
Prayers

To God

We praise You, Lord God for the love You have shown us throughout our lives. We have not always appreciated what You have done for us, and we have not always seen Your protection, Your guidance, Your love, Your healing or Your sustenance. Shine afresh into our lives this day so that we may perceive these things and rejoice at Your provision and compassion. We praise You, Lord God for all You are doing in us and for us right now: **AMEN**

For myself

Pray about how you look. This may be a difficult thing; for either you would not think this relevant or you may give so much time to this it has become a major feature of your everyday life. Spend time trying to get this into a godly perspective.

For others

Weekly theme: those at sea

Pray for those who are involved with scientific research and data-gathering from the seas around the world. Pray that people and countries will respect the work done by those who try to help us understand the seas and the part they play in the life of this world

Meditation

Lord of all;
Lord of every living thing;
Lord of every wonderful and fascinating human being;
Lord of space, of the solar system and distant galaxies;
Lord of countries and continents; sky, land and oceans;
Lord of time, creator of the past, present and future;
Lord of banking, politics, pressure groups and charities;
Lord of commerce, industry, factories and building sites;
Lord of history, geography, sciences, maths and the arts;
Lord of all that could be;
Lord of all;
Save us and redeem us,
Remake this world, anew!

Bible Passage

Exodus 1:1-14

¹ These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each one going with his entire household.

² Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah,

³ Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin,

⁴ Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher.

⁵ So it was that all the descendants of Jacob numbered 70 people, including Joseph who was already in Egypt.

⁶ Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and the entire generation also died. ⁷ However, the Israelites were fruitful and grew in large numbers and great strength so that the land was full of them.

⁸ Now, a new king came to power in Egypt who did not know about Joseph. ⁹ He said to his people;

'Look, the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. ¹⁰ We must deal shrewdly with them, as they might become stronger in number than we. Then if war were to break out, they could join our enemies, fight against us and then leave the country.'

¹¹ So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They were made to build Pithom and Raamses as store cities for Pharaoh.

¹² But the more the people were oppressed, the more they increased in number and spread around the land; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites, ¹³ and they forced them to work, ruthlessly. ¹⁴ They made their lives bitter with relentless labour in brick and mortar, and all manner of field work. Moreover, in all this cruel labour, they were treated with severity.

Review

The book of Exodus begins with a description of Israel as an oppressed nation in living Egypt. The optimism of Genesis has evaporated, and God's people, once honoured because of Joseph, now find themselves in dire straits. The ominous words '*a new king came to power in Egypt who did not know Joseph*' have been used ever since to bemoan the difficult changes people have endured when those in authority over them have moved on; new governments come to power and change society, leaders of industry bring in fresh faces and new ideas, churches appoint new leadership teams, pastors or ministers. But the book of Exodus begins a quite remarkable story, because as a whole, the book tells the remarkable story of God's deliverance of Israel (Exodus 1-19). In addition, the book tells the powerful story, through thick and thin, of God's establishment of Israel as His own people who worship Him (Exodus 20-40).

Our story begins by looking backwards and giving us a list of the names of the sons of Jacob who went to Egypt (1:1-5), echoing the list found in Genesis 46:26f. But after this, a number of important themes begin to surface which continue throughout this great book. Our passage sets the scene of the racial oppression of Israel by Egypt, but right from the start,

some important building blocks of Israel's amazing story of escape from Egypt are put in place.

The first theme is that of Israel's varied and changing nature. As the book of Exodus unfolds, we will at one place empathise with her plight and will her to survive, but at another, we will be exacerbated by her stubborn intransigence in the face of God's love. Throughout the Old Testament, the relationship between God and Israel swings to and fro, and throughout, we learn a great deal about the constancy of God and the temporal frailty of people.

