

GOD MADE ISRAELITES SLAVES (1)

Exodus 1:1-22

Key Verse: 1:7

"...but the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them."

The book of Exodus is the continuation of the book of Genesis. The book of Genesis mainly teaches us that God is the Creator. Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." It also teaches us that God wants man to be great by stewarding God's world and ruling everything in it. Most importantly, it tells us of God's covenant with Abraham which laid the foundation for his world salvation plan. Exodus is written as a most dramatic description to unfold God's purpose of world salvation. But Exodus does not directly tell us the story of God's world salvation plan. Exodus chapter 1 is a story of how the Israelites immigrated to Egypt and how they became slaves under the power of Pharaoh, the Egyptian king.

I. The prosperous Israelites in Egypt (1-7)

First, the boy Joseph was sold as a slave (1-5). In verses 1-5 the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob are all recorded. The descendants of Jacob numbered seventy in all, and Joseph was already in Egypt. It is important to remember the names of Jacob's twelve sons because they would become, in the end, the twelve tribes of Israel. Look at verses 1-4. 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.

Verse 5b says, "...Joseph was already in Egypt." Why was Joseph already in Egypt? Joseph's story of faith is so heart-moving that even non-Christians like to tell it to their children. There is no one who would not cry after reading Joseph's story in the last part of Genesis. Joseph was Jacob's eleventh son, born of Rachel, who was the second and most beloved of Jacob's four wives. So Jacob favored Joseph most. He made a richly ornamented robe and clothed Joseph and made him like a prince, while his ten brothers wore shepherd's clothes. Once, Joseph's brothers were far away from home, grazing the flocks of their father's sheep. His father sent Joseph to see if they were doing well and if their food supply was sufficient. Joseph, in his ornamented robe, started on his way to locate his brothers. After several days, he met his brothers. As soon as his brothers saw him, their anger flared up and they said, "Here comes that dreamer! Come now, let's kill him and

throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams" (Ge 37:19,20). But at Judah's suggestion, they sold Joseph to Midianite merchants for twenty shekels of silver. The Midianite merchants sold him to the family of General Potiphar, King Pharaoh's bodyguard. God was with Joseph.

General Potiphar's wife liked Joseph until she suffered from love fever. Because of this, Joseph was put in prison. When Joseph was in prison, God was with him and Joseph became a shepherd for the other prisoners. Even though Joseph missed his mother and father so much as a 17-year-old boy, even though he was in a sorrowful situation, he did not give in to fatalism. Joseph always believed that God is good. Wherever he might be, he did his best to be faithful to God. As a result, he gained the favor of his worldly bosses.

One day King Pharaoh had a nightmare which distressed him so much that he summoned all the wise men and magicians of Egypt. He solemnly ordered them to interpret his dream. But no one could interpret his dream. Finally, Joseph was introduced to King Pharaoh by the chief cupbearer, who had been in jail with Joseph. Joseph interpreted the king's dream. It meant that there would be seven years of abundant harvest and seven years of dreadful famine. Joseph could interpret Pharaoh's dream because he believed that it was not he, but God, who could interpret dreams (Ge 41:16). In any situation, when Joseph loved God, God was with him. After Joseph interpreted the dream, King Pharaoh exalted him highly, next to himself. In his young life, Joseph started as a slave in a foreign land due to his brothers' hatred. Now he was in charge of distributing surplus grain in Egypt. If anyone wanted grain, they had to come to Joseph and bow down before him. When Joseph loved God, God exalted him to be the Prime Minister of Egypt, and all people of all nations came to buy grain from Joseph.

Second, Jacob immigrated to Egypt (1). After the seven years of abundant harvest were over, the seven years of dreadful famine started. The famine extended to Jacob's family. Jacob was wealthy. He also had many sons and wives. But after missing Joseph, he lost the joy of life. All his blessings through his family and wealth could not comfort him. Jacob cried every day. He cried in the morning. He cried in the evening. He cried when he saw a boy who looked like Joseph. He said to his other sons, "In mourning will I go down to the grave to my son" (Ge 37:35). His sorrow of missing Joseph was one thing. And the hunger problem was another. Jacob had everything, but he didn't have food. So he sent ten of his sons to Egypt to get some food. They did not recognize Joseph. But Joseph recognized them and arrested them, on suspicion of being spies. Finally Joseph told them that he was Joseph and cried with a loud voice. Joseph also asked them to bring his father to Egypt. So Jacob and his sons went to Egypt. This is the story of

how Jacob, called Israel, immigrated to Egypt.

Third, Israel was very prosperous (6-7). Jacob was the father of twelve sons, who became twelve patriarchs of the nation Israel. Why do we call the nation Israel? Jacob's name was changed to Israel when he was changed spiritually in God. Therefore, Israel is the name of Jacob, and also it is the name of the nation Israel. Verse 6 says, "Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died..." Here we learn that one generation passes away too soon. As Peter said, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field" (1 Pe 1:24). Joseph's people could no longer enjoy his influence. In other words, they remained as long-term guests in a foreign land. Their future was dark.

But God was with them. Read verse 7. ...but the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them. When they came to Egypt first, they were seventy altogether. But they were fruitful and multiplied greatly and had become exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them. Politically speaking, they were no more than long-term guests and foreigners. But from God's point of view, they were special people. And they were the real owners of the land.

How could they become so numerous that the land was filled with them? It is based on God's covenant. God made a covenant with Abraham. Genesis 13:15-17 says, "All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you." Genesis 15:18-21 says, "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates--the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.'" When we think about this covenant with Abraham, we can understand why God sent Jacob's family to Egypt.

