God Multiplied the Israelites

Exodus 1:1-22

Key Verse: 1:7: “but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.”

As we studied last week, the word “Exodus” means ‘exit’ or ‘departure.’ Exodus is the second of five books of Moses, which are called the “Pentateuch” or “Torah” in Jewish terms. The themes of Exodus are God’s divine deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, his law, and instructions for worship. Someone said that Exodus laid the foundations of Biblical faith related to redemption, constitution, and consecration. The book of Exodus starts with Abraham’s descendants in Egypt, whereas the book of Genesis starts with Abraham in Canaan.

Look at verses 1-5. “***These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each with his family: Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali; Gad and Asher. The descendants of Jacob numbered seventy in all; Joseph was already in Egypt***.” As we know, Jacob and all his family went down to Egypt after Joseph became the right hand man of Pharaoh. Jacob died in Egypt, but he was buried in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, with his father Isaac, and Abraham. When Joseph ruled Egypt as a prime minister, he provided the best part of Egypt, Goshen, for his family. (Ge 47:11) Goshen, the district of Rameses, was a fertile land by the Nile River, which was good for feeding and watering cattle and sheep. As shepherds, Goshen was the perfect place for Jacob’s family. Jacob’s family was protected from the godless pagan culture of Canaan and could keep their identity as the covenant people in the best part of Egypt. The Egyptians did not associate with the Israelites because they hated shepherds. In modern terms, the Israelites were legal immigrants who had been invited by their family member Joseph. Without any hindrance from the Canaanites and the Egyptians, and with Joseph’s protection and provision, Jacob’s family multiplied and increased in numbers until they became a nation.

Look at verses 6-7. “***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.***” When they went down to Egypt, their number was only seventy. When they came out of Egypt, it was over one million, 603,550 men plus women and children. (Nu 1:46) If their exiled number was one million, their population increased 2,326 every year for 430 years. God blessed Israelites to become fruitful and increase in number as he promised Abraham and his descendants. God blessed Abraham and said, “*All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted*…”(Ge 13:15-17,22:17) God also promised Isaac in Genesis 26:4, “*I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.*”

Here we learn that our God is the faithful God who keeps his promises. God blessed Israel by making them fruitful and increasing in number as he had promised. We often forget what we promised even a few days ago. But our God remembered what he had promised 430 years before. In order to keep his promise, he sent Joseph to Egypt first, ahead of his family. Through Joseph God sent Jacob’s family to Egypt, the best place for their multiplication. The land of Canaan was not the best place for Jacob’s family. They had been constantly threatened by neighboring tribes who were tempted to annihilate them. The children of Abraham must have overcome the strong idolatrous pagan culture of Canaan. This was why Abraham was looking for a wife for his son Isaac from his relatives rather than from the Canaanite women. God wanted to protect the Israelites from the threat of their enemies and temptations from pagan culture, and sent them to Egypt where spiritual and political protection and enough food were provided during Joseph’s reign.

Our God always works with a big picture and with a long term plan. While living on this earth, we may live in prosperity or poverty. We may not see God’s blessing at once or experience his favor in our life time. But God is working faithfully according to his divine plan and good purpose in us and through us. In all things he works for good for those who love him and who live according to his good purpose. He makes a promise and keeps it no matter what, whether we acknowledge it or not. One of his main characteristics is faithfulness. He remembered the promise which he made with Abraham 430 years ago, and kept it in his best time. What we must do is to trust in Him always and be faithful to him to the end. Amen!

How nice it would be if the Israelites had multiplied and spread over the whole land of Egypt, even to the southern tip of the African continent! But God had a different and better plan for them. What happened to the Israelites? Look at verses 8-10. “***Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. “Look,” he said to 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, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country***.” After Joseph died, a new king realized the remarkable increase of population of the Israelites. Fear and jealousy came into his heart. He considered the Israelites as a future threat to the Egyptians’ safety and security. So he summoned all his officials and discussed how to deal shrewdly with the Israelites. He did not ask to build a border wall between Goshen and the district of Egyptian residents. He did not make strict immigration laws, either. What did Pharaoh do?

