

Sermon File # 644

Scripture Text: Exodus 1:1-22

Sermon Title: *In the Days before Deliverance*

On Sunday morning 13 February 2011.

In the Days before Deliverance

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to the Book of Exodus, as we begin a new series of sermons that will occupy us a great part of this year. Exodus defines the very existence of the Jews, and is for Christians “the Gospel of the Old Testament” (Ryken, 17). This narrative of God’s miraculous deliverance of his people from bondage in Egypt to the Promised Land is to the Old Covenant what the resurrection of Jesus is to the New (Kelley, 5). I pray that we’ll all be challenged and encouraged by this great account of God’s guidance, care and provision for the people of his covenant love.

Exodus has been called a sequel to its prequel, Genesis, to use cinema terminology (Oswalt, *CBC*, 286). The first word in the Hebrew text is waw, “and,” directly linking Exodus with the last words of Genesis, making it the continuation of a larger story of God’s calling and purpose for his chosen people (Enns, 40f). The historical setting is sometime between 1450 and 1250 BC, during the 18th Dynasty of Egypt (1500-1295), which boasted the greatest military power and cultural wealth in the world (Oswalt, *NLT*, 122. Durham, page 7, places the Exodus setting during the 19th Dynasty, which boasted massive building projects which would have particularly benefitted from Israelite labor).

Today we look at the first chapter, which gives us a picture of the Israelites in the land of Egypt “in the days before deliverance.” Follow as I read:

Exodus 1:1-22

The eyes of the world have been upon the nation of Egypt since January 25th with the outbreak of a mass rebellion against the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. This past Friday night we witnessed on television news stations what was broadcast throughout the world—the celebration of throngs of Egyptians in the streets of Cairo. An 18-day mass revolt had resulted in the resignation of this dictator, derisively named “Pharaoh” because of his oppressive 30-year rule. No one knows what kind of government will replace Mubarak’s dictatorship, but obviously millions of Egyptians want change that will bring them greater freedom and opportunity. Of course we are praying for a good resolution and outcome, which would allow for greater freedom to proclaim the Gospel and equal rights for all the citizens of Egypt.

About 3400 years ago, another restive group, known as Israelites, dwelt as long-term sojourners in Egypt, longing to be free from an oppressive and cruel dictatorship of another Pharaoh (title for Egyptian kings). Up till this time, these descendants of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had become very accustomed to life in Egypt. Some 400 years before, Jacob and his other 11 sons made their pilgrimage to Egypt to escape famine. Jacob’s favored son Joseph had become prime minister due to God’s hand upon his life following his betrayal by his brothers (Genesis 37:12ff); and through

Joseph's request, his father and restored brothers were allowed by Pharaoh to settle in the region of Goshen, in the northeast delta area of Egypt, near the present day Suez Canal (Oswalt, *CBC*, 287). This is where the Book of Exodus finds these descendants of Jacob some 400 years later.

God blessed by nothing less than miraculous growth (from "seventy," verse 5, to "exceedingly numerous," verse 7), from the families of Jacob's sons to a land that was literally "swarming" with Israelites (Durham, 4). Life had become basically good and comfortable for these sojourners, since they enjoyed the goodwill and favor of the government and society in general. They lived with the advantage of family association with the former famous and heroic Prince and Prime Minister of Egypt, Joseph. This was a time of numerical growth and outward prosperity and security, but there is no evidence of any spiritual growth or progress in the faith that had characterized Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and also Joseph.

Here in Western Europe and also in North America, we find places where it is still somewhat advantageous to have some kind of Christian association or identification. Particularly in places in my home country, the USA, it's still advantageous to belong to the local evangelical church, especially if it's the largest and most influential in the city or town. In that kind of environment, it's very easy for evangelical Christianity to become individualistic, materialistic and even racist, as Soong-Chan Rah argues (27ff). Although church life can thrive and the numbers increase, the heart of the faith grows weak and the church loses its spiritual power and life and culture-changing influence in the lives of its people and the life of its community.

