these verses not only reveal the gravity of Israel’s suffering; they also clarify the heart of the problem: not slavery *per se*, but *to whom Israel is enslaved*. The same word used to describe Israel’s hard service to Pharaoh in vv. 13-14 is also used later to describe Israel’s *service of worship* to the LORD in ch. 3:12 and 4:23 (and a whole bunch of other places).⁶ Pharaoh steals from God the service that rightly belongs to him. To serve Pharaoh is bondage; to serve the LORD is true freedom. To serve Pharaoh is to be subject to dehumanization; to serve the LORD is to find out what it truly means to be human. And so as one author puts it, God “is not merely intent on liberating slaves but on reclaiming worshipers.”⁷ There’s only one God, only one King worth serving, and it’s not Pharaoh!

But Pharaoh’s not convinced. And so when his first tactic to stop Israel’s flourishing fails, he resorts to an even more brutal and dehumanizing tactic: *murder*.

The Oppression of Israel through Murder (1:15-22)

In his first attempt, Pharaoh tries to be subtle and secretive. He speaks to two Hebrew midwives, responsible for delivering babies, and tells them that if the baby is a boy, kill it; if it’s a girl, let it live. His new plan is to weaken Israel’s potential for uprising by depleting the nation of men—soldiers. What he fails to realize is that he’ll also be weakening his slave labor force.

And that’s only one of the ways we see Pharaoh’s foolishness displayed in these verses. The great king of Egypt who thought he could outsmart God gets served by a couple of lowly Hebrew women. Women whom the author dignifies by telling us their names—Shiphrah and Puah—something he *never* does for either this Pharaoh or his successor. Women who display the very virtue that Pharaoh lacks, the true definition of wisdom: *the fear of God*.

This is what the author emphasizes in vv. 17 and 21—their fear of God. It’s what motivates them to refuse to comply with Pharaoh’s murderous plot. “But the midwives *feared God* and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live” (1:17). And it’s what God recognizes and rewards. “And because the midwives *feared God*, he gave them families” (1:21).

This is real wisdom—the fear of the LORD. That’s what Proverbs tells us (e.g. Prov. 9:10). This is what’s needed when we’re tempted to prioritize our own kingdom at the expense of others, in

⁶ See also Exod. 7:16, 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 8, 24, 26; 12:25.

⁷ C. J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 270.

opposition to God. It's what's needed when we threatened by others to comply with their kingdom in opposition to God. The fear of God is what keeps us from acting like Pharaoh, and what guides us when we fall into the hands of a Pharaoh.

So what does it mean to fear God? Fearing God simply means recognizing that God is God, and I am not. It means recognizing that God is uniquely worthy, supremely powerful, and has an unqualified right to rule his earth and accomplish his plan. It means that instead of working against God's plan for human flourishing, I work with it. Instead of opposing his plan to bless all people through his chosen people, Israel, a plan he fulfills through Christ, I trust in it. Fearing God stops me from acting like God, which frees me to serve God and truly live.

The midwives, whom Pharaoh has enslaved and commanded to comply with his murderous plot, instead live as free women, and choose to serve God. At great risk to their own lives. In fact, you could say that without the defiance of these two women, God's great plan of salvation for all nations could have fallen apart. But they knew what Pharaoh didn't know, that even if it cost them everything, *there is no opposition in heaven or on earth that can stop God from accomplishing his plan through his people*. And not only did God protect the midwives from Pharaoh through what was really a rather flimsy explanation (vv. 18-19), Pharaoh's second tactic also failed to accomplish his goal. Verse 20: "And the people multiplied and grew very strong."

But the chapter ends on a cliff hanger. Verse 22 introduces Pharaoh's second attempt to carry out his second tactic of murder. And this time, instead of relying on Hebrew midwives, Pharaoh commands all his people to throw any male Hebrew baby they see into the Nile River. His murderous plot comes out of the shadows and into broad daylight. National public policy. A plot that threatens not merely to end a people, but to overturn God's entire plan for creation. Because if Israel is cut off, God's promise to Abraham will fail. And if God's promise to Abraham fails, there will be no Christ, no Messiah, no hope. Only darkness, decay, and death.

