

Prayers

To God

Praise the Lord God on bended knee, or in some other position that obliges you to focus on God and honour Him

For myself

Lead me, Lord Jesus, in paths of peace. I long to know peace within my soul, the inner peace of Your precious gifts of the salvation of my soul, the healing of my body and mind, the blessing of Your deliverance from all manner of evil, and the freedom of Your liberation from all manner of bondage. I yield to You, Lord Jesus; shine Your light into my life, completely. AMEN

For others

Weekly theme: those at sea

Pray for those whose work in the fishing industry, and who face all manner of difficulties from lack of stock to quotas and the overfishing of other vessels in their areas. Pray for justice and equity within the fishing industry.

Meditation

The power of the Lord is present and active in this age.

The Holy Spirit touches lives and changes them everywhere;
The faithful love of the Lord brings peace to troubled souls;
The Word of God inspires people wherever it is read;
The healing hand of Christ restores bodies, souls and spirits;
The renewing power of the Lord brings the dead to life!
The Creator of the world sustains life, all the time.
The captives are set free as Christ delivers people from evil.

The victory of the Cross is implanted in human history,
And it can never be removed, stained or blotted out.
The power of the Lord is present and active right now!

Believe it.

Bible Passage

Exodus 1:15-22

¹⁵ The king of Egypt gave these instructions to Shiprah and Puah, the midwives of the Hebrews;

¹⁶ *'When helping Hebrew women give birth, watch them on the birth stool so that if it is a boy, you must kill him; but if it is a girl, then let her live.'*

¹⁷ However, the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king ordered them and they let the boys live. ¹⁸ So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked,

'Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?'

¹⁹ The midwives replied to Pharaoh;

'the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; they are lively and strong, and give birth before the midwives can get to them!'

²⁰ God was good to the midwives, and the people increased considerably in number and became strong; ²¹ and because the midwives feared God, He gave them their own households.

²² Pharaoh responded with a command to all his people. He said;

'You must throw every boy that is born (to the Hebrews) into the Nile; but you will let every girl live.'

Review

The story of God's people in Egypt suddenly enters a dangerous new phase. Oppressive work and the control of taskmasters was a severe life for Pharaoh to impose upon a people (1:9-14), but a policy of genocide was something else. In a wonderful section of this passage (1:15-19), we learn about the way in which the Hebrew midwives circumvented the command of the king and therefore saved many lives.

This passage closes the first chapter of Exodus, however, with the angry and deadly threat of the king, issued as a decree to all the people of Egypt. Hebrew baby boys were to be killed by throwing them into the Nile. Pharaoh was intent on pursuing his policy of racial hatred towards the Hebrew people, whatever its results.

There is little obvious logic in Pharaoh's edict, however, and the irrationality of his hatred and racial abuse is obvious. He was not the first or the last leader in history to demonstrate such absurdity. Having set the Hebrews to work in building essential supply cities (1:11f.), the king of Egypt's desire to kill all the Hebrew boys was entirely contradictory to his objectives. Big building projects in ancient times, such as the building of cities, took many years, if not generations. Moreover, there is ample evidence in ancient records that under these conditions, those required to work had a significantly low life expectation. There would be a constant need for new young labour in order to keep the projects alive over the generations it would take for them to be completed. Pharaoh's commands however, were not dominated by the strategic needs of Egypt for which he was responsible; they were governed by feelings and impressions.

Into this horrendous story, Exodus inserts the small story of the Hebrew midwives. It is fascinating, and is tucked into this passage like a small gem. The naming of the midwives is significant, for few women are honoured like this in Scripture. They are mentioned in this way because their actions directly protected God's Covenant heritage, and the story of what they did is told with relish. The king of Egypt had told the midwives, Shiprah and Puah (1:15) to keep an eye on women in labour, and then kill the male children even as they were born.

This was an extraordinary demand, and it required the midwives to go against every fibre of their moral, social and religious convictions. It is no wonder that they found an easy way of getting around the command, by the use of an excuse which, in those days, could not easily

be checked. The king had tried to turn the Hebrew midwives against their own people, using his own authority and power as an Egyptian god, but the midwives would have none of it. As the story explains, they 'feared God' (1:17) and deceived the king rather than insult their own people. It is no wonder that the king reacted to this with venom and hate, ordering the first general slaughter of male children recorded in the Bible.

