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January 3, 2019 – PM

Covenant People
Exodus 1:1-2:10

When I was in seminary, an important part of our studies involved the biblical languages. When we began the study of Greek, very quickly our Greek tutor discovered that unlike previous generations of students many of us suffered from a serious deficiency. We had not been taught the rules of English grammar as a distinct subject in our earlier schooling, and so we were lost when it came to the most basic of technical linguistic distinctions. And so, understanding tenses and cases, nouns and verbs, and syntax and grammar in English became our study for the first few weeks before we ever got to Greek. But once we had a good basic understanding of English grammar, we discovered that we had a helpful starting point from which to understand the rules of language study when it came to learning Greek as well.

I rather suspect that for many of us one of the great weaknesses in our Christian lives is that we do not have a sufficient grasp of the language of the gospel. We have learned it piecemeal. Our understanding of it is patchy and lacks cohesion. We grasp *this* aspect of the good news quite clearly, but *that* dimension is one we still struggle to fully comprehend. And how we put them all together into a coherent whole is even less clear. Can you relate to that? Well, I want to suggest to you this evening that perhaps one reason for that is that we may not have mastered the rules of gospel grammar as we find them outlined in the Old Testament scriptures.

The book of Exodus in particular is especially useful in providing us with that basic gospel grammar. “It is an interesting and important fact,” says Iain D. Campbell, “that almost all the words that are important in the New Testament in explaining the gospel to us are before us in the book of Exodus.” He goes on to characterize reading Exodus as learning the “ABC’s, the building blocks of the good news, the vocabulary in which the message of God’s salvation is communicated to us.” (Iain D. Campbell, *Opening Up Exodus*, 18)

So let me invite you now, please, to turn back to Exodus, chapter 1. One of the most important things to notice about Exodus is that it is written as part two of the ongoing story of the origins of God’s covenant people which began in the book

of Genesis with the calling of Abraham, the narratives of his children Isaac and Jacob, and then removal of Jacob's sons and their families down into Egypt during a great famine to live there under the protection of Joseph, one of Jacob's sons who had risen to the office of Prime Minister in that country. The Israelites lived in the land of Goshen and prospered.

And Exodus, chapter 1, picks up where Genesis left off. In fact, its first word in Hebrew is "And"- Verse 1 literally reads, "And these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt..." This is a continuation of the story rather than a new story that is beginning. And that is critically important to understand because the book of *Genesis* is not simply focused on the fortunes and failing of Abraham's family. It is not simply a history of Israel's ancestors. It is an account of the covenant promises God made to Abraham and his children by which they were set apart and bound to the Lord. It is an account of the covenant faithfulness of God to those promises. Just as much as it is a history of the ancestors of Israel, it is also a history of the covenant love of God towards Israel.

And *Exodus* is written to demonstrate how those ancient promises find their partial fulfillment in the drama that unfolds in the chapters of this great book. The message of Exodus, in other words, is God-wards, primarily. It makes a point about *God*. He chooses and selects a people for Himself. He binds Himself to them in covenant love. He keeps His covenant promises to them.

And here in Exodus 1:1-2:10 we are introduced to the situation in which the people of God find themselves as they sojourn in Egypt. They are multiplying and growing in number. Then a new king, or perhaps even, as some scholars have suggested, a new dynasty of kings, ascends to the throne, and he cares nothing for Joseph, this historical figure from a previous day under whom the Hebrews enjoyed such protection. Instead of protection, the new regime is marked by paranoia. They recognize that the Hebrews are particularly virile and fruitful and they reproduce at a rate that was rapidly coming to outnumber the Egyptian ruling classes. Instead of protection then, the Hebrews encounter paranoia; instead of privilege, they meet with persecution. In fact, they are enslaved and compelled to work in the labor camps of Pharaoh.

But the enslavement of the Hebrews does not halt their growth, and so Pharaoh attempts a “final solution.” He orders all male children to be killed at birth. The female children could be absorbed by intermarriage within a generation, and so the Hebrews would simply cease to exist. And it’s at this point the story hones in on the courage of two Hebrew midwives who refuse to kill babies for the government and the heartrending tale of one couple, Amram and Jocabed, who face an agonizing choice over what to do with their baby boy in the wake of Pharaoh’s edict.

