

# Hurting People and Hidden Power

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] reading tonight is taken from Exodus chapter 1, which is found on page 58 of the Church Bibles. Please look at that with me as we read. Exodus chapter 1. These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each with his family. Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah, Ishakar, Zebulun, Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.

The descendants of Jacob numbered 70 in all and Joseph was already in Egypt. Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful. They multiplied greatly, increasing in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them. Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. Look, he said to the people, the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous. And if war breaks out, we'll join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country. So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built Python and Ramesses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread. So the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labour and brick and mortar with all kinds of work in the fields and all their harsh labour.

The Egyptians worked them ruthlessly. The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Pua, where 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. The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to. They let the boys live.

Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live? The midwives answered Pharaoh, Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women. They are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive. So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own. 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. Amen.

Neil, it's my fault. Right. Has anyone heard anything I just said? David heard the thank you for reading.

[ 3 : 2 0 ] I'm Martin. I'm going to start again. If we've not met, I'm Martin. I'm the lead pastor here. And I've actually just been on the dangerous camping weekend with kids that we just prayed for.

So I need prayer and we'll all need prayer to get through this. It turned out we went into the wilderness that is just east of North Berwick by the beach. And as we went to the beach yesterday, there was like a wedding going on. Obviously, a couple had seen photos of the beach and thought, that looks like the kind of when you see Americans having weddings on beaches in California in the sunshine. And the sun was shining, but the wind was like 50 miles an hour. And so there were these people huddled up waiting for the wedding. But what I hadn't thought as we walked past was, they'll have a disco, won't they? So there was like, from the neighboring field, there was this like, it all went quite techno in the early hours of the morning. So all the dads were awake going, what is going on? All the kids obviously slept through that and still walk at half six.

So it's just chaos. So anyway, let's pray for energy to get into Exodus chapter one together. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we praise you and thank you that you are a speaking God who has made yourself known to us.

And we ask that this evening you will speak to us and so work in us that we would experience the reality of these truths, these promises about who you are, that we would find your words to be more precious than gold and sweeter than honey. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. So as Andrew said, we're starting a new series this evening. Our practice as a church, our normal practice is to work through books of the Bible chapter by chapter so that we're just letting God set the agenda and we're looking to bring out what's in his word and hear God speak to us. And Exodus, second book of the Bible, is a brilliant book because God reveals himself to people in human history through bringing about one of the most extraordinary times in world history, undoubtedly. We're going to see this extraordinary rescue of people. There was a movement of perhaps two million people who came out of slavery in Egypt where they were being oppressed and through the Middle East into the land around Jerusalem where they eventually got to. In the book Exodus, we're going to see the living God appear to a man, Moses, as he appears in flames of fire coming from a bush that isn't burning up. And God gives his name to Moses, his appointed leader for his people, to pass on to his people. So when we think of God and we think of names of God, we'll often think of words that are actually titles about God. But in Exodus, we hear God reveal his name and all the richness of what that means. We're going to see what happens when the most powerful human being in the world has a crack against God, fighting against God. Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, was the most powerful man in the world. You just think today about how people will still go to see the wonders of the ancient world in Egypt. Immense power and he'd enslaved the people of God. And when God sends

[ 6 : 53 ] Moses in his 80s to stand before this powerful man and say, these are God's people, they belong to the Lord, let them go. Pharaoh says, who is the Lord that I should let these people go? And it's game on.

They're in the ring together through the book. And eventually, well no, I once did, not eventually, but through these events, God says these dramatic words that we'll see when we get there. God declares to Pharaoh through Moses, I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. You still set yourself against my people and will not let them go. Therefore, at this time tomorrow, I will send the worst hailstorm that has ever fallen on Egypt from the day it was founded till now. Extraordinary events. We're going to see God bring his people out and bless them by revealing to them his moral code in the Ten Commandments from a mountain with thunder and lightning. It's just epic drama. And we're going to see the people replace, sorry, this is massive spoilers, right? But I'm just, this won't spoil it. We're going to see the people decide to replace God with a golden calf that they'll worship instead. And God is still merciful to them and then pitches his tent with them in the wilderness because he's going to dwell with them. It's an amazing, amazing book. It's drama that's inspired movies, The Prince of Egypt, now a West End musical, all sorts of other movies, some of them not very good movies. We're not recommending all the movies, but it just shows there's real drama here. And here in the Bible, we also see how God is revealing how we should interpret the events that happened.