So here in this passage, we find that the names '*Jacob*' and '*Israel*' are both used of God's people. The name '*Jacob*' emphasises the family nature of those who were descendants of Abraham through Isaac. The name '*Israel*' calls to mind the national identity of this people and their calling to bear God's Covenant (see Gen 32:22-32). However, God's people do not start as one thing and become another; both descriptions remain true.

Also, today's passage describes Israel as both weak, but also strong. It describes the weakness and servitude of Israel as a people facing the overwhelming might of the superpower that is Egypt. For example, the Hebrew words describing Israel's forced labour (1:11-14) emphasise the ease with which Egypt oppressed Israel and forced her into slave labour under task-masters. But this passage also describes Israel as a very large nation (1:7,19-10), so large in fact that she was considered by Egypt to be a threat to their identity!

We could say that such things are as always a matter of perception. However, this contrast is typical of God's people throughout Exodus. On the one hand, they are the intimate family of God's people, individually known and loved by God and suffering all the difficulties of an emerging nation. On the other hand, they are a vigorous nation ever conscious of its identity within the world, and called by God to be '*fruitful*' (1:7). This is a contrast which binds together two features of God's people even now in New Testament times, when God's people are the church. They are both His intimate family, and also a great '*nation*' amongst the peoples of the world with all the complexities of what this means.

The second theme which begins to surface here is that of the foolishness of Egypt's king (Pharaoh). The new king came to power ignorant of Joseph's massive contribution to his country's organisational heritage (1:8), recorded in detail in Genesis 47:13-26. But how could this man be so ignorant? There is much we do not know about those times, but one thing is known, which is that in Egypt, Pharaoh was a '*god*', so he could say and do as he pleased without fear of contradiction or challenge. It was an assumption which surely contributed to a potential for great foolishness in high places. The king spoke, for example, of dealing '*shrewdly*' with the Israelites, because he did not like them and they were too numerous to continue living in Egypt (see 1:9,10). However, his logic of making the people of Israel work harder on various projects of his only made the Israelites essential to the economy of the land. Ultimately, he needed the Israelites and would not want to see them '*leave the country*' (1:10), however much he disliked them and wished they did not exist!

Later on in Exodus, we will be frequently surprised at the senselessness of Pharaoh's actions in promising to '*let the people go*' (8:8 etc.), but then '*hardening his heart*' (8:32 etc.). We may at first think that Pharaoh's words were the mere machinations of an autocrat, but in comparison to Moses, whose actions were according to God's wisdom, Pharaoh is presented as a fool. Eventually, even the people of Pharaoh's court can see this contrast (11:3), but not before the final show-down between Pharaoh and God is set in motion. The end result is the release of Israel from slavery and the comprehensive defeat of Pharaoh in the Red Sea (Ex 14). Some of the seeds of this great story are planted within this passage right at the beginning of Exodus.

Reading the passage through, however, it is obvious that broad literary 'brush-strokes' are being used to set up this epic story. God's people began life in Egypt under the happiest of circumstances, in favour with God and with the people of Egypt. But in an awful but typical

change of human history, their lives were changed from peace, security and justice into slavery, intimidation and injustice. Two questions arise from this passage and the problem created by the coming of the new Pharaoh. Firstly, what would the people of Israel do? Secondly, what would their Covenant God do? The story of what happens next, as with all real history, is both complicated and fascinating.

Going Deeper

Further Comments

'These are the names' – the name of the book of Exodus

It is not commonly known that the name of the book of Exodus in Hebrew means '*these are the names*'; being the first two words of the Hebrew text. This is not an unusual way for a book of Scripture to be headed in Hebrew; for example, the first book of the Old Testament, named 'Genesis', is merely a Latin translation of the first Hebrew word of that book, meaning 'in the beginning'. However in the case of this book, Christian tradition has used the name 'Exodus' after a Latin word which describes the central event recorded in the book; the escape or 'exodus' of the people of Israel from the land of Egypt.

