

This is Our Story: Fruitfulness Through Suffering

This morning we will start off a new series in the book of Exodus. Pastor Brian has asked me to begin the series today, and he will finish the “what if Jesus was serious?” Series next Sunday and then we will come back to this new Exodus series again in 2 weeks.

Before we get into the Scripture for this morning, I would like to provide some background to the book of Exodus. Exodus, means “way out,” and it is the 2nd book in the Old Testament. **The traditional Hebrew name of Exodus is actually “These are the Names,”** and the reason for the differences in the two titles is the English title, “Exodus,” was derived from the early Greek translation called the Septuagint, but the Hebrew titles of the first five books of the Bible, called the Torah, were taken from the opening words of the text. The reason for this was because the texts of the Torah were compiled into a single rolled up scroll **(Picture)** that was meant to be presented as one piece of literature. The beginnings and endings for each of the first 5 books of the Bible introduce key thoughts or passages that propel the narrative forward and connect to the next book of the Torah. They did this to let the reader know that the

Torah needed to be read and interpreted as one unified narrative where all of the stories connect to each other. So if you, in your own studies, want to read any of the first five books of the Bible separately, you should go back and read the first and last chapter of the preceding book because it will give you a few signposts for how you should approach the next book. We will see that when we get into the first chapter of Exodus in a few minutes.

Continuing with the background of Exodus— **the main idea of Exodus is the holy God calling out and separating a unique and holy people for himself from the peoples of the world.** The book begins with the burgeoning Israelites enslaved under harsh oppression in Egypt. God hears their cry and begins to act on his covenant promise to Abraham by raising up Moses, who would become God's mediator to both the Egyptians and the Israelites. In the deliverance from Egypt, God shows how both he and his people are separate and unique in the world by singling them out from the Egyptians, introducing his name to them, and promising a good homeland for them in a land occupied by ungodly

people. The holy and unique nature of the Israelites and their God are established through the ten plagues, the Passover event, the parting of the Red Sea, the miraculous provision of manna in the wilderness, and all of the events at the mountain. The covenant laws that we'll hear about later in the series, with the sacred tabernacle and the priesthood, all flow from the promise made by God to his people with the heart of making them a holy, unique people set apart in the world by their holy, one-of-a-kind God. The covenant law and the way that God reveals himself, in power and might, with justice and compassion, in miraculous provision and phenomenal guidance, and as true to his promises, separate God from all other gods as a unique and holy God. There is no one like him in all the earth. And **his people are to be a peculiar people on the earth with a God-given purpose, a God-given destiny in a world of divine order, who are not destined to roam around lost and enslaved in an ungodly and chaotic world.** That is the main idea of Exodus— the holy, one-of-a-kind God calling, redeeming, and separating for himself a unique and holy people out from the ungodly

people of this world. And the Exodus narrative is a clear foreshadow of the redeeming work of Jesus on the cross.

Now for a little bit of a frame before we get into Exodus, let's look at Genesis 1:28- remember, if we want to study a single book from the Torah we should go back and look at the first and last chapter of the preceding book. So in the first chapter of Genesis, **God created mankind in his own image and in verse 28, "God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and rule over it."** Keep that in mind. Now let's turn toward the end of the last chapter of Genesis, chapter 50:18-19, in particular verse 19. This is a very important interaction between Joseph and his brothers after Jacob, their father, died. If you haven't heard Joseph's story leading up to this, Joseph had been sold as a slave when he was a boy by his jealous brothers and he was carried away to Egypt. Now God's favor was with Joseph and in time he became a prominent governor in the land of Egypt. So Joseph and all of his brothers remained in Egypt, and after Jacob their father died, Joseph's brothers came to him asking for forgiveness for treating him so badly. In Genesis 50:18 they threw

themselves down before him and said, “we are your slaves,” but listen to this, **Joseph said to them, vs. 19, “don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”** — you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish his purposes for the salvation of his chosen people. So keep these two thoughts in your mind— one, God’s blessing on mankind and his command for them to be fruitful and multiply, and two, God’s turning what was meant for harm into good to bring about his life-giving purpose on this earth for his people.

