

Captivity, Silence, and Hope #1

Series: Epic Journey: From Where We Are to Where God Wants Us

Exodus 1:1 – 2:10

Today is the first day of a brand-new series. And it's always exciting to dig into God's Word for several Sundays, as one week's message builds on the week before. This summer I've chose to go through the book of Exodus. I believe that it will be so life-changing for you, that if you miss being here in person, you will catch up by watching on Facebook, YouTube or eagrm.org.

When I think about the book of Exodus, the first picture that comes to my mind is that Epic movie from 1956, The Ten Commandments, starring Charlton Heston, Yul Brynner, Edward G. Robinson, and Yvonne DeCarlo, who later played the part of Lily Munster.

The words of Scripture speak into our lives, in ways that we can't predict or control. And that has very little to do with my presentation or teaching ability. It's because the Word of God is active, and powerful; and the Holy Spirit makes it come alive inside of us.

The story in the book of Exodus is an epic journey of enslaved people headed to a place the bible calls The Promised Land.

When the book starts, the total number of Israelites is...are you ready for this? 70 people! And when it ends, there are 2-3 million of them. So, for the next several weeks we're going to follow the epic journey of God's chosen people from where they are to where God wants them.

In fact, the title of this series is: **Epic Journey: From Where We Are to Where God Wants Us.**

And here's what I want you to see: throughout Exodus, God is leading the people of Israel out of where they were, and He's bringing them where He wants them to be. He's taking them from here to there. And that same undertaking is true for every one of us.

No matter where you are in life right now, you have not arrived at your final destination. God has a dream for your future.

God is not a God of stagnation or status quo. He's a God who leads us from here to there. It's true for us as individuals, and it's true for you as a family and for us as a church.

God has an epic journey yet ahead for each of you as well as for this church.

As we track the journey of the Israelites, I'm asking the Holy Spirit to make it very personal to each one of us in a way that helps us take the next step and then the next step as God moves us from where we are to where He wants us to be.

The title of this first message is Captivity, Silence, and Hope. So, if you're ready to begin this epic journey, let's PRAY.

The first word in the book of Exodus is the word "and." They don't put that in English translations, because teachers told us to never begin a sentence with "and." But it's the very first word, which tells us that Exodus is continuing where Genesis left off.

In case you don't know where Genesis left off, here's a quick summary: there was no nation of Israel yet, but we have Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jacob had twelve, which would become the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph was the favored son of his father Jacob and wife Rachel. Do you remember her, Leah's sister that we talked about last week. Joseph was also a dreamer, who had ten older brothers who hated him.

So, they sold Joseph as a slave, and he wound up in Egypt. And through a series of miracles and misfortune, he got promoted till he was second in command to Pharaoh himself. Meanwhile, there was a huge famine in that area, and Egypt was the only country that had food because Joseph had interpreted Pharaoh's dream and was able to plan for the future and store grain.

People from everywhere came to get food from Egypt, including Joseph's brothers. Eventually, Joseph's whole family moved to Egypt. And they settled down. That's how the book of Genesis ends, which sets us up for today's reading, Exodus 1:1 to Chapter 2, verse 10.

“These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each with his family: 2Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; 3Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin; 4Dan and Naphtali; Gad and Asher. 5The descendants of Jacob numbered seventy in all; Joseph was already in Egypt.

6Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, 7but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers, and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.

8Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. 9“Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. 10Come, 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.”

11So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. 12But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites 13and worked them ruthlessly. 14They 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.

15The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, 16“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.” 17The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. 18Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?”

19The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.”

20So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. 21And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

22Then 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.”

(Chapter two) **1**Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, **2**and she became pregnant and gave 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.

5Then Pharaoh’s daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave 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.

7Then 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. So, the girl went and got the baby’s mother.

9Pharaoh’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.” (NIV)

So as God was working with the Israelites, to take them from where they were to where God wanted them, the first thing he needed to do was to deal with their captivity.

And it's the same thing with us. I want to talk about three things today: The Nature of Captivity, The Silence of God, and Hope for the Future. The nature of captivity, the silence of God, and the hope of change.