It's also a new chapter in God's big book. So it's key to understand the book of Exodus in that wider picture of the Bible. In fact, the first word of the book of Exodus in the original language is the word and, because it's going to carry on a story that we've already seen of God at work bringing the origins of his people in Genesis. And it's a chapter that the rest of the Bible will be connected with so that as we get further on in the Bible to five, six, seven, 800 years before Jesus came, God began promising through prophets that he would bring about a great rescue for the world, for people from all over the world through his appointed king, Jesus. And he uses, well, the prophets self-consciously use language of a new Exodus will come. And so it enriches our understanding of who we are and who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for us to know Exodus well.

That we're saved not through the waters of the Red Sea, but through the waters of baptism when we become a Christian. We are rescued not through the blood of lambs on doorposts, as happened in the time of the Exodus, but through the blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. And so there are these illusions. God has come to dwell with us, not by pitching his tent among us in the wilderness, but through his spirit being sent to dwell among his people. And we're being led to a promised land, to the new creation. So if we want to know God better and have a richer picture of what he's done for us, Exodus is where we need to be. And as we dive in this evening, our first big point, they're on the sheets, inside the notice sheets, if that would help you. Our first big point this evening is we're going to see a faithful God who is keeping his promises. A faithful God who is keeping his promises. Let's look again at verse 1. These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each with his family. Then it lists the sons. You see the names there, verses 2, 3, and 4. And then it says, verse 5, the descendants of Jacob numbered 70 in all.

Joseph was already in Egypt. So that's where the book of Genesis left us. With Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob. Jacob had his name renamed by God Israel. So he is like the father of this nation, of God's people. And one of the sons, Joseph, has been raised up by God to be the kind of head honcho, the prime minister of Egypt under Pharaoh. And he rescues people. He rescues God's people and he rescues people from the nations around there. But then we're learning that 400 years have gone by and they're summed up in verse 6. Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful. They multiplied greatly, increased in numbers, and became so numerous that the land was filled with them. And that language draws us back again to the book Genesis. It points us back to the original recipient of the promises of God, Abraham.

[12:13] And so anyone who trusts God, whether it's at that time through being ethnically descended from Abraham or coming to trust God's promises through those descendants, or for us now when we come to trust Jesus, we can say we're children of Abraham. He received the promises. And those promises are like a seedbed for the whole Bible. And they begin in Genesis chapter 12. So we're just going to look at that afresh. It's just on the screen, if Jorge can just put it up. This is the first few verses of Genesis chapter 12. As God says to Abraham, who at that stage is called Abraham, go from your country, your people, and your father's household to the land I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse.

And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. And you can see different elements there in the promises of Genesis chapter 12 from God to Abraham. You see what they are? Some people say there are three. Some people say there are four. There might be five. But if you just have a look, there's land. So that gets kind of spelled out a bit more clearly in chapter 15 of Genesis. But here, we're seeing that God is telling him to go up to a new land, and God's going to promise to give him that land. So there's land. And then there's people. He says, I will make you into a great nation.

And there's blessing. He says, I will bless you in verse 2. And then the fourth one there would be that God says that Abraham will then be a blessing. So it says, all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. So somehow through the seed of Abraham, the nations, all peoples on earth will be blessed.

So we get to Exodus chapter 1, where we are tonight. How is God getting on so far at delivering on these promises? Well, land? Have they got land? No, they're in Egypt. No land. People, I will make you into a great nation. Yes, God is doing that. Blessing. We might say no at this stage. I don't know what you think. But being a slave, probably quite grim. But people, yes. In other words, what we learn from verses 1 to 7 of Exodus 1 is God is a promise keeper. And he has been keeping that promise that he made. And it's not that God has broken the other two promises. He is just keeping them in his own timing. So in Genesis chapter 15, which I haven't got for the screen, but God said to Abraham, as he reappeared to him, know for certain that for 400 years, your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and that they will be enslaved and ill-treated there. So that's what's been going on and what is going on here. And then God says to Abraham, but I will punish the nation they serve as slaves. And afterwards, they will come out with great possessions. So all of this has been anticipated. God is faithful, but in his own timing. And that is a message that the future readers and hearers of Exodus desperately needed to hear. I take it that the first hearers of Exodus are the next generation down. They are on the edge of the promised land. Their parents' generation came out with Moses out of Egypt. What they face as they go in the promised land is frightening.