That is the story. It is a moving story of courage and faith in the face of tyranny and brutality. But it is, of course, about much more than that. This is a story about how Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, and Amram and Jocabed, Moses’ parents, *were able to do what they did*. This is a story about both the faithfulness of God’s people to His covenant, but more importantly, about the covenant faithfulness of God to His people.

Let’s consider that great theme of God’s covenant faithfulness to His people, first of all. Look at verses 6-7 please, “And Joseph died, all his brothers, and all that generation. But the children of Israel were *fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty*; and *the land was filled* with them.” And notice the same theme again in verse 12, “But the more they afflicted them, the more they *multiplied and grew*. And they were in dread of the children of Israel,” and again in verse 20, “Therefore God dealt well with the midwives, and *the people multiplied and grew very mighty*.”

Now in describing the multiplication of the Israelites, Moses uses language that echoes two earlier sources in the book of Genesis. The first comes from Genesis 1:28. When God created our first parents, Adam and Eve, He gave them this mandate, “Be *fruitful and multiply; fill the earth* and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” That was the command of God to them. It was part of the original creation mandate given by divine law to Adam and Eve. What’s striking to notice is that this same language of fruitfulness and multiplication occurs again most significantly in the context of *the gracious covenant promise God makes with Abraham*, for example, in Genesis 17:2, “And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will *multiply you exceedingly*”- or and again in

Genesis 22:17, “blessing I will bless you, and ***multiplying I will multiply your descendants*** as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which *is* on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies.” To Jacob, Abraham’s grandson, in Genesis 35:11, God renewed that covenant promise and said to him: “I *am* God Almighty. ***Be fruitful and multiply***; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you, and kings shall come from your body.”

And so now here in Egypt what are we to understand from the multiplication and the fruitfulness of the children of Jacob and Abraham? We are to understand that God was keeping His covenant promise to them. Whereas multiplication was **the legal obligation** laid on Adam in Eden *before* the fall, *now* in the covenant of grace made with Abraham after the fall, multiplication is a **gracious promise**.

Before the sin of Adam, before creation itself was cursed, the multiplication of the race was natural and unimpaired by the brokenness that it now endures. But since the fall, now that God has cursed the race, specifically cursing the childbearing of Eve in Genesis 3, fruitfulness is no longer something we may take for granted, which some of you may know to your own great pain. Childlessness is a terrible sorrow that marks life this side of Eden for a great many. Certainly, fruitfulness was not something one might easily expect to see in ***Israel’s*** case, dwelling as they did under the most severe cultural oppression. They were slaves, brutally treated and cruelly used. The regime did everything it could, not simply to oppress, but eventually to destroy them. And yet, still, in these most unlikely and extreme of conditions, sin notwithstanding, fallen nature notwithstanding, Egyptian malice and paranoia notwithstanding, the Hebrews were fruitful and multiplied.

What are we to make of that extraordinary fact? It is surely that God was keeping His covenant promises to them. He was fulfilling by grace promised to Abraham what He commanded by law given to Adam, which, if I might detour slightly for a moment, is a principle that stands at the absolute core of biblical Christianity.

The law of God, the covenant of works, the obligation to obedience, cannot be fulfilled by any of us now that Adam has sinned. The ***gospel*** is that what God

commands in His Law He provides in His grace to His people. Augustine's famous prayer sums it up perfectly, "Grant what thou commandest and command what Thou dost desire." If you do not understand that concept, you do not understand the first thing about basic Christian living. Alone, unaided, you can't obey. You can't. God must give the grace. Obedience is the *fruit* of the enabling grace of God in our lives. Grace *precedes* obedience. Obedience is not the condition for grace. Your best efforts to please God are futile: futile, if they do not spring from the prior activity of God in your heart by His grace; futile, if He does not first bring you to the end of yourself, and draw you to rest wholly on Jesus Christ; futile, if He does not first cleanse your conscience and pardon your sin; utterly futile, if God does not come to dwell your heart by His Spirit through faith in His Son.