Now, let’s turn to Exodus 1, this story picks up after Joseph had passed away. I am going to read the whole first chapter and then dive a little deeper into a few of the key concerns from this story. (**Scripture**

Exodus Ch. 1)

These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each with his family: ² Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; ³ Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin; ⁴ Dan and Naphtali; Gad and Asher. ⁵ The descendants of Jacob numbered seventy in all; Joseph was already in Egypt.

⁶ Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, ⁷ but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.

⁸ Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. ⁹ “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. ¹⁰ 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.”

¹¹ So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites ¹³ and worked them ruthlessly. ¹⁴ They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.

¹⁵ The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, ¹⁶ “When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.” ¹⁷ The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. ¹⁸ Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?”

¹⁹ The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.”

²⁰ So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

²² Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: “Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ex 1:1–22.

We won't be able to get into every part of this chapter, but let's analyze a few key parts to see what is happening here. This story is the beginning of the birth of Israel as a nation and as the chosen people through whom God would reveal himself to the world. **As God's chosen people in the midst of ungodly nations, Israel is to become the one nation that brings God's accountability to the world.** Israel is to become the one nation that tells the world there is indeed a Creator God who demands an account of all people on the earth, and this is who he is, how he works in the world, and the right way to worship him. And in this birth of the nation of Israel, Egypt shows up as the antitype to God's people, a rebellious and ungodly oppressor of God's chosen ones. So Exodus chapter one gives us a picture of the birth of the people of God in the midst of great suffering at the hands of a rebellious and ungodly people. Keep this thought in your mind, **God's chosen people were born out of the fire of intense suffering and pain and in the midst of rebellious and ungodly people.** All of God's chosen ones, those he calls his own, are born out of the fire of intense suffering and pain and in the midst of rebellious and ungodly people. When we think of all the pain and

suffering in this world, we might be tempted to ask, where is God?

Where is God in my pain and suffering? Well instead of asking where is

God, I think we should ask **what great and amazing new**

transformation is taking place out of this pain and suffering? What

great new creation is being made by the hands of God that can only

be made through the fire of pain and suffering? God's people are

born out of intense suffering and pain in the midst of rebellious and

ungodly people, but what looks like certain harm to us is turned to good

by the mighty hand of God- do you believe that? Here is an important

key to observe- Just as the Hebrew midwives experienced an increase in

God's blessing for having no part in the evil schemes of the Egyptians,

so we will experience an increase in God's blessing when we say no to

the invitations and schemes of sin and evil around us.

Let's continue to analyze this for a few more thoughts. This chapter and

chapter two detail the scope of Israel's oppression and the Lord's

redemption. **The Israelites were oppressed in every aspect of their**

existence. First, in verses 8-10, a new king came to power who did not

know the Israelites, and he viewed the Israelites as a political threat, a

people who might join the enemies of Egypt in war. So the Israelites suffered political oppression at the hands of the ruling power. Second, in verses 11-14, the Israelites were forced into slave labor of all kinds, and the Egyptians were ruthless with them. Slave labor means they worked extremely hard and were not fairly compensated for their work, if they were even compensated at all. So add economic oppression to their political oppression. Third, in verses 15-22, we see that the political and economic oppression were not enough to stop God's people from multiplying, so the Egyptians attempted to enlist some of the Hebrew people themselves to stop them. They instructed the Hebrew midwives to kill all of the boys who were born to the Hebrews, but the Hebrew midwives feared God and would not do it. As a result, the Egyptians themselves were instructed by Pharaoh to kill every boy born to the Israelites- this is severe social oppression. So the Israelites suffered political oppression, economic oppression, and now severe social oppression. And fourth, we will see this later in the series, but the Israelites were prevented from sacrificing and worshiping God, so they were under spiritual oppression. So **the scope of oppression**

experienced by the Israelites was all-encompassing, touching every aspect of their existence in Egypt- political, economic, social, and spiritual. Their suffering was extensive, but the Lord's redemption, as will be preached about in a later sermon, was even more extensive. So now, let's bring our frame from Genesis 1 and Genesis 50 and lay it over this story.