Now there are clearly two parts to this passage, and each of them is important. The number of people going down to Egypt is a significant piece of information, for example, and signals the great growth of Israel mentioned in God's promise to Abraham (12:5, 22:17). Secondly, the enslavement of Israel is a significant historical event, and one which archaeologists have been keen to identify, but with uncertain and controversial results.

The numbers of people going down to Egypt

The number of people recorded as going down to Egypt agrees broadly with Genesis 46:26, with the number travelling being 66 and the total in Egypt being 70 (assuming we include Jacob, Joseph, and his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh). It is perhaps worth noting that this number is disputed even within Scripture, for Steven, in his sermon to the High Priest and the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:14) declares the total number to be 75! There are a number of theories about this difference of opinion, but there are unfortunately no clear or logical explanations for the differences. We have to accept that Steven spoke according to a Jewish tradition which added up the descendants of Jacob (and their households) in a different way. We must not complain at this, for even we have had to make assumptions in order to make sense of the two numbers mentioned in Genesis; being 66 and 70!

In our passage, the names of the sons of Jacob are listed according to their mothers. The first six are the sons of Leah (1:2,3), then Rachel's son Benjamin is listed alone (1:3) because Joseph was already in Egypt. After this, the two sons of Rachel's maid Bilhah are listed and finally the two sons of Leah's maid Zilpah (1:4). According to verse 1, each son of Jacob went to Egypt with his whole family including wives and children (though we have little information about the names of the wives, in particular). No mention is made of Joseph or his sons Ephraim or Manasseh because they did not travel down to Egypt 'with Jacob'.

At the very end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, we gain the sense of a tightly knit family unit, but Exodus quickly moves us on by telling us that this new 'people of God' grew rapidly in number and 'strength', indicating the general wealth and established social framework of the group. This fulfilled the many prophetic words spoken to the forefathers within God's Covenant promises (see above) which are found throughout Genesis. However, great changes were about to take place, and the focus of verses 6 and 7 is on the passing away of a generation of people who were close to Jacob and Joseph, and who were personally

connected with the great events recorded at the end of Genesis. It was not simply the coming of a 'new king' (1:8) in Egypt which changed the picture, but the passing of the generations of God's people, and their increasing sense of security; however false that security in numbers and strength turned out to be!

Oppression by the Egyptians

When a new king came to power in Egypt who 'did not know Joseph' (1:8), it was not simply his own ignorance of Egyptian economic history and the part played in it by Joseph which led to the changed attitude of the Egyptian authorities towards God's people. God's people were a perceived threat to this new king because they were numerous and powerful. I have translated the passage in a way which makes the Hebrew readable, but verses 9 and 10 have repeated words which stress the extent of Israel's growth and influence. It may have been that their reputation was bigger than the facts, as is often the case in history, but at the point when God's people may have felt that they were thriving, tragedy was at their door.

The new king was racially brutal and xenophobic. With twisted logic which expressed his fear of the people of Israel as a racial group, and yet a desire to control situations to his own advantage, the new king issued his orders. Taskmasters were set over the Israelites as they were placed in forced labour. In effect, they were made slaves. Under Joseph's reforms, all Egyptians had become slaves of Pharaoh and the Israelites were spared this heavy discipline. Now, under the new king, their slavery did not take the form of living on the land and producing food for Egypt, its court and people, but the hard and brutal work of city building. The Egyptian Pharaoh's were famous for grand construction projects which required enormous amounts of human labour, moving vast quantities of quarried rock, and placing and finishing them according to the designs of Egyptians engineers.

The building projects of Pharaoh – what does archaeology say?