According to God's covenant with Abraham, God wanted to save the whole world through one person, Abraham, by making him a blessing (Ge 12:3). God wanted to bless all peoples on earth through one person, Abraham. God gave Abraham only one son, Isaac, and tested him, to see if he loved God more than his son. Of course, Abraham loved God more than his son Isaac. To Jacob, God gave twelve sons who would become twelve patriarchs and the foundation of twelve tribes of Israel. God knew that Jacob's seventy family members were not enough to cover the whole world with the word of God. So God planned to send them to Egypt and increase them until the twelve tribes of Israel would grow to be a nation. Genesis 15:13 says, "Then the Lord said to him, 'Know for certain that

your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.'" This prophecy was too ambiguous for Abraham to understand because Abraham was dozing in distress at that time. But we learn that God's world salvation plan was more than clear, and he was proceeding moment by moment and step by step, person to person. Eventually, God formed a nation through Jacob's family. And thus far, Israel enjoyed many privileges and prosperity in a lush land. In this part we learn mainly about Joseph. He was the most beloved son to his father Jacob. But because of his brothers' jealousy, he was sold as a slave to a foreign land Egypt. His happiness toward his father turned into unbearable sorrows and hardships. But he overcame his sorrows believing that God was with him. He confronted one hardship after another. But he overcame all kinds of hardships believing that God was with him. Then God gave him success whatever he did. Finally God made him Prime Minister in the Egyptian Empire.

II. Israel's suffering under a godless king (8-22)

First, a new king's fear (8-14). Verse 8 says, "Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt." There was a problem. A new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power. And at the same time the number of the Israelites grew and grew until they became a threat to the Egyptian Empire. From King Pharaoh's point of view, the Israelites were a political issue which should be solved with drastic action. So King Pharaoh determined to strengthen his military security by sharply curtailing and controlling these aliens. Furthermore, he intended to use them for economic gain by making them slaves and putting them into hard labor. The Israelites were no longer guests. They became slaves all of a sudden. Because of Pharaoh's hard-labor policy, the Israelites lost their freedom. They were afflicted by burdensome tasks. They mainly served as slave labor in building cities, such as Rameses, as store cities for Pharaoh. Their lives became dispirited and they were broken hearted. The Israelites had no strength to move. So they moved as much as they were whipped.

Pharaoh's hard-labor policy was planned to reduce the number of Israelites. Did it work as he planned? No. Verse 12 says, "But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites." The Israelites were chosen people. They were covenant people. They were sent to Egypt. Now the situation changed; they were in an adverse situation. But God was with them. Biologically speaking, a hard-labor policy without proper meals should have reduced the number of the Israelites. But the Bible says, "...the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites." The Israelites were suffering from hard labor. But incredibly, the Egyptians, including King Pharaoh, dreaded them. God was with these people. King Pharaoh became helpless. So he pressed the Israelites hard. He 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 (14). An ungodly king used a ruthless policy against the Israelites. But when God was with his people, his people multiplied and increased.

Second, the king of Egypt's final resort (15-22). King Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives, "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" (16). His final resort was merciless. In order to carry out his policy, he didn't mind massacring newborn babies. This king parallels Stalin. Anyone who was suspicious of Stalin's policy was sent to Siberia for a lifetime of hard labor. Innumerable people were killed because of hard labor and malnutrition. In order to establish his dictatorship, he made a policy of collective agriculture. They say that he killed more than ten million Russian men. As a result, there have been so many sorrowful Russian women because their husband candidates were all killed and they could not marry.

Sometimes we don't seem to find much difference between godly people and godless people living in this world. But when we study world history, we learn that godly rulers were father-like shepherds. The best example may be George Washington, who lived like a private even though he was the most eminent general in history. He shepherded his soldiers with God's comfort and God's hope. Another most eminent example might be Abraham Lincoln. He was a man of faith who was opposed to the slave system. As a godly man, he honored the word of God and came to the conclusion that the United States must not be oppressed by English interference, Mexican invasion, or French annoyance. Most of all, Abraham Lincoln claimed that the United States should be the United States, undivided. He said, "The United States cannot be half slaves and half free. A house divided against itself cannot stand." His spirit of independence and his respect for human freedom forged the United States, which God ever planned to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

In his ungodly policy, King Pharaoh had become a fourth-degree mental patient. Look at verse 16. He ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill all the boy babies at birth. Look at verse 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. So the Israelites continued to increase and became even more numerous. Pharaoh was greatly distressed. Then Pharaoh ordered all the people of Israel, "Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live" (22). To the Israelites, the situation was out of control.

But to God, it was a time when he was forging a nation in the fertile land of Egypt in the hope of establishing a kingdom of priests and a

holy nation. It was not enough for them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. They also needed to know godless people first in order to know God, his saving grace, and his purpose for world salvation. This is the reason God gave the Israelites unbearable hardships.

Our God is the only God. We know he created the heavens and the earth. As we have studied, he had a plan to forge a nation to use as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, so that through them, the knowledge of God would be proclaimed to the whole world. We cannot know all about God's greatness and his wisdom. But we must know one thing: that God was with his people and blessed them and increased them and multiplied them. God wanted them to experience a happy and glorious life and at the same time, he allowed them to experience the cruelty of a godless ruler so that they might come to know how terrible it is to live under a godless ruler and how wonderful it is to live under the wings of God's grace. We thank God that he allows us to be prosperous. We thank God that sometimes he allows us to suffer in the course of carrying out God's covenant objectives.

In this part, we learn that God gave his people Israel divine discipline so that they might know how terrible it is to live in a godless nation, and how wonderful it is to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Thank God that he gives divine discipline to each of us to raise us as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Heb 12:4b-13).