But in the days before God's deliverance, circumstances can change quickly, as was true for the Israelites. Suddenly there appeared a new Pharaoh, a paranoid dictator, who cared nothing for the identity of these semi-nomadic shepherds called Israelites. I believe that for us in the West, here and in North America, where there also is a heritage of biblical faith and a resultant level of respectability and comfort with the general culture, things could change quickly. The Old Covenant calls this the great tribulation before the coming Day of the Lord, one of judgment for God's enemies and deliverance for his followers. The New Testament calls this the Return, the glorious and awesome Second Coming of Christ. But before that great Day and Appearing, tribulation will create in us a longing for deliverance. And since the resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus, we have been living in the last days. As we move toward the final Day that will see the glorious return of Christ, we can expect things to become increasingly difficult for the church, the people of God.

In the last days before our deliverance, we are to first of all...

Remember whose we are

The youth of my generation were the restless and rebellious, and we learned to question tradition and authority, and were on a quest to find ourselves. A lot of my generation became hippies and turned to Eastern mysticism in order to "find themselves." I recall a pastor sharing that his daughter of my generation told him as she left home for university her goal was to find herself, "to find out who I am," she declared with resolve in her voice. The response of her concerned father was that it was more important that she remember *whose* she is than *who* she is. Especially in difficult times we need, like the Israelites, to remember that we are...

Children of the Father...

The opening verses of our text link the patriarchal history with the story of Exodus (Durham, 3). These Israelites, whatever might befall them, could remember that they were God's chosen people, children of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who had come with his sons to the land of Goshen centuries before.

When our circumstances change, darkness seems to surround us and God's voice seems to be silent, we need to remember whose we are, that we are "God's elect" and his "chosen people" (1 Peter 1:1; 2:9). Before God called us to himself through his Son Jesus, we were "not a people, but now we are the people of God" (2:10).

In giving us a model for our prayers, setting forth the basic elements, Jesus taught us to first of all address our prayers to "Our Father in heaven." Jesus himself prayed to the Father in intimate terms, using the word "Abba" (Mark 14:36), which expresses endearment to a loving, dear Father, who also is sovereign over the Kingdom of the Heavens.

Through our faith in Jesus, we enter an intimate relationship with the Triune God, knowing deep fellowship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with the assurance that we are kept in his strong, loving hand (John 10:29f). We are the distinctly different children of God, and that we are called, like the Israelites, to live...

in an unbelieving world...

There came to power a new king, Pharaoh Ahmoses (Oswalt, *CBC*, 287), who "did not know about Joseph" (8). Actually, the literal translation is, he "did not know Joseph" (ESV). Of course he lived centuries after Joseph, but his predecessors had kept alive the memory of Joseph and his heroic, ingenious leadership during a worldwide famine. Because of his ingratitude and refusal to honor the heritage of Joseph and his progenitors, the king chose to ignore the significance of Joseph, which allowed him to turn against the Israelites. His willful ignorance of Joseph and his offspring led to his sinful treatment of them. As one has said, "And so it is with all who are ignorant of God, His ways, His Word and His Son" (Ramm, 7f).

The word "agnostic" has a certain sound of sophistication, and many in this secular culture identify themselves as agnostic, as though they have received a certain level of intellect that qualifies them to reject notions of faith such as the "naïve Christians" believe. But the word "agnostic" means "without knowledge," and its counterpart is "ignoramus," hardly an honorable moniker. Willful rejection of God's truth leads to spiritual darkness and the inability to perceive truth, resulting in corrupted morals and sinful, perverted behavior (Romans 1:18-32).

Willfully ignorant Pharaoh, seeing the growing numbers of the Israelites, and yet wanting to exploit their numbers to aid in his massive building projects, decided to "outsmart" the Israelites and yet he was ignorant of the fact that he was pitting himself against the God of the Israelites, whose purposes for his people cannot be frustrated (Durham, 7f).