I. The Nature of Captivity.

Things were not always this way for the Israelites in Egypt! When they first got there, Joseph was regarded as a hero, so his people were welcomed guests, and treated with respect. They were outsiders, but they were held in high

esteem. But as time went on, and that generation died out, the KJV says in verse 8, a new king arose, ***"who knew not Joseph."***

That king was known as Yul Brynner, I mean, his name was, Ramses II, and under his leadership, the Egyptians started fearing that the Israelites would revolt. And their strategy to prevent that was to enslave them.

Verse 11 says, ***"So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so, the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites 13 and worked them ruthlessly."***

That word "ruthlessly" comes from the root word ***"to crush."***

Have you ever felt crushed by something going on in your life? Like it's hard to breathe, because the situation you find yourself in is so oppressive and so suffocating? That's how they were starting to feel.

Verse 14 says, ***"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."***

If you've ever been part of a Passover Seder, one of the elements in that meal is bitter herbs, usually they use horseradish, to symbolize the bitterness of captivity. To remember where they came from.

So, what does this have to do with us? Well, in the Bible, the bitter enslavement of the Israelites represents a reality that every human deals with. All of us are born with a sin nature and have an inherent tendency to become captive to different things.

This passage helps us to recognize that captivity, or bondage in our lives. There is a word that shows up over and over in this passage, especially in verse 14. It's the Hebrew word ***avad***, and it means ***"to serve as master."***

If you were to translate verse 14 literally, it would say something like this:
'They made their lives bitter with serving in brick and mortar and with all kinds of serving; in all their serving they made them serve ruthlessly.'

That sounds repetitious, but here's the point: slavery is all about serving.

To be a captive means you serve the desires and the commands of someone or something else. And some of you are thinking, "That's not me, because I don't serve anyone, or anything. I am a free agent. I'm my own person."

The Word of God would challenge you on that.

At times all of us have at least one thing in our lives, other than God, that is our God substitute. Does that make sense? But in our hearts, we say, "If I have this, I'm good; if I don't have it, I won't be happy or complete." And whatever that thing is, your heart is captive to it, which means you're not free.

It could be anything. It could be a bad thing, like an addiction, or involvement in ungodly activities. But it could also be a good thing, like misplaced priorities, or worldly pursuits.

Here's the point: if anything, but God fills that role, then you are enslaved by something that is not worthy of your service. And ultimately that thing will lead to bitterness, bondage, and misery.

Have you ever tried to read through the book of Exodus, and you get about halfway through, and you get bogged down? You know, the beginning is great! The burning bush; the plagues in Egypt; the Passover; crossing the Red Sea. It's all action! Then about halfway through, God starts giving them detailed instructions on how to build the Tabernacle. It's dry.

But listen, we can't skip that part! Because in those instructions, God is inviting his people and he's showing his people how to worship and serve Him, instead of worshipping and serving anything else.

Let me say it like this: you will never be free until you are amazed by, and ravished by, and in awe of the beauty and the glory of God. Until you get there, you will still be a slave. And the book of Exodus reminds us that we have this strong tendency to worship and serve things besides God.

The book of Exodus calls us out of that, into freedom. But here's the tricky part: be careful how you define freedom.

Step back for a minute and think about the story of Exodus. Most of us know the basic story. God raises up Moses, and Moses goes to Pharaoh, and he says...what? **"Let my people go!"**

And we always end the quote there, but it doesn't end there! Because he says, "Here's God's message to you: Let my people go, so that they can go and...(anybody know the rest of that verse)...worship me, or serve me." That is massively important. Because the modern concept of freedom is: **"I am free when I have no master; I serve no one and I can do anything I want!"**

The Bible says, "No! That's not the way the human heart works?" Moses does not say, **"Let my people go, so they can do anything they want!"** He says, "Let my people go, so they can worship and serve God." Because only then will they be truly free.

So, here's the deal: for God to take you from where you are to where you need to be, He needs to deal with any false gods in your life. And that can be a painful process. But that's the only way we'll truly be free.