The projects the Israelites are recorded as working on were the building of the 'store cities' of Pithom and Raamses (1:11). There has been much debate about when these cities were built and the chronology of the king who was supposed to have been Pharaoh at the time. Until recently, this was reckoned to be Rameses II (possibly 1304 – 1237 BC), because cities similar to this were built in his reign in the north of Egypt. However, this conflicts with the traditional reckoning of the Exodus as being in the fifteenth century BC, according to dates mentioned in 1 Kings 6:1. Unfortunately, recent archaeology has shed less rather than more light on this, and it is a brave person who can pick their way through the complex scholarly arguments which still rage over the dating of the Exodus. See, for example, the arguments for a more Biblical time framework argued by David Rohl in 'Pharaohs and Kings – A Test of Time' (Century Press, 1995) which are still strongly rejected by theologians in general. Perhaps there will be a helpful consensus one day which fits the accepted archaeological facts and the Biblical record, but we will have to wait for it!

In the mean time, we are left to note that what happened drove a racial wedge between the people of Israel and the Egyptians. Again, the Hebrew words of verses 12 to 14 emphasise the cruel and oppressive nature of the work the Israelites were required to do, and to add insult to injury, the Israelites were building store cities, these were storage facilities which their own beloved ancestor Joseph had built many years ago in order to save the people of the day. Now, their salvation had turned into slavery!

Discipleship

Application

Dealing with a reversal of fortunes ...

The great spiritual theme which comes out of this passage is that of how God's people cope with a worldly reversal of their personal and national circumstances from good to bad. Here, the people of Israel thought they had become a fruitful and healthy nation, but they were plunged into unexpected disaster, and we wonder how strong they were in their faith in the God of their forefathers. Just like the people of Israel, we find it hard to understand the trials and apparent reversals of circumstances which we experience in life. We ask, what is God doing to us?

Now the Bible record shows that all this will ultimately be used by God for good, and it will prove to be part of God's great plan for the history of the world. So it may appear hard for us to endure hardship, but this is what we are called to do. From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus spoke about standing firm in the midst of trouble and strife (Matt 5:11f.) and this remained a constant theme of his preaching. It was also a frequent theme of Paul's teaching in his letters (e.g. 2 Cor. 5:1f.). Faith demands that we stand firm whatever the outward circumstances of life

Being fruitful for God

In the middle of this passage, we read that the people of Israel were 'fruitful', and to some extent, this was part of their problem. Pharaoh and the Egyptians saw this and were scared of the Israelites, which resulted in their slavery.

Now we often think of being fruitful as a necessary and important call of God on our lives, and we study those passages of the New Testament that speak of this, for example, John 15:2, or Galatians 5:22f. We do not often read those Old Testament passages such as this, which warn us that when we are fruitful, Satan is unhappy and will attack us. He does not want God's people to be happy and successful in establishing the Kingdom of God!

The story of God's people in Egypt should therefore warn us that this might happen, and perhaps will happen. If we go on to read about how Israel responded to God's work amongst them to save them from the world, we can then learn something of how to both call on God for His salvation and also how to keep close to Him when He acts in power. The people of Israel did not always get their relationship with God right. Now we know Jesus and have the power of the Holy Spirit, we should be able to face out troubles with greater maturity.

Ideas for what to do

- Have you been in a situation where you have felt oppressed by others even though you have been successful in doing what God requires of you? Be assured this is a common Christian experience, and sometimes even within the church. I suggest that you keep close to the study of this book of the Bible to learn from Israel what is and what is not a good way to keep close to God in the midst of difficult times. To begin with, never give up on what God has asked of you or given to you.
- Pray for the church throughout the world, especially those parts of it that face great persecution like the people of Israel in Old Testament times

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does it matter that in different parts of Scripture, the people of Israel are numbered differently (66, 70, or 75; see above)?
2. Are the Israelites in any way responsible for their own slavery?
3. Should we assume that any new worldly authority which affects us is liable to be hostile? Should we watch out for this?

Final Prayer

Lord God; You have guided each of us along a path of life which has been full of many unexpected things. Save us, we pray, from falling into the temptations and oppressions of the world around us; and through Jesus Christ, keep us pure, in faith, in hope, and in love.
AMEN