At this point, it is worth pointing out that this is the beginning of a powerful scriptural theme. Throughout the Bible, such terrible human vengeance would eventually become associated with circumstances in which God worked in power for the salvation of his people (see Jer 31:15). The story also points forward to Herod's slaughter of the innocents at the time of the birth of Christ (Matt 2:16-18). Too often, we like to read those parts of the Bible that are 'nice', and do not mention the difficulties and sometimes the atrocities of real life. In truth, the Bible ignores no aspect of human life, including the difficult bits.

To return to the story, God's reward to the midwives is recorded in verses 20 and 21. To our ears, the Biblical text suggests that God enabled them to have large families, and some Bible translations say just this. However, the Hebrew text of the Bible says plainly that the women were rewarded with headship of their own '*households*'. It is very rare for Scripture to identify a woman as the head of a household, let alone two women, for such a position was formally held by men in any Israelite home. We must therefore accept that God is quite capable of overruling the assumptions and prejudices of normal human society (1:20,21)!

Lastly, the passage is an example of the contrasts we saw yesterday in the opening verses. On the one hand, Israel was a nation small enough to be served by two midwives alone (perhaps only a couple of thousand people). On the other hand, we are told that the nation was thriving, with growth outstripping the expectations of the day (1:20). But no numbers are given; because all Scripture wants us to know is that despite the persecution, the people of God grew and thrived. God's blessing trumps Pharaoh's curse.

Going Deeper

Further Comments

This passage continues to build the story line of Exodus by giving us more insight into the blessings of God on His people despite their circumstances, and the growing xenophobia of the king (Pharaoh). Each element of the story is told for a reason, and though it is tempting to read quickly through Exodus 1 in order to get to the well known story of Moses' birth in chapter 2, these verses help us understand God's perspective on what was happening.

The authority of God and the Authority of Pharaoh

In a highly structured and organised society, one would expect the Hebrew midwives to be obedient to a command of the great king of Egypt, and do his bidding which was to kill the male Hebrew children. This, however, is not a simple story of an event. It is a description of a spiritual battle played out between the only two authorities which mattered, according to Scripture. The king of Egypt was the earthly authority, but a man who believed he was a god, and whose trappings of power were all designed to make him appear god-like. Nevertheless, his words and actions are treated with disdain by these two midwives. The other power is God Himself, and He appears twice in the story, reacting to the events that take place. In a verse which is central to the whole story, Scripture tells us 'the midwives feared God'; and then after the midwives have made a mockery of Pharaoh, God rewards them with 'households' (see above).

The midwives

There is a great deal of scholarly debate about whether the midwives were Hebrew or not. The reason for this is firstly that the midwives are described, technically, as 'the midwives of the Hebrews' (1:15), which does not give us firm reason to say that they were Hebrews themselves; it just tells us that they were the ones who did this job for the Hebrews. Secondly, the midwives talked in verse 19 as if they were familiar with assisting the childbirth of both Egyptians and Hebrews, and for this reason were capable of comparing the two. Thirdly, the statement that they 'feared God' (1:17) stands out as if they were non-Hebrews who had come to accept faith in the God of the Hebrews! This debate, which you will find in most commentaries, however, sterilises the whole story. The story begs us not to try and ascertain the nationality of the midwives, but to compare the way that they respect the two authorities represented within the story. By fearing God, the midwives took courage to face the evil of the king directly, and refuse to do his will. They were prepared to face the wrath of the king of Egypt rather than the wrath of the God of all life!

Again, there is some debate about what the midwives were expected to do, with some indication in the Hebrew text that the midwives were expected to deceive the mothers by causing the baby boys to die in childbirth in what might have been perceived to be a 'natural' way. We must remember that infant mortality in those days was far higher and far more expected than today. But the underlying fact of the story is the fruitfulness and virility of the Hebrew people. They were God's own people, and God was present with them and blessed them whatever happened in the world around them and whatever their earthly circumstances.

A new name, 'Hebrews'?

What is most interesting about this story is that God's people are called the 'Hebrews'. Previously, in the first fourteen verses of Exodus, they were called the 'sons of Jacob' or the 'sons of Israel', and also the 'Israelites' (1:1,7,8,12,13). Does the name change mean anything? Although we are used to thinking of 'Hebrews' as an alternative word for God's people, the number of places in the Bible where this wording is used is very limited. Abraham is once described as a Hebrew (Gen 14:13), and Joseph was called a 'Hebrew slave' by those who accused him of sexual misdemeanours with Potiphar's wife (Gen 39:14f.). Then, apart from this passage, God's people are called Hebrews in the description of a few of Saul's battle with Philistines (1 Sam 13,14), and there is one mention of them in Deuteronomy 15:12, and a couple in Jeremiah 34:9f. In comparison to the number of times the word 'Israelites' or 'Judeans' appears, this is very small, and the main place in the Bible where God's people are called 'Hebrews' is in Exodus 1 and 2.