Look at verses 11-14. “***So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Ramses 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 labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.***” Pharaoh’s first pogrom started. His plan expected twofold success, both politically and economically. He desired to reduce the Israelites’ population through a system of slavery, and to use them as labor for the Egyptians’ economic benefit. The legal immigrants, the Israelites, became slaves of Egypt. Pharaoh put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor. He used them to build two store cities for himself. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread. This was because God was with them. Pharaoh could not control their population because God was with them. No matter how Pharaoh tried to reduce the number of the Israelites with his evil, he failed because God was with them. It reminds us of Paul’s victorious message in the book of Romans, “*If God is for us, who can be against us*?” (Ro 8:31)

Pharaoh realized that his first plan for pogrom failed. So he planned the second one, which was more cruel and murderous. Look at verses 15-16. “***The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah 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 is a girl, let her live.***” The Pharaoh’s edict was murderous. He ordered the midwives to kill all Israelite newborn baby boys. At that time, there were delivery stools which were connected to aqueducts for the newborn babies to be washed. By the king’s order the midwives must kill all the baby boys in the water. But this time the king’s plan didn’t work, either. Verses 17-19 tell us how God frustrated Pharaoh’s plan and protected his people the Israelites from the massacre. “***The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys alive. 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***.” (Ex 1:17-19) The midwives feared God rather than the king, the Pharaoh. They did not obey the king in order to obey God. They even lied in front of the king in order to save innocent lives. Here we learn that God’s law is above human laws. God’s word is above all human laws, rules, systems, and policies. The midwives not only feared God, but also loved human lives. They loved babies who were given by God. They did not have the Ten Commandments, yet they knew that they should not murder. They lived according to their good conscience. God blessed them.

How did God bless them? Look at verses 20-21. “***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***.” God blessed the midwives because they feared God more than the king of Egypt. Their reward from God was their own families. They must have had reasons not to have their own families. They must have been barren or old. But God opened their wombs to conceive their own children and to have families. These two Hebrew women could have lived and died anonymously like many other midwives women. But their names were written in the book of Moses because of their heroic action for the destiny of the Israelites. God raised the name of Esther because of her heroic work of salvation of the Jews from the peril of massacre in Babylon. In the same way God raised Shipharh and Puah as heroines in God’s redemptive history. God blesses those who fear him and love human lives. God shows his kindness to those who live according to his word and work for God’s redemptive purpose.

God frustrated Pharaoh’s evil and murderous plan for the Israelites. But like the persistent Satan, Pharaoh did not give up. He continued to challenge our Sovereign God. Verse 22 says, “***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***.” His command was ordered to all the Hebrew parents. All Hebrew parents must throw their new born baby boys into the water. Pharaoh’s order was parallel to Herod’s order to kill all the baby boys under two after the birth of Jesus. Just as God delivered his people from the slavery of Egypt through Moses, God delivered us from the slavery of sin through Jesus Christ.

In the book of Exodus God’s sovereignty over human history is emphasized. God rules world history and controls human destiny. God is in control. No matter how hard Pharaoh worked to destroy the Israelites, it could not work without God’s consent. Pharaoh’s plans for pogrom failed twice because God intervened. Jesus promised protection for his anxious disciples in Matthew’s gospel, “*Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows*.” (Mt 10:28-31)

Therefore, the people of God must live by faith in God and in his promises. Imagine the lives of the Israelites as slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor. He made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields. (1:11,13) But they did not give up as people of God. They kept their faith and their identity as people of God. They remembered Joseph’s farewell oath according to Genesis 50:25, which says “*And Joseph made the Israelites swear an oath and said, “God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place.*” They believed that God would not let Joseph’s bones be buried in Egypt, but would let them carry his bones to the Promised Land. They taught their children God’s covenant with their ancestor Abraham, “*Know for certain that four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions…*” (Ge 15:13-15) They believed God’s promise which God had made with their ancestors. Their faith and endurance was based on God’s promise. Whenever they saw Joseph’s bones, they remembered God’s promise. Our faith should be also in God’s promises. God promised eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. (Jn 3:16) As the Israelites looked at Joseph’s bones and remembered God’s promise, we also must look up at the cross of Jesus and remember God’s promise for eternal life.

Our God is faithful in that he keeps his promises. Our God is the Sovereign Lord who works all things for his good purpose. Our life is a very small part of his long term plan. Still, our life is so precious, beautiful, and meaningful to the eyes of God. May God bless us to trust in him and believe in his promises and live as people of God in the last days. Amen.