[ 16 : 04 ] And they need to trust we can be brave and obey God because he keeps his promises. And we need that today. We need this week to be able to trust that God keeps his promises.

He's promised to us that Jesus will appear in glory. And when he does, he'll put the world right. And he'll take everyone who's trusting him to be with him forever in a new creation.

And as we look day by day at God's will for our lives, there are times when it is costly to live for God, to live like Jesus, live a Jesus-shaped life, serving others, putting others first, because we're putting God first and his will first. And those costs in our lives don't really make sense unless God's promises are true. We are moved to be willing to trust God and live to please him when we remember he's a promise keeper. He will keep his promises. And if we find it hard to believe that that promise that Jesus will come back and we'll all stand before his judgment seat and he'll take with him, everyone who trusts him, to be with him forever, if we find it hard to trust that promise, then we can look back at moments like the Exodus as well as moments in God sending Jesus and think, yes, he did. So yes, he will. Yes, he did. So yes, he will. And we need it day by day. I think of a friend who finds it hard when he wakes up every morning. He feels a sense of despair as he wakes up every morning and he has to talk himself out of those feelings by saying to himself, today is a good day.

Today is a good day. And as he said, as he remembers why it's a good day, he remembers God's promises. It's a good day because God the Father loves me. It's a good day because God the Son, Jesus, came and died for me. It's a good day because God the Spirit is in me to equip me for everything I face today. It's a good day because God is working in all things for my good. And today is a good day because I'm one day closer to being with God forever in eternity. To say those truths, we have to trust that God keeps his promises. And Exodus 1 says he does. He will because he did. And the big idea for us this evening in Exodus chapter 1 is to hold that truth alongside the lived experience for God's people at that time. So that's our second point, that we see a smashed in people whose lives feel bitter from verse 8 onwards. So the people enjoyed security in Egypt for a while as people remembered the grace they'd enjoyed under Joseph and his leadership. But look at verse 8. Then a new king to whom Joseph meant nothing came to power in Egypt. Clearly he sees the value in having this people enslaved as a labor force for Egypt. Because he says at the end of verse 10, that's one of his concerns, that they might leave the country. So he decides to try a number of tactics against the people of God who were in his land. And it's sobering as we look at these tactics to remember that people who have power around the world use these tactics against Christians. They've used them ever since and they use them today.

There are Christians today around the world who face extreme pressure, not unlike this, for being Christians. His first tactic is to create fear of them. And we see that in verse 9.

[ 19 : 49 ] Look, he said to his people, his people, the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous.

And if war breaks out, we'll join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country. So it's very like Satan himself, our great spiritual enemy, that Pharaoh, he wants the Egyptians to see God's people as other, as different from them and be afraid of them. He provokes this enmity.

And then his next tactic is to crush their spirits. If you look at verse 11 and see why he's doing what he's doing. So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor. And they built Pithom and Ramesses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread. So the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and work them ruthlessly.

They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields. And in case we hadn't got the point, he says, in all their harsh labor, the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly. So how does it feel to be one of God's people, a Hebrew at that time? It's grim, isn't it? It's grim, the experience. What is the life experience of someone who has inherited the promises of God and trusts them? It is bitterness at that time. The bitterness of being enslaved, mistreated by a powerful foe who treats them unjustly and has no one to hold them to account.

It would have been easy to feel defeated, would it not, at that time and think there is no future for us as God's people. And Pharaoh's concern is that they're becoming too numerous, but working them hard backfires. They keep having kids. And so he tries his third tactic, which is just all-out war. Wipe them out. In verse 15, it's wipe them out. The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shifra and Puah, 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's a girl, let her live.

[ 22 : 14 ] And that is devastating, isn't it? If you picture those midwives, what makes someone go into midwifery? Surely one thing is they want to help deliver life, do they not? Probably they love babies.