And by the way, that means you'll be free to others and their opinions of you, your popularity, and your prosperity more loosely, because those are no longer things you absolutely need. You're no longer enslaved to them, so they and everything else take their proper place in your life.

When God's love becomes the ultimate source of your security and your significance, then you'll be free.

So that's the first thing: the captivity of the Israelites teaches us that when we serve anything but God himself, we are slaves. And God wants to bring us out of that, to something better.

I mentioned this can be a painful process, so let's talk about one of the things that makes it even more painful: point number two,

II. The Silence of God.

Try to put yourself in the shoes of an Israelite living in Egypt at that time. Think about what your world would feel like. Your people had always been treated well by the people of Egypt. But lately, there's been a shift in government

policy, and they have stripped you of your rights. You're forced to work 12-hour days, seven days a week. It's hard to imagine how things could get worse.

And then one day you hear a rumor, and at first, you don't believe it's true.

They're saying that the government has ordered all Hebrew male infants to be killed. It's so barbaric, you just dismiss it. But over time, you realize it's completely true. And this sense of terror spreads through your community. But then there's this little glimmer of light. Because you hear about these two courageous midwives who've been defying the law, and they've been able to rescue a bunch of baby boys. But that just makes the king more determined, so he makes a nation-wide announcement that anyone who sees a newborn Hebrew baby boy is responsible to drown the infant in the Nile River. If you were a Hebrew living in Egypt, it would feel like the world has been overcome by evil.

When chapter two begins, the story goes from a panoramic view of all of Israel to a close up of one particular Hebrew family.

It doesn't tell us their names, just says they're from the tribe of Levi (which, by the way, is the tribe where Hebrew priests came from, and the basic role of a priest is to bridge the gap between God and people. That right there tells us something about the role that Moses would play.)

Try to put yourself into the shoes of this one man and his pregnant wife. She gives birth to this perfect baby boy, and she's able to hide him for three months, but then she realizes her luck won't last forever, so she does the unthinkable: she takes a basket, she waterproofs it with tar, and she puts her 3-month-old infant into the basket and launches him into the river.

If you were that mother, or that father...or if you were any Hebrew person living in Egypt, I think there would be one huge question on your mind during that time: **Where is God?**

How can God let this happen, not just to people in general, but to his own chosen people? I mean, things seem to be getting worse and worse, this arrogant Pharaoh is abusing people in the most unthinkable ways, and God doesn't seem to care! The only time God is even mentioned in this whole

passage is when he blesses the midwives for their act of bravery. Other than that, God seems completely and utterly silent.

And one of the reasons the book of Exodus matters so much is that this sense of God's silence is a universal experience.

If you read the Psalms, repeatedly, you see this cry: **"God, where are you? Why are you so far from the sounds of my groaning? Why don't you care about me."**

If you go online and read some tragic story, and then you scroll down and read the comments, one of the most frequent comments is: "where was God when this tragedy happened? When these children were shot in school, when that accident took my loved one? Where was God? Why is He silent, while I'm suffering." Have you ever felt that way?

When we look at the captivity of the Israelites, it confirms this thing all of us have felt there are times in life, sometimes a season, where God seems to be silent. But here's the thing: we also learn that it's during those times that God is at work, behind the scenes, using those circumstances for ultimate good.

It's like the song we sing: "He's working even when we don't feel it or see it."

Think about it: didn't the schemes of Pharaoh wind up accomplishing exactly the opposite of what he intended? Pharaoh said, "I'm going to kill all the male infants." And because he made that law, Moses has a totally unique upbringing.

First, he's nursed and cared for by his own mother, which, in that culture, was probably the first 3-4 years of his life. So, he got his Hebrew cultural identity from those early years. AND THEN, he's brought up and educated in an Egyptian home, which gave him the training he needs for his future role.

When God seems the most silent and absent, He's not. He's working for good and for His perfect plan to unfold, even in the hardest times. Will we choose to believe that? God plays the long game, which is hard for us, because we want things now. But God's not interested in our timetable.

Choose to believe that God is working even when He seems silent?

There's one more thing we learn from this passage, and I'll call it...