Well, one place where the New Testament picks up the language of the covenant of grace made with Abraham is in Matthew 28:19-20, where the risen Christ tells the apostles, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age.' Amen." Now the object, remember, of the fruitfulness and multiplication that God promised to Abraham was that in his seed all the nations would one day be blessed. The Greek Old Testament, used by the writers of the New Testament, uses the same expression, *pa,nta ta. eiqnh*, "all the nations"- "Go into all the nations," that we find in Matthew 28:19, in Genesis 22:18, when God tells Abraham that "all the nations will be blessed in his seed." Jesus is telling the disciples that they are now the vehicles through whom that promise will be fulfilled. The people of God will multiply and be fruitful in all the nations through the gospel proclamation of the church of Jesus Christ, which is, incidentally, exactly what you find reported, in this same covenantal language of fruitfulness and multiplication, all over the book of Acts, as the church got on with the work of preaching and teaching about Christ crucified. Acts 2:47, "The Lord added to the number daily those who were being saved." Acts 6:7, "Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly."

Where does church growth come from? It comes as the church of Jesus Christ takes the covenant promise of God seriously. It comes when we trust God and take Him at His word and proclaim without embellishment the unalloyed truth

of Holy Scripture. Growth is the promise of the covenant. Of course, it may not be the growth of this particular congregation, but the growth of the worldwide covenant people of God is assured. The command to be fruitful and multiply given to Adam is now the promise of fruitfulness and multiplication given by grace to Abraham, fulfilled in his seed, Jesus Christ, and realized in the life of local churches all over the world.

Another mark of the great covenant faithfulness of God to His people here is in the preservation of Amram and Jocabed's son, Moses. Look at chapter 2:1-10, please. Pharaoh's plan A had failed. Enslavement has not reduced the numbers of Hebrews or slowed the rate of their multiplication. Plan B had also failed. The Hebrew midwives disobeyed the king and obeyed the Lord and the Israelites continued to grow. And so now in the last verse of chapter 1, Pharaoh turns to plan C—throw your male children in the Nile. But Amram and Jocabed will not do it. When Moses becomes too old and too noisy to no longer be kept secret, Jocabed makes a little basket, covers it in asphalt and pitch to seal it against the water, and places her son in the basket amongst the reeds at the river bank. Moses' elder sister hides nearby to keep watch.

What happens next is full of both irony and beauty. Pharaoh's daughter finds Moses. Now if the Pharaoh in view here is Rameses II, he has close to sixty daughters and homes all over this region which means that, while this is a remarkable coincidence, it is not at all difficult to believe. Pharaoh's daughter notices that Moses is a Hebrew child, presumably because he has been circumcised, but instead of horror or outrage, she chooses to adopt the child as her own, which is the cue for Moses' sister, who steps forward and suggests a Hebrew nurse for the Egyptian princess. And so Jocabed brings her baby boy, Moses, home, and for the next few years raises him as a Hebrew child, and she even gets paid to do it!

Now as moving and gently humorous as the story is, there aren't many clues as to why *this* child has been preserved among so many others who were no doubt lost. *One* important clue is the word used for the papyrus basket Jocabed made for Moses. The word is "ark," she made an ark for him. It is only ever used elsewhere in the account of Noah. There is a hint here, I think, that we are meant to see, that

woven into the story of the life of this little boy is a story of salvation from divine judgment. Just as Noah saved the covenant line from the flood in an ark, Jocabed saves Moses from the waters of the Nile in a second ark so that in time, through Moses, the covenant line, the people of God, would likewise also be saved from the wrath to come.

And here we glimpse part of the significance of Moses in the book of Exodus and in the sweep of God's redeeming plan across history. Moses will be the earthly savior of God's chosen people. He will mediate the covenant to them. He will lead them from slavery into freedom. Moses is a type, a picture, of Jesus Christ. Like Moses, when Christ was born, a tyrannical and paranoid king, Herod this time, not Pharaoh, ordered the massacre of male children to prevent the fulfillment of the covenant promise of God. Like Moses, Jesus found safety, not death, in Egypt. Matthew 2:15 says that the words of Hosea that speak about Israel coming from Egypt under Moses' leadership were fulfilled in the coming of Christ, "Out of Egypt I have called my Son."