Midwives, midwives love babies, don't they? And most of the time, they are in it to enjoy giving living babies back to their mums as they're born. But they would also, I take it, naturally in their job, since Genesis 3, since the fall, they would know the grief of giving the news to a mum that the baby hasn't survived and how crushing that would be. And now those same women are being told, if the baby that's born living is a boy, you have to kill it.

And when that doesn't work, which we'll see in a minute, it's not working for Pharaoh, it's the all-out war that he declares. So the command then comes to everyone, in verse 22, at the end of the chapter, to his people, all his people, every Hebrew boy that is born, you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live. It's extraordinary, isn't it? The Nile has been given to Egypt by God as the source of life. And it becomes a place of death. Throw the boys in.

Pharaoh's will is that God's people would be one generation from extinction. And so as we think about what that must have been like, we can reflect on how God is showing us here that there is not a contradiction between him being unceasingly faithful and the bitter experience of his people at the hands of oppression. And that is a lesson people have to hold on to in parts of the world today. On the Open Doors website, Open Doors are an organization that move Christians, especially to pray for Christians who are being persecuted around the world.

And there's a report this week about Christians in northern Nigeria who've had to flee from violence against them by Islamic militants. And there's a pastor called Barnabas on the video online, and he walks us around the camp that he now lives in. I've got a picture.

[ 24 : 41 ] Jorge, if we just have that up on the screen. This is the camp that he walks you around. Those are the tents they live in. And he shows us around his house. If we get the next slide up, he says, this is my house. He lives in it with his wife and three of his kids. It's smaller than a double mattress in size. So his other children have to stay in a tent with a neighbor, and they just come and join them in the morning. And he pastors a church in the camp.

And that church and that camp are just some of 16 million Christians in sub-Saharan Africa who were displaced for being Christians. And Pastor Barnabas says on the video, every day our hope is in God. Their experience is bitter, but every day what they've got left is they trust God is faithful, and we will trust him. And though our positions might not feel as extreme as that, the same reality may be true for any of us this week, that we might look at our lives right now and say, do you know what? The experience of my life is bitter. I feel hard-pressed by what's going on in my life. And Exodus 1 urges us to see God is faithful, and we can still trust him.

We can trust him because we can look back at his faithfulness to his people and know that we can trust his promises. And if we trust him, we can respond faithfully to whatever our situation is.

And tonight we are introduced to two women who did that at the time. So that's our third point. Our third point this evening, two midwife legends who fear the Lord. So we meet Shiphrah and Puah in verse 15, and they're a bit like Boaz in the Bible, that when we looked at Boaz in the book of Ruth, I did say we need more boys called Boaz in our church. And we are actually, we now have them.

I don't think it was because of that sermon. It's just, he is a legend and people have named their boys Boaz. And we don't yet have any Shiphrahs or Puahs. But if we get any, you know, when you hear their name, you know, they've chosen well, because these are righteous women. Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the world commands them, kill the boys. But in verse 17, the key is they knew who to fear.

[ 27 : 20 ] 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. And he even summons them. And it's good to remember how frightening that summons would have been. And he asks them in verse 18, why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live? But they give their answer. Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women. They are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive. Now there is some lively discussion here about whether they lie.

And if they lie, is it okay for us to lie as Christians? And is God commending their lies? Or is he just commending their faith? Or do they not lie? Do they just say something that's kind of not a lie, but deceives Pharaoh? And I'm happy to take questions about that. They may well be lying. And God does commend them here. The Lord clearly approves of the midwives because they fear him and not Pharaoh.

And that is good. We see that in verse 20. So God was kind to the midwives. And the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own. So it could well be here that they lie and God is pleased with the deception of such an evil man with such evil intent. And if we think, therefore, there is a time when the godly thing would be for a Christian to tell a lie, let's just remember that it is an extremely limited situation with an extremely limited group of people. Here are women standing before a man who is effectively the evil one. He is doing the will of Satan. It's the most satanic evil. He is resolute in his determination to wipe out the people of God. And at that point, they choose to deceive him with their words to protect life. And it's good to be aware that this is one example of a beautiful little theme that runs through the Bible. Sin first came into the world through Adam, the first man who is rightly blamed for the first sin because he had the command of God. But it comes through Eve, the first woman, being deceived by Satan. And then from that moment, we get this little theme woven through the Bible of there are women who are faithful and they, faced with Satan, deceive.