The most likely explanation for this is that in the last century, scholars have found ancient letters from regional kings dating from the fourteenth century BC, and these talk about a nomadic group of people called 'Habiru', or sometimes 'Apiru'. Were these letters referring to the clans of Jacob? It is possible. However, a close reading of these ancient letters shows that the term 'Habiru' was used in almost a derogatory way, as some people (unfortunately) speak rather condescendingly about 'gypsies' today.

It may be that by using the term 'Hebrew' about the Israelites (surely the favoured word for the people of God), the king was speaking in a derogatory way. However, all his pronouncements backfired, and instead of being seen to act wisely and astutely (see 1:10), he was shown up as something of a fool himself. Some people suggest that the Israelites were not ashamed to accept the insult, for within the whole story of Exodus, it was they who insulted Pharaoh by escaping from Egypt after pillaging the land of its wealth (Exodus 14). They had the 'last laugh'.

Pharaoh's campaign of genocide

Meanwhile, in this part of the story, there is no doubt that the oppression of the Hebrews (Israelites) continued, and despite the almost comic nature of the first part of the passage (1:15-21), Pharaoh was not going to stop his campaign to wreak genocide on the growing

number of Jacob's descendants in the land of Egypt. His final command was cynical and destructive. He gave permission for any Egyptian to take a young male Hebrew and throw him into the Nile (1:22). In this way, Pharaoh intended to disperse the growing national identity of the Hebrews. Without boys, there would be no marriages or family life. The young women would be free to be taken into mixed marriages or harems, and all the cultural foci of the life of the Israelites would be gradually filtered away into greater Egypt. Apparently, Pharaoh was not really concerned about the supply of labour for his building projects; but that subject comes up in the next part of the story.

God was not going to allow His own people, charged with the message of faith and hope for the whole world and through whom He intended to bless all peoples, to disappear. The first chapter of Exodus has the function of building up a picture of God's people in increasing need of faith, hope and salvation themselves.

Discipleship

Application

Standing against persecution

The Gospels often speak of the fortitude required for people to stand against persecution in steadfast faith (e.g. Matthew 5:12,13), as does the book of Exodus in this passage. Evil may also be defeated by standing steadfast in the power of God, as the midwives did in this great little story. God is consistent, and these themes are as relevant to us today as they were to the Hebrews.

We often find ourselves to be in similar places to the Israelites in this passage, either physically or spiritually (or both). We talk today about 'raising our head above the parapet', for which we can pay a heavy price. What will often sustain us is the example of those who have stood up for what is right before; so although it is good to read the story of the Hebrew midwives, we can be blessed by the stories of others who have stood up to be counted when times have been tough.

Stopping the killing of children

It sounds almost too awful to say, but children are killed even today when people have their 'blood up' and are intent on civil war, sectarian strife, or even just the rewards of political power. Children were killed in Northern Ireland during the troubles (1970-2000), children are being killed in Syria as I write, along with anyone in the way of the war there. They are arguably targeted by those who present abortion as a lifestyle choice, or by state child rearing policies (as has sometimes been the case in China). In addition, children are often the victims of state social policies, which keep some in poverty with no route to escape.

Perhaps the wisdom of Scripture here is to report such things and alert us to the fact that they are a part of the endless landscape of atrocities committed in every age, against which we must fight. Perhaps there are no more effective weapons of warfare against this than the wisdom of protective women, who do everything in their power to thwart the machinations of those intent on blood by means of godly cunning and intelligence. We are not all women, but we can all learn from them.

Ideas for what to do

- Do you have the courage to stand against ungodliness? It is easy to say that we would, but hard to do. How often have we heard something that we really believe to be wrong and done nothing about it? Look back on such things and ask yourself whether there is any action you can take to put right a wrong that has been done.
- The best defence against evil is to pre-empt its attacks. How might the enemy attack you at this point in time? Pray and seek the Lord's wisdom for how to deal with this.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does it matter whether the midwives were Hebrew or not? Today, does God work only through His chosen people, the Church, or through others as well?
2. Discuss in your group the effects of genocide upon a country, using examples from recent history.
3. What are the main features of hope within this story, and what are the main features of persecution? What can we learn from them?

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, when we struggle to do what we know to be right, please stand beside us and help us. When we need courage to face the evils of this world, grant us the spiritual strength to stand firm. Then, when salvation comes, may we rejoice with all our heart and soul and voice; and give thanks to Him who has saved us! AMEN