We have to wait till next week to find out what happens with this second attempt. (Yes, it's okay to read ahead.) But as we've already seen in this chapter, just because things take a sudden turn south, doesn't mean God is no longer at work, or that his plan has failed. We've seen in this chapter that the suffering and hardship Pharaoh inflicts is very real. But we've also seen that he is a downright fool to think that he is crafty enough to thwart God's plan in pursuit of own kingdom and glory.

The Politics of Pharaoh and the Hope of Christ

And it's easy to look at Pharaoh and say, "Wow, how stupid is he?" And we should. Or even to say, "Man that is so obviously wrong." And it is. But the reality is that none of us are immune from the politics of Pharaoh, the temptation to prioritize our own kingdom at the expense of others, in opposition to God.

The politics of Pharaoh are alive in every age and every heart. We see it in our government, on both the right and on the left. It's interesting how you can hear echoes of Pharaoh's program in the official party platforms of both conservatives and liberals today. The kind of fearmongering that whipped Egypt into a terrified frenzy over what these refugees in their midst might do if we don't put them in their place and control them, and treat them like a problem to be managed rather than people to care for and love—Pharaoh might as well have been wearing a hat that said

“Make Egypt Great Again.” On the other side, the callous disregard for human life in its most vulnerable form, that would use medical professionals to take life instead of protect it, that would justify the murder of infants for the sake of personal security—that’s *written into* the party platform on the left.

The politics of Pharaoh are alive and well today. In businesses, in schools, in churches, and in every single one of our hearts. We all want to be king. We all want threats to our kingdom eliminated, or at least subverted. We are always at risk of setting up our own kingdom, or being coopted by the kingdoms of others, which is to set ourselves up against the kingdom of God.

So what do we do? We follow the model of the Hebrew midwives. *We fear God*. We recognize that he is God, and I am not. That he is uniquely worthy, supremely powerful, and has an unqualified right to rule his earth and accomplish his plan. The fear of God is what keeps us from acting like Pharaoh, and what guides us when we fall into the hands of a Pharaoh. The fear of God moves us to search our hearts and repent of our selfish ways. To seek forgiveness for our sin against God and others. The fear of God points us to *the gospel of Jesus*. That’s where the story of Exodus is going. That’s where the promises to Abraham are fulfilled. That’s where God’s plan for creation is accomplished.

The reality is, as much as we might want to renounce the politics of Pharaoh and contribute to the flourishing of life, we can’t do it on our own. We’re already guilty and deserving of God’s judgment, and the sin in our hearts will find a way to coopt every attempt to love, and spoil it. We need to be cleansed. We need to be forgiven. We need a new heart. And for that, we need a Savior.

And that’s where the story of Exodus points us—not only to God’s great act of salvation for his people Israel, but to the greater act of salvation for all people through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Lamb who was slain, whose blood cleanses us, who sets us free to serve God and not Pharaoh. To work for life, not against it. To put others ahead of ourselves. To replace the politics of Pharaoh with the politics of Jesus.

Think about Pharaoh’s agenda in Exodus 1 in contrast to the Jesus’ Beatitudes in Matthew 5.

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who are broken and bankrupt, as opposed the proud, self-confident, and domineering.
- Blessed are those who mourn over the brokenness of this world, not those who contribute to it.
- Blessed are the meek, who trust God with the outcome, rather than use force and coercion and violence to get results.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for all to be made right, instead of complying with unjust systems or withholding justice from others.
- Blessed are the merciful, the compassionate, those willing to love at great cost to self, not those who withhold mercy for their own personal gain.
- Blessed are those whose hearts are pure, not blinded by sin.

- Blessed are those who work for peace and wholeness in life, not those who divide and conquer.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted for doing what is right, not those who oppose them.

This is the life we are called to. This is a vision for human flourishing. This is what God saves his people *for*—that we might no longer serve ourselves or Pharaoh, but become servants of God. This is a vision that is only possible through a relationship with our Savior, Jesus, who alone can reconcile ungodly sinners with a holy God.

This is God's vision for life. And it will prevail. There is no opposition in heaven or on earth that can stop God from accomplishing his plan through his people. And praise God for that. Because there is no other plan that offers real life, true freedom and blessing, hope for new and better world, than the gospel of Jesus.