Remember, Genesis 1, God blessed his creation and said, "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the land" and in lining that up with Exodus 1, we see in verse 7 that "the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them" and in v. 20, even under severe oppression and attempts to snuff them out, "the people increased and became even more numerous." Even through their extensive suffering, pain, threat of genocide, and complete annihilation, the Lord's blessing enabled them to be increasingly fruitful and to multiply greatly. I looked up the Hebrew words for "fruitful and multiply" from Genesis 1, which also happen to show up here in Exodus, and the words are **Peru U-Revu**

פְּרִי וְרֵבִי Peru means, as it is translated, to be fruitful. It can mean to reproduce but it also means more generally to increase, to produce fruit—the intention is to live a fruitful life. Pastor Brian preached last week about the fruit that Jesus is looking for, that it’s really all about Jesus knowing you, dwelling intimately within you— he wants to know us, he wants to dwell within us so that we can bear much fruit, and he wants intimacy with us. **I believe this is exactly what Peru means for us, to live a life of fruitfulness that comes by the life-giving Spirit of Jesus living intimately within you.** The second word, Revu, means to increase or multiply. It also means to thrive, so it is more than just producing a bunch of babies, it is about thriving in life. So, **as God’s creation, we have been blessed to live a thriving life of fruitfulness through Jesus’ dwelling Spirit within us, no matter where we are, or what we are going through.** In John 10:10, Jesus talks about his sheep, us, living among thieves who only steal, kill, and destroy, but he came that we may have life, and have it to the full— to have life more abundantly. So, we were created to Peru U-Revu— **can you say that to the person next to you- “you were created to Peru U-Revu”- you**

have been blessed by Jesus to live a thriving life of fruitfulness even in the midst of great suffering. We may not be oppressed on all sides in the same way that the Israelites were, but all of us have or will experience deep suffering and pain in our lives. Some of you are experiencing that right now and you might be crying out to God, saying, this is more than I can handle Lord— where are you God? Some of you might be looking at your harsh circumstances right now and wondering what the future holds, maybe even fighting back fear. If you are in that place right now, be encouraged because the Lord always takes what was meant for harm and turns it into good for you and for those around you. You might feel beaten down by that enemy right now but the truth is the enemy is the one who is afraid of you, because you are a blessed child of God who still lives with a purpose from God's mighty hand despite your ongoing hardship!

And that leads to the second frame from Genesis for us to line up with this Exodus story— **Genesis 50:19, Joseph said to his brothers, “you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”** In this first chapter

of Exodus, we have seen that the Egyptians intended to harm, steal, kill, and destroy the Israelites on every side, politically, economically, socially, and spiritually. Yet, even in the midst of such horrifying oppression, God blessed them and caused them to Peru U-Revu- to be exceedingly fruitful and to spread throughout the land to the point that the Egyptians feared them. God turned what was meant for harm into good for the Israelites and for the entire world, because Jesus and salvation for the world came through this small group. They were God's chosen people struggling just to survive in a foreign land full of thieves. My friends, **this story truly is our story. As God's own people, we live in a foreign land, a world that is not our real home, full of thieves, rebelliousness, ungodliness, and oppression.** All of God's chosen ones, those he calls his own, are born out of the fire of intense suffering and pain and in the midst of rebellious and ungodly people. But the good news for us is God's plan has and always will be for us to be a peculiar people on the earth with a God-given purpose, a God-given destiny in a world of divine order, who are not destined to roam around lost and enslaved in a chaotic world full of thieves. **Romans 8:28** says, **“and we**

know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” You, wherever you are in your life, may be experiencing the fire of pain and suffering, with oppression or abuse coming at you from all sides, and you might be tempted to yell at God, where are you in all of this? My friends, rather than wondering where God is in the midst of your pain and suffering, **I encourage you to wonder at what he is doing to forge beauty and life out of the fire of your deep pain.** Jesus knocks on the door of your heart, wanting to come into the midst of your chaos to bring purpose, to cause you to be exceedingly fruitful, even in your darkest days, and to cause you to thrive even in the days where you feel the thief has stolen everything from you. The hope we have in Christ allows us to say that this dark day will surely pass— this dark day was intended to harm me, but God intended it for my good to accomplish his great purpose in my life. I will finish with **Romans 8:18- “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”** Just as the Lord redeemed the Israelites and brought them out their slavery into a land of their own, we are also being

redeemed through Jesus, out from our slavery to sin, pain, and suffering and into a land that we can truly call home. His promise is for us today, and in these days, no matter where we are or what we are going through, we can still live a fruitful life that is thriving with purpose, hope, and blessings from God! Amen!

Let's pray.