

STUDY NOTES FOR LESSONS 1 & 2

Exodus Chapters 1-4

GOD'S MYSTERIOUS WAYS

The prologue to the story of Moses is the story of Joseph, for if he had not been "sold into Egypt" God's mysterious purposes could not have been brought about. When famine came to the land of Canaan, Jacob (also called Israel) sends his sons to Egypt, because he hears that grain is for sale there. And indeed it is, because of an amazing young man who began life as a favored son, but was jealously hated by his older brothers and sold by them as a slave to Egyptian traders. This boy, Joseph, later rose in prominence until he was governor of all of Egypt. In one of the greatest dramatic scenes in the Bible, Joseph confronts his brothers in Egypt and says to them,

"Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life.

6 For these two years hath the famine been in the land: and yet there are five years, in the which there shall neither be earing nor harvest.

7 And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

8 So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God: and he hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt.

9 Haste ye, and go up to my father, and say unto him, Thus saith thy son Joseph, God hath made me lord of all Egypt: come down unto me, tarry not:

10 And thou shalt dwell in the land of Goshen, and thou shalt be near unto me, thou, and thy children, and thy children's children, and thy flocks, and thy herds, and all that thou hast:

11 And there will I nourish thee; for yet there are five years of famine; lest thou, and thy household, and all that thou hast, come to poverty. Genesis 45:5-11

A PROMISE MADE TO JACOB

As Jacob travels by wagon towards the land of Egypt, overjoyed that he is going to be able to see his son Joseph before he dies, he has a dream. And this is the prophesy God made to the aged patriarch:

2 And God spake unto Israel in the visions of the night, and said, Jacob, Jacob. And he said, Here am I.

3 And he said, I am God, the God of thy father: fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation:

4 I will go down with thee into Egypt; and I will also surely bring thee up again: and Joseph shall put his hand upon thine eyes. (Genesis 46:2-4)

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

Exodus 1: 1-10 Exodus begins by listing the sons of Jacob (or Israel, as he becomes known). Eleven sons came into Egypt with their families, the text noting that Joseph's line was already there. But Joseph and his brothers eventually die and a Pharaoh comes to power that "knew not Joseph." It could be that this pharaoh was from a different dynasty, so there was no reason for him to do any favors for Joseph's descendants. This ruler felt threatened because God's blessing had prospered His people. They had

"multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty." Because of this, Pharaoh becomes an enemy to God's people. As their enemy, Pharaoh functions as a type of Satan, the enemy of all God's children.

GOD'S PROVIDENCE

Exodus 1:10-14 The situation that had once protected them and given them a safe harbor, now threatened their annihilation as a people. Yet note how the schemes of the enemy come to nothing. Obviously there is one mightier than Pharaoh, who is able to turn all his evil intentions into actual good, even when the children of Israel can't yet see that God is working in their favor. We call this God's providence: the outworking of God's plans and designs in the world when His work is not "signed", i.e., He is working anonymously.

One of the first things God does for them is to "make their lives bitter." For hundreds of years Egypt had been a good place for them. Their danger at this point was that they would not want to go back to Canaan, a place they didn't remember and that was surely going to require a harder existence than the one they had in the lush Nile delta. This problem of being at ease in worldly Egypt is solved by a change of dynasty that brought a Pharaoh to the throne who "knew not Joseph." This pharaoh increased the burdens cruelly laid on the Israelite nation. But rather than hurt the Israelites, the effect was to make God's people stronger.

It is interesting to note that God provided a protection for the Israelites that kept them from becoming wholly assimilated into the culture of Egypt through intermarriage. In Genesis 46:34 we read that "every shepherd is an abomination unto the Egyptians." The fact that the Egyptians held the profession of cattle and sheep herding in such low esteem kept the two populations from intermarrying. Another thing that divided the populations was religious practice. The Israelites practiced animal sacrifice of sheep and rams. The Egyptians did not sacrifice these animals as part of their religious rituals.

MORAL COURAGE

Exodus 1:15-21 In the story of the Hebrew midwives we have a record of two courageous women whose names are preserved for the ages; Shiprah and Puah. It must have been terrifying for these women to be called into the presence of the mighty Pharaoh, where everything was designed to create awe and fear in a common person. But their fear to offend the true and living God was stronger than their fear of offending the Pharaoh, even if it meant their own death. This tells us that faith in the true God was still very much alive among the Hebrews, and certainly the coals of that faith had been carefully kept glowing by the breath of the women, as they passed the stories of their ancestors down to their children and their children's children. In fact, until Moses comes back from Midian as the deliverer, all the courage and heroism shown in the record is that of women: Shiprah, Puah, Jochabed and Miriam.

It is also interesting to note that Moses does not include the name of the particular Pharaoh who orders the midwives to kill Hebrew babies. Neither does he give the name of the Pharaoh of the Exodus itself. He knew them of course. And he would also have known, being brought up in the court as a crown prince, that the great aim of the religious practices of the Egyptians was to keep their name alive. That is why it was inscribed all over the walls of their tombs and on monuments. As long as their name and memory was alive, they considered that they would prosper in the afterlife. Yet what names does

history remember but Shiprah and Puah, two humble women who feared God. Indeed, God honors those who honor Him. (1 Samuel 2:30)

THE FEAR OF GOD

The fear of the Lord is much misunderstood by our generation, as we seem determined to do what the song says and "accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative, and don't mess with Mr. Inbetween."¹ But the fact remains that the Old Testament speaks over a hundred times of fearing God as a positive thing. Sometimes we act as if this were simply a mistranslation and that it really means "respect God" or "reverence God." But the Book of Mormon and the D&C also use the wording "fear God" in a positive way. Further complicating the issue are scriptures like Genesis 15:1 where God tells Abraham to "fear not." So how do we both fear and fear not?