Because Pharaoh, in his sinful ignorance, feared the growing strength of God's people, launched his plan of attack to weaken them. And so we today as God's children need to remember that we also are children of God in an unbelieving world...

that becomes increasingly hostile.

Pharaoh couldn't deny the positive contribution being made by the Israelites, who would build bare handedly two of his cities. Nor have antichrists and secular opponents of the Christian faith been able to deny the contributions of the Christian faith and its humane and educational institutions to Western civilization. Yet Pharaoh chose fear as his motive (Durham, 7), and became paranoid and increasingly cruel and desperately murderous in his efforts to subdue the Israelites, whom he feared would join rebel and outside forces against his empire (Oswalt, *CBC*, 287).

Pharaoh's Plan A was to break the backs of the Israelites through hard labor, a plan which resulted instead in their becoming stronger and more numerous yet (12). His Plan B was infanticide, instructing the midwives to kill the newborn male babies, one which they defied (17). His final and cruelest Plan C was genocide, an order to have all Hebrew boys drown in the Nile, eventually in time destroying the Israelite people (Durham, 9ff).

Who can doubt the increasing hostility against the people of God today, with massive persecution and martyrdom of our fellow believers around the world? And this is what Jesus said would happen, on an increasing worldwide scale (Mark 13, etc.) but also to us individual believers, who follow in his steps (John 15:18-16:4). We can expect, when we live godly lives, to find alienation, ostracism, opposition and eventual persecution. Our lives are a rebuke to those in darkness around us and a disturbing threat to their way of thinking and living.

We all will have "days of darkness" that will come over us (Motyer, 27), when God seems to be deafeningly and maddeningly silent. As we noted throughout our study of 1 Peter, the way of following Jesus is the way of sharing his sufferings in the way of the cross. And the godly life, which draws the attention and incites the ire of the fallen world, is the life that is most persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12). But suffering and persecution do not deter God's people from being spiritually strong and fruitful. As we see in our text, the more Pharaoh oppressed God's people, the stronger and more numerous they grew.

In one breath the great missionary, Paul, declared his intention to remain in Ephesus because a "great door for effective work" had opened for him, *and also* that there were many there who opposed him (1 Corinthians 16:8f). In our days before deliverance we can expect and should not be disheartened by hostility and opposition as we also...

Realize God is working

As Bernard Ramm has written, the slavery and oppression of his children "did not catch God asleep any more than anything in this world does." God had predicted this outcome (Genesis 15:13) and 'works in the pushes and pulls of history,' even though it's difficult for us to see where and how he is working. "But faith believes he is there! In Egypt! At the cross! In our lives! In our history of our world in our times!" (Ramm, 9).

In fact, it was imperative for God to deliver his children, else he would have been a fraud and his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob null and void. Had he not been at work to bring about the deliverance of his people the entire Book of Genesis would be a "dead letter (Oswalt, *CBC*, 290f).

But God is absolutely faithful to fulfill his promises and he is at work, though often...

In hidden ways...

Faith alone allows us to trust that God is at work for our good when only bad things seem to be happening. Isaiah tells us that God's ways are not ours and are higher than our ways (55:8). And in time the children of Israel could see that God was giving them grace and strength and that his plan announced centuries before (Genesis 15:13; 46:4) would be fulfilled.

We today and the suffering church throughout the world needs grace to believe that God is at work for our good and his glory (Romans 8:28f) and his purpose and promise for our final redemption cannot be thwarted. Whatever is going on around us, happening to us and against us, we are nevertheless safe in God's sovereign and loving hand (John 10:28f, Motyer, 31ff).

