



1. Hope in a hopeless situation

(Exodus 1:1-2:10)

If you watch TV awards one of the most popular is called continuing drama otherwise known as Soap Operas. To my mind, they are largely nonsense although they are often used by their writers to underline social issues. Part of the “excitement” of the soap opera is that they leave you hanging at the end of the episode. If you didn’t already know the outcome of the first chapter of Exodus, you’d think it was a hopeless situation for the Israelites. It couldn’t get worse. Evil Pharaoh had first enslaved the Israelites, then demanded that their sons die as they were born and when that didn’t happen, he demanded that any boys found be thrown into the Nile! (Remember all that for when we get to the Passover. Remember that too when we get to the people grumbling in the wilderness.) It was a story of unmitigated disaster – or so it seemed. What do we have

- ◆ mass genocide – ethnic cleansing
- ◆ oppression and slavery
- ◆ people taking desperate measures

This was an impossible situation – or so it seemed. But as we’ve seen in previous months, we have a God who turns minuses to pluses. Out of disaster, God leads His people into an amazing adventure when they witness miracles never seen before. He turns them into a special nation.

It was the fulfillment of the prophecies to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob about their offspring being numbered as the stars of the heavens. I wonder what the Israelites were thinking of that as they suffered under the yoke of slavery in Egypt? They had the promises, but where was the reality. Actually, in the years between Joseph and the birth of Moses, they had started to grow into a nation. There were so many of them that Pharaoh feared them! There may have been more to it. Take a look at Genesis 47 at some point. Jacob and his family were allowed to settle in Goshen and Joseph wielded enormous power on Pharaoh’s part. He bought up land of people affected by the famine in Canaan and it became Pharaoh’s. That meant that the state actually owned land. We know that in that period Egypt controlled Canaan and beyond. Joseph made Pharaoh powerful through that famine and extended the empire but probably made enemies of Egyptians who had to sell to Pharaoh.

I was surprised that by cursory reading of Exodus 1:8, a Pharaoh arose who did not know Joseph. People like him are often famous well beyond their lifetime. The Egyptians kept historic records and we know a lot about their history as a result. The words in verse 8 are *then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt*. The word *know* is a broad one that may include “recognise” in terms of recognising his place in history. In other words he knew about Joseph but He didn’t know him as the Saviour of Egypt but common history had changed his legacy to one who didn’t favour Egyptians. Genesis 47 is our key here. He wasn’t one who liked Joseph’s legacy. He knew about Joseph; he had to. But Joseph wasn’t the saviour of Egypt, but the man who dispossessed people of their land, placed them under Pharaoh’s control (however willingly that may have been in famine) and who encourage these Hebrews to live in the land and do very well under state patronage at the Egyptians expense. It’s history but not as we know it. It’s called “conventional wisdom”. Each generation changes history a little to suit its needs. So take care that facts are facts. And the same has occurred through the years hasn’t it – Nazi Germany, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur. It leads to discrimination of one group against another – Northern Ireland, Iraq whatever irrespective of what true facts may be.

When you think about how long and forgotten politicians and usually how long and forgotten their legacies are – even in a generation, then what happened in Exodus 1 was not a surprise. Joseph’s

people had acquired a huge amount of influence because of Joseph, but the political tide may have turned against them. What was favour in one generation in one generation became xenophobia in another.

They were so busy prospering in Egypt under Joseph that they failed to notice that they were a nation. I wonder what they were doing with God in all those years? Was He forgotten as they prospered? They may have forgotten but the Egyptians saw their growth in numbers and power and saw them as a threat. And that slipped into bondage and then genocide. For the Hebrews, the slide from prosperity to bondage was a swift one.

Sometimes, the way upwards is not as smooth as we would like it to be. We hang on to the promises of God, we look at the vision He is giving us; but then we look at the reality of it. Hmm. I've thought about this recently as after a positive year, we have seen a few people leave for one reason or the other. We've seen promising areas of ministry run into difficulty. And maybe we started to question things. "Oh dear, the Norfolk curse has struck again. Everything is going fine and then – bump!"

God hadn't forgotten them. They were going to move into a new age – and a more blessed one according to His grace. Exodus is the story of how God made the people of Israel into a nation – a nation under Him. It's the story of an Exodus – a leaving of one thing and the journey towards the promised land. It's a journey of hope but also one of the people's failure, but God's continuing grace to them despite their failings. Over the next few months we are going to join them on that journey and learn from their experiences.

So Exodus opens with disaster. How does this disaster start to turn the corner?

By the raising up of bold women

15 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, 16 "When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." 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. 18 Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?" 19 The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive."