Let's clear this up. God is merciful and loving. He is not like the vengeful idols who cared nothing for their worshippers. These people feared their gods because these gods might destroy them on a whim. They were like the children of an abusive father who fear their parent because they never know what that he may do to them.

Fear of the Lord comes from just the opposite. A loving God carefully explains exactly what the consequences are of breaking his commandments. The fear of God, the kind we are supposed to have, is simply a knowledge that God applies consequences for unrepented sin that apply equally to all people. Our God is fair and doesn't play favorites. He both loves us, and means what He says about breaking his laws. We can count on it.

For those of us who had good fathers, most of the time we thought of our fathers in a positive loving light. Fear only came in when we approached the boundaries set for us, for example, if a friend urged us to sneak out with friends to a forbidden concert. Fear rises up as a protection for the child of God when they get too near the boundaries the Lord has set, urging him to back away from those boundaries and stay in compliance with God's laws.

When facing a temptation to break or ignore a commandment, if we think only of God's love, we may presume too much, assuming that since God loves us, we can do whatever we want and the consequences will be minor. The right attitude is to both "Fear God" and "fear not." We should "fear not" when we understand that God is our loving Heavenly Father, and we should "fear God" by appreciating the real and unyielding consequences that exist for rebellious sin.

THE USES OF ADVERSITY

Exodus 1:22-2:10 Becoming more frenzied in his desire to rid himself of the threat he imagined from the Israelites, Pharaoh gives up the cloak of secrecy that he used when dealing with the midwives, and comes out in open enmity against them. Now he orders all his people and the might of his army to assist him in his plan to kill the boy babies born to the Hebrews.

Again, all the events of this chapter reveal the hand of Satan, seeking to defeat the purposes of God by using the powers of this world for his own diabolical ends. He repeatedly attempts to wipe out the chosen people so that there will be no lineage through which to send a Savior. This tactic in the battle between the Serpent and "the Seed of the woman"² will surface again in the book of Esther, and again when Herod seeks to kill the

¹ Lyrics to "Accentuate the Positive" by Johnny Mercer.

² Genesis 3:15

male children of Bethlehem.

Yet, from the divine perspective, God was all the while achieving His purposes and promises largely unnoticed--offstage as it were. God had foretold to Abraham (Gen. 15:12-16) the affliction and bondage which would befall His posterity in Egypt. Yet through that bondage and adversity a number of purposes were being fulfilled for their good. Here are some of them:

- * As was already mentioned, the Hebrews were kept a separate nation by not intermarrying with the Egyptians who were prejudiced against them.
- * Egypt was a stable, peaceful and wealthy "incubator" where the baby nation was able to grow quickly from a small clan to a great multitude.
- * God's justice was preserved, for He could not righteously destroy the Canaanite nation living in that land until they were ripe in iniquity. (Gen 15:14-16) By the time the 430 years have passed, these conditions were met.
- * God made physical preparation for the journey ahead of them. When they finally left they were physically strong and had been given the wealth of the Egyptians to become seed money to start their new nation and build their temple.
- * They began as unsophisticated Bedouin-like herders of the desert. From their time in Egypt they were exposed to great cities and buildings and dams and bridges and courts and markets. Their horizons were much expanded in terms of their possibilities as a society. What they would build after Egypt was much more sophisticated than what they could have imagined before Egypt.
- * When God was seeming not to hear their prayers, He was actually working to raise up a leader with the skills necessary to lead a nation and make a record of the nation's history. In Pharaoh's court, Moses received the finest possible education of his day and also received training in warfare, troop movement, governance, building, public works, law giving, judging, languages, document keeping, etc. At the same time, in a miraculous way through the faithful Jochabed, the knowledge of who he really was and the knowledge of the true God was planted so deep in his heart that the enticements of the court of Pharaoh could not root it out.

DISAPPOINTED HOPES

Exodus 2:16-25 The incident in which Moses kills an Egyptian while defending a Hebrew slave is interesting because it shows that in spite of the years of training to become ruler of Egypt, emotionally Moses still identified with his mother's people and chose to try to help them. Paul's commentary on Moses in Acts 7 even implies that Moses "supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them." (Acts 7:25) It is hard to fault him for this confidence. It would be natural to regard the unusual circumstances of Moses' life as having been orchestrated for the very purpose of freeing the children of Israel.

However, his impetuous struggle and the death of the man he hit, resulted in having to flee from Pharaoh who now became his mortal enemy. There followed 40 long years of living with Jethro in Midian, tending sheep for the man who became his father in law. It

could not have been good for his self-esteem, as we would say in today's idiom, to be forced to become a shepherd, the very thing he had been taught by the Egyptians was "abominable," who was not even the head of his own household. Forty years is a long time to wallow in feelings that you have failed.

Perhaps God intended for his great prophet to be marvelously skilled and able, yet still remarkably humble for one so gifted. We have the word of scripture that he succeeded: "Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth." (Numbers 12:3) The Lord certainly devised an ingenious plan to achieve all these ends. Moses' story should give hope to all those of us who feel that life has passed us over, and that we are too old or too broken to make a contribution of any significance. We should let our past make us humble, and look to the future with full hope that God can still use us to do amazing things!