They deceive him. They deceive instruments of Satan with their words to protect. Even though they're weak, they use deception courageously to deceive those who are bent on evil. Rahab is another example that she protects God's people. And here, the excuse they make to Pharaoh, it is quite implausible, isn't it? Is it even a bit mocking of Pharaoh? The reason we can't obey you, Pharaoh, is that the women who are Hebrews, they just give birth so quickly. They're just a bit more vigorous than your women.

And when we get there, it's all happened already. We actually, as an aside, nearly had a baby like this, where the midwives nearly weren't there. But thankfully, they did make it, so it wasn't left to me.

[ 31 : 08 ] But I was reading it thinking, like, if that was true, then Shifra and Puah, they wouldn't have a job, would they? What is the point in midwives if, whenever they get there, the baby is not just born, but hidden away somewhere, so that if it's a boy, they can't have him? They would be redundant.

So, it seems bizarre to me, but evidently, I take it Pharaoh is actually deceived by this, because he doesn't put them to death. He just tries another tactic to get the people killed.

And key for us is that they're just so brave, these women, and they choose to fear God and not man. And that example inspires us today as God's people. For when we ask ourselves, why are we not more radical as disciples of Jesus? Surely, oftentimes, it's because of fear.

Fear of what would happen if we were more obedient, more radical in our following of Jesus. Fear of the cost of being more committed to Jesus. Fear of how people around us might react.

Could we feel inspired by these women and God's approval of them and God's blessing of them, his delight in them? They had so much to be afraid of, but they chose to fear God and not anyone else.

[ 32 : 32 ] Folks, our time is nearly gone, but as we reflect on Exodus chapter 1 and how God's keeping his promises, but the people's experience is bitter. Let's notice the hidden power of God. Even in these early chapters, while Pharaoh seems so active and so powerful, there's already irony in the way that actually God is the one whose will is being done. So he doesn't want the Hebrews, Pharaoh doesn't want the Hebrews to leave, and the oppression he is bringing about will be exactly the reason that God will get his people out. So the tables are being turned on Pharaoh. Pharaoh doesn't want the Hebrews to breed, so he makes them work harder. And it seems, when we read through it in verse 7, sorry, in verse, where was it, verse 12, that for whatever reason that we don't quite understand, the more they're oppressed, the more they multiply. They have more and more kids.

And then eventually, he orders the Egyptians to throw every Hebrew boy into the Nile River, and next week we'll see his own daughter pull a baby boy out of the Nile River, who is a Hebrew, who God will use to save his people. The most powerful people in the world today cannot thwart the purposes of God. And the most powerful people in your life today cannot thwart his purposes.

That's God's hidden power. Next, notice the concerns of God, that if we were alive in Egypt, or even in neighboring nations at that time, Pharaoh would have been the one we noticed, the one we talked about. But in Exodus 1, we don't even learn his name. But we do learn the names of these two midwives, who in their weakness, protected God's people. Boy, do they matter to him.

And so it is today, when all the chatter around us is about people with strength and influence and money, what God is concerned with is where are his people who are humbly serving him while they wait for him.

And finally, let's just notice the plan of God relentlessly at work here, that everything is happening just as he promised towards his purpose of rescuing a people for himself.

[ 34 : 53 ] And we need to remember that God has a plan when our experience is bitter. It's worth remembering that Jesus himself had to trust that, that in the wilderness, when he was tempted by Satan, Satan's temptation was, all of this can be yours if you are the son of God.

But Jesus had to say no to that, to having everything now, and endure the beatings that took him to the cross, because through that, God was at work to save everyone who looks to Jesus today as he died the death that we should have died, so that he can spend forever with the glorious inheritance that God has prepared for him in the people who trust him.

Let's pray together. We praise you, gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, that you are powerful and that you keep your promises.

Thank you that your promises are what we need in life, so that we cry out to you, will Jesus come soon? Lord, come quickly. And by your spirit, would you move us as your people?

Whatever we go through today, this week, in life, to keep trusting that you are faithful, that we would respond with obedient trust, and our lives will adorn your message, for Jesus' name's sake.

[ 36 : 26 ] Amen. Amen. We're going to sing in response to God's word. Ailey the band will lead us. Do stand if you're able. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.