III. The Plan of God.

What's the strategy that God seems to use when he's carrying out his plan? Go back to Genesis again for a minute.

God chose the younger brother, Isaac, over the older brother, Ishmael. That was unusual to favor the younger over the older.

He did it again when he chose the younger brother, Jacob, over the older brother, Esau. He chose the unlovely and unloved wife, Leah, over the favored wife, Rachel, to first make Jacob a father, and to give birth to Judah, whose descendants would eventually lead to the Messiah, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.

God often works through the poor, the weak, the marginalized and the least qualified people.

Now think about the story we just read. Who are the heroes of this story? They're all women? And in that culture, women had almost no status and no power. And yet God chose to work through women.

He worked through the midwives, and by the way, midwives were usually women who had no children of their own. In that culture, if you didn't have kids you were considered at best a failure; at worst, cursed. So, God used the lowest of the low to rescue his people.

And then in chapter two, Moses' mother carries out this act of civil disobedience. Because Pharaoh ordered all the baby boys to be thrown into the Nile River, which is technically what she does. Pharaoh never said you couldn't put the kid in a basket and float it near where his daughter and servants take their bath.

And then Pharaoh's daughter, a non-Israelite, an ethnic outsider, is used by God to rescue the baby.

The bible is full of example after example of how God uses the most unlikely people to carry out His divine plan. Knowing this gives us hope.

CONCLUSION:

What does that mean for us? I can think of two things:

- 1. If you feel poor or weak or marginalized; if you feel unqualified, or less than the best, you are in the perfect position to trust your life to God and let Him use you. And He will use you.**

Did you notice: the name of the Pharaoh is never given? Doesn't even mention his name!

But the names of the two midwives are recorded: ***Shiphrah and Puah***. Probably not great names to name our daughters, but amazing people! And we are speaking those names over 3,000 years later. Shiphrah means beauty; and Puah means splendor.

Beauty and Splendor; two women of whom it is said that "they feared God." And because they feared God and disobeyed Pharaoh's order; Exodus 1:20-21 says that God was kind to them and gave them families of their own. Psalm 111:10 says that the "***fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.***"

Fearing God means that following God's word is more important than following the ways of this world. So, if you feel like a nobody, you're in exactly the right position to receive God's grace and be used by him.

- 2. Go out of your way to love people who don't have any power or status. If those are the kinds of people God shows special care for, then when we, as individuals or as a church, care for those same kinds of people, we are doing what Jesus said in Matthew 25:40, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' (NIV)**

Three huge lessons from looking at the captivity of Israel. We learn about the nature of slavery; we learn about the silence of God; and we learn about the plan of God.

Can I tell you what not to do with these lessons? Don't say, "Okay, if slavery is when we serve anything but God, I'm going to try hard to stop worshiping and serving all these false gods in my life.

And if God is working most when He seems most silent, I'm going to make up my mind to believe that He's working even when I can't see or feel Him."

Let me just say, any time we learn lessons from Scripture, the biggest mistake is to say, "I'm going to give my best effort to live this out!" Because you can't. Your effort or self-control, or discipline will never be enough.

Instead, when we read the story of Moses, let it lead you to the one that Moses points to.

Doesn't this story sound familiar? The king makes a law that all the male children should be destroyed. Where else do we see that in the Bible?

Right after Jesus was born, King Herod made a decree that all the male children should be killed, right? And yet one special child is rescued from that. In Hebrews chapter 3, it says Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses. So instead of just being impressed with Moses, let Moses direct you forward to the greater Moses...**Jesus.**

The passage we looked at today reminds us that God sometimes seems absent, but let that point you to the most terrifying time in history when God seemed absent: when Jesus hung on the cross, and he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." Realize that God worked through that moment for the greatest possible good, to forgive sins and reconcile people with himself.

If you just try to apply the principles in Exodus, it'll be helpful. But if you allow Exodus to lead you to Jesus, it will be transformational. Because Jesus is the one who can break the slavery in your life and free you from the penalty and power of sin.

It's ultimately Jesus, by His Holy Spirit that is leading us from where we are to where we need to be.