20 So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. 21 And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own. 22 Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

Resistance to Pharaoh was through two Hebrew midwives, Shiprah and Puah who refused to kill the boys at birth, making excuses why they had not. Sometimes we look for big gestures when we are in a difficult position. We look for someone to come and rescue us. Or we think that we have to do something that is out of our reach. But in all the bondage, some people were doing a small act of defiance against Pharaoh. It wasn't much, but it allowed Moses to be born.

When we have our problems, what do we do: give up because it seems too difficult? Or do we look for the way God has provided out of it. Sometimes it is the smallest act of all – prayer. As a church we often look for the grand schemes to see change here. We think "maybe the Pastor and the Deacons should come up with a scheme to get more people in" "Dennis should do a few more doors". "They must do it, because I could never do it myself". But change will come when we are prepared to be Shiprah and Puah. When we are ready to devote prayer to the situation. When we are prepared to make that small risk of talking to our friend or neighbour. That's when Moses gets to be born. That's when we see God in action. "Blessed are those that expect little – they will never be disappointed!"

By a desperate act of faith

birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. 3 But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. 4 His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him. 5 Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the river bank.

The bravery of Shiprah and Puah didn't seem to be very productive to begin with. Pharaoh commanded that all male be thrown into the Nile. So for Amram and Jochebed and their small son Moses things don't look hopeful. So she takes on an act of faith – she puts him in a basket amongst the rushes near the Nile. We are not told why, just that she did it and then set Miriam to watch over it. Sometimes God asks us to just trust Him. Whether that be in our personal problems or as a church, the bottom line is that big things start with a small act of trust.

Do we want release from our personal problems and difficulties. Do we want to see new things here in our fellowship? Then it starts with small acts of faith – a prayer here, a small risk there, and act of faith. Out of small beginnings grow great things. That was certainly the case for young Moses.

■ Never underestimate God

5 Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the river bank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to get it. 6 She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said. 7 Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?" 8 "Yes, go," she answered. And the girl went and got the baby's mother. 9 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. 10 When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."

Who would have thought that God's salvation would come this way. It came through an act of compassion by the daughter of the man who oppressed the Hebrews! Never dictate to God how He should work. Who ever would have thought that the man God raised up to lead His people out of Egypt would have been by a man brought up with the oppressors and all the privileges that brought with it.

Since I have been here in Norfolk, I have heard so many times from various quarters how we should do things this way or that way. I've heard how good other churches are compared to ours and we should do what they are doing. "Why don't we get their minister to come and preach here – he'll soon liven things up? Such and such a church is no good because they don't do this or that in accordance with scripture! Scripture teaches that we should do things this way? We will worship somewhere else because they are more spiritual there" – or worse, "because God looks as though He's working more there than Swaffham Baptist!"

Let's take a reality check here. This is God's church, not yours or mine. He doesn't follow the rules we set Him – he sets the rules. What He does elsewhere is what He does elsewhere and praise Him for that. But we have to learn to trust Him for what He wants to do here and look for that, not in a replication of what He does down the road, but what He wants to do in His sovereign grace here.

It's all about where we are casting our eyes. For the Israelites, it was casting their eyes on the bondage of Egypt and seeing no hope. For Shiprah and Puah, Amram and Jochebed, and Miriam, it was celebrating the small blessings even though they did not see a way through quite yet.

Look and see what He is DOING here already with Swaffham Baptist Church. He's doing lots. It may not be dramatic, but Moses started in the bulrushes Hope for Israel came from an unexpected place – a small basket amongst rushes! Let's start with the bulrushes Look in the unexpected places and celebrate what God is doing, discern where He is going and follow Him!

The salvation of Israel came out of the court of the oppressors! The last place the Hebrews or Pharaoh himself would ever have looked. And this man had unique insight and knowledge that would be critical at a later stage.

Do we seriously want to see the blessings of God in this fellowship? Do we want to see real change? Do we want to *not* see history repeat itself with more disappointments?

Then let's trust the God who turns minuses to pluses, let's be faithful in the small acts that we can easily do, the small risks that we can take, and look in the bulrushes for the unexpected God who brings in amazing ways and makes a way where there is no way.

A good way of summing this up is in a song by Don Moen:

*God will make a way,
where there seems to be no way;
He works in ways we cannot see,
He will make a way for me.
He will be my Guide,
Hold me closely to His side;
With love and strength for each new day,
He will make a way,
He will make a way.*

**By a roadway in the wilderness He leads me,
Rivers in the desert will I see.
Heaven and Earth will fail,
But His word will still remain;
He will do something new today.**

Don Moen

***As we come with Jesus around His table this evening, let's take time to get things into perspective.
Let's not see tough things, but let's look in the bulrushes and see what God is doing.
Let's commit ourselves to pray
Let's commit ourselves to God's work***



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