Jesus came to accomplish a new and ultimate exodus from the slavery and bondage of the people of God to sin this time rather than slavery to Egypt, and this He did when he became our Passover lamb, whose blood atones for our sin, and under whose blood we take refuge that the angel of death and judgment might pass over.

God was keeping His promises. His promises point, every one of them, to Jesus Christ, and in Christ, to the hope of blessing for the world.

Then secondly and very briefly, notice not just the covenant faithfulness of God to His people, but the covenant people's faithfulness to their God.

The Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, decide that killing babies can never be valid no matter what the state says. And while there are obvious lessons there about the horrific reality of abortion in this country—that no matter what the government decrees, murder is murder and can never be sanitized—while those applications are important, the motivation of these two midwives is deeper even than simple moral outrage. They understand that what is at stake here is the

survival of the entire people of God. If they obey Pharaoh, the promises of God fail. If they obey Pharaoh, the covenant people are finished.

So, like Peter and John in Acts 5, they resolve to obey God rather than men. When Pharaoh asks them about their actions, it is not clear whether they lie or simply report the truth. Either way, they say that the Hebrew women deliver the babies before they can do anything about it. Verse 17 tells us why they did as they did, “The midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them.” The fear of the Lord is the reason these women are not afraid of Pharaoh. They fear the Lord rather than man. But the fear of the Lord there does not mean that they are scared of God. It means they revere the Lord. It means they trust God’s word and promise so much that they dare not offend them. It is the fear of a child who fears offending the love of their father. The fear of the Lord is the fruit of grace gripping a heart and changing it.

We can say the same for Amram and Jocabed. Pharaoh’s daughter identified Moses as a Hebrew undoubtedly because he was a circumcised child. If ever there was a situation where a parent might excuse his disobedience to God’s covenant, it was surely this one. Imagine the discussions, “If we circumcise our child, he will be marked in his flesh as a Hebrew. We will be condemning him straight away. What are we going to do?” But like the midwives before them, Amram and Jocabed fear the Lord and not man. They trust the covenant promise over everything else. They circumcise Moses. They do not kill the child but contrive some way to try to save his life.

They have little chance of success, of course, and their desperate scheme even looks as though it will utterly backfire when Pharaoh’s own daughter picks up the basket and identifies Moses as a Hebrew. It is all over now surely?

But these two believers fear God rather than men. They take God at His Word. And instead of grief, Jocabed raises Moses as her own for the next few formative years, doubtless pumping into him the covenant promises, the word of God, the faith of his fathers, and she gets paid to do it, plundering the Egyptians here at the beginning of Moses’ life in an ironic anticipation of the day when Moses leads Israel from Egypt and the people of God plunder the wealth of their former masters as they go.

Friends, there will be times when you are tempted to obey men rather than God. There will be many situations in which a good excuse, a handy rationalization for disobedience, will present itself. But Shiphrah and Puah, and Amram and Jocabed knew that God keeps His promises. They knew that the covenant grace of God never fails. And though they could not see how it would be so in their situation, they feared the Lord above all others and obeyed God rather than men.

Of course, great wisdom is required in distinguishing when we need to directly disobey men and when another route can be legitimately found that allows us to satisfy superiors and obey God. But when there is no alternative, the call of God is clear. Take God at His Word. Trust Him and obey God and disobey man. You will find the courage to do that in the covenant faithfulness of God alone. You will find it in the God who commands what He wills and gives what He commands. Fear the Lord. Rest on His promise. And see the ways that He will demonstrate His faithfulness before the eyes of the watching world.

God's covenant faithfulness to His people points us to Christ and through Christ to the building of the church all over the world to the glory of God. The faithfulness of the covenant people to God teaches us to rest on grace and fear no man.

May God help us cling to grace and fear the Lord.

Amen.