Jesus spoke of how the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, tiny and insignificant to human sight but growing secretly and significantly (Matthew 13:31ff). God's kingdom has grown in places of oppression and persecution, such as in China, and we can be sure it's growing today in Iran and even in North Korea and Pakistan, as it is in post-Christian and secular Western Europe. Kingdom growth may not always show up in denominational statistics, with church attendance and baptism numbers, but it's happening.

Also in your life, as you move inexorably toward the day of your final deliverance, the Kingdom is growing. Even when you think and feel you're making no progress in your faith during your time of spiritual darkness, God is at work in you. The Kingdom is growing in you (Luke 17:21). When it seems you're not close to God and he's not answering your prayers, he nevertheless is faithful to you and present in you and at work through you. He may simply be leading you to a point of spiritual desperation or weaning you away from your complacency and comfort with the ways of this fallen world.

19th Century London pastor, Charles Spurgeon, noted that our text shows that God was at work behind the scenes, through wicked Pharaoh, to wean Egypt away from the pleasures and comforts of Egypt. Had they not been oppressed, they would have likely been absorbed into the idolatrous culture around them. Persecution, said the great preacher, reminds God's people that this world is not our home, and gives us a heart for the eternal Kingdom. (349ff).

God was at work also...

through unlikely people...

In order to thwart Pharaoh's Plan B, God used the two "head nurse" midwives to save his people from the wicked king's order of infanticide (15ff). Shiphrah, whose name means "beautiful one," and Puah," whose name means "splendid one" (Ryken, 39), certainly lived up to their names by not only refusing to kill these newborn Hebrew males, but actually providing special care for them, as implied in the Hebrew text in verse 17 (Durham, 11). Although his plan was to outsmart the Israelites (10), Pharaoh was certainly outwitted by these two ladies, who revered God more than they feared the king. In fact, it didn't take much of an alibi for these women to cover their counter plot. I agree with Philip Ryken that this Pharaoh appears a "few bricks shy of a pyramid" (43)!

God is at work in the lives of his people today, including and perhaps especially in lands of severe persecution, through people who revere him more than they fear others, who, as Jesus said, can kill only the body but not at all harm the soul (Matthew 10:28). God blessed these midwives

immediately and temporally (21), but he always will bless us eventually and eternally when we live with trust in and obedience to him.

God's greatest deliverance came to the world in an unlikely way. Whereas the Jews were expecting a mighty political and military deliverer, Jesus came as a lowly carpenter and itinerate teacher. Instead of overwhelming the world with immediate power, Jesus submitted himself to arrest, suffering, shameful treatment and death on a cruel cross. God fulfilled and continues to fulfill his promise to Abraham to create a great people through the great deliverance brought about through his Son, who emptied himself as a servant and spent himself through his death on the cross (Philippians 2:8).

Think of the utter weakness and desolation of the Son of God on the cross, when he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Darkness covered the entire earth, and especially the mind and heart of our forsaken Savior, who for the first and only time in eternity was separated from the Father's love (Mark 15:33). When we think God is silent and that darkness has come over us, we need to remember the terrifying silence and darkness Jesus endured when he, the sinless one, for our sakes became sin (2 Corinthians 5:21).

He brought deliverance to us through his death and resurrection. Just as he called to be his first followers a ragtag group of fishermen and outcasts like a tax collector and a political radical, so Jesus continues to call and use the weak outsiders of this world, the world's nobodies (1 Peter 2:12; 1 Corinthians 1:26ff). God brings his deliverance to the world through the life and witness of his weak and broken people, who trust him in hours of darkness when God seems silent.

But God is not silent, even when at times we have trouble hearing his voice. He is there and he faithfully speaks to us from his word, if we only take it and read it and seek to hear God with all of our mind and heart. This story of Exodus and all of God's dealings with his people in the past, are given to us as examples and as warnings (1 Corinthians 10:11). "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

God is working in us and through us...

for a certain outcome.

Pharaoh was no match for the living God, even when he launched his murderous genocidal Plan C, to eventually eliminate the Israelites by ordering all their boys to be drowned in the Nile. Obviously this didn't work, not only with the boy Moses, as see in Chapter 2, but with many of Moses' contemporaries, who also survived this intended pogrom.

God is at work, preparing us for our final deliverance, and he will bring his promised deliverance to fulfillment.

Some of us received yesterday an e-mail from our former IBC member Suzie Said, who along with her husband Nagi, returned to their Egyptian homeland years ago, where Nagi serves as one of the pastors of the large evangelical church in Cairo. Christians in Egypt have lived under some severe restrictions and of we've heard about recent attacks against particularly the Coptic Christians. Suzie and many other believers express joy over the resignation of "Pharaoh Mubarak," and hopes for the

establishment of a just democracy that guarantees freedom and allows for prosperity for all the people.

In expressing her hopes, Suzie quoted Philippians 1:6, about Paul's promise that he will finish what he has begun in his people, hoping that will be true also for the nation of Egypt. We can and should hope and pray the same with Suzie.

We are all living in the days before our final deliverance, but we can be sure, that just as God was "honor-bound" to keep his promises to the people of Israel, so he is keeping his promises to his New Israel, the people of God throughout the world, from the beginning of creation to the end of time.

Conclusion:

We today are waiting for our deliverance. Some may be waiting for deliverance from personal afflictions, or perhaps from oppression and opposition from spiritual warfare. Whatever our circumstances, we all are waiting for our final deliverance. We are waiting for God to complete what he has begun in us in our call to follow Christ and to become like him.

We who are trusting Christ are sealed by the Spirit and kept by the love of God for our final Day of Redemption (Ephesians 4:30). When we see Jesus face to face and become like him (1 John 3:2), our salvation will then be made complete and God will have finished all that he began to do in us (Philippians 1:6).

Those who bear the burden our suffering and trials will realize on that Day you see Jesus that he was preparing you for glory and that all you have suffered in this life is not worth comparing to the glory you will receive (Romans 8:18). On that Day of final deliverance, our present trials will seem "light and momentary" (2 Corinthians 4:17), and what seemed interminable and nearly unbearable in this world and time will seem like "a little while" (1 Peter 5:10). In the light of our "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13), we should pray the prayer of anticipation and preparation, "Come, O Lord!" (1 Corinthians 16:22; Revelation 22:20b).

The Deliverer is coming, and comes in salvation for his children, and in final, dreadful judgment of those who refuse him as Lord and Savior. By grace through faith, expressed in your turning from self and sin to follow Jesus as Master, you can trust that you will meet him as *your* merciful and mighty Deliverer and not face him as a terrifying Judge.

Jesus, our Deliverer through his death and resurrection, is the one who liberates us from the ultimate dictator and "Pharaoh," Satan. He delivers us from all that holds us captive, things and emotions such as self-destructive behavior, fears, anger and bitterness.

These are the days before the final deliverance, but the revolution has been fought and won. We already, in living by faith and in hope, can also celebrate in our streets, in this church and in our hearts, our great deliverance.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. After living in Egypt for 400 years, perhaps the Israelites had become complacent and too much a part of the surrounding culture. How would you compare this spiritual condition with the Church in the Western Europe and North America today?
2. What role did Pharaoh's oppression have in "weaning" the people of God from Egypt?
3. What effect has suffering and persecution had upon the Church throughout history and in the present persecuted Church?
4. In times of spiritual darkness and difficulty when God seems to be silent, why is it important to remember, as did the Israelites, *whose we are*?
5. What do you think is meant by those who say that had God not delivered the Israelites, he would have been a "fraud" and the Book of Genesis "a dead letter"?
6. In delivering his people, God worked behind the scenes and used "little people." In what ways was Christ an "unlikely" Deliverer and how does he work today in unlikely ways through unlikely people?
7. Contrast the political situation and the recent revolution in Egypt the past few weeks with God's deliverance of the Israelites and his deliverance of his people throughout history and since the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

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