

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
Deliverance
 Exodus 12:1 – 11

Joseph, the son of Jacob, grandson of Isaac, and great grandson of Abraham, has died. At the ripe old age of 110, he is embalmed, and placed in a coffin in Egypt. “Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation [have died], but the Israelites [are] exceedingly fruitful; they [multiply] greatly, [increase] in numbers and [become] *so numerous* that the land [is] *filled* with them” (Ex 1:6 – 70).

A new king, a pharaoh, of Egypt has come to power who does not know Joseph and his family, nor care *anything about* their history together. He sees them instead as a *threat* to power, since they are so numerous, and uncontrolled. He fears that they may join forces with their enemies and go to war against them and leave the country. So he places “slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor...But the more they [are] oppressed, the more they [multiply] and spread; so the Egyptians [come] to dread the Israelites and [work] them *ruthlessly*” (Ex 1:11 – 12).

They are worked *to the bone*, yet they multiply and spread, so the pharaoh needs to develop a *new* plan. Slavery isn’t enough, so he tells the Hebrew midwives to kill all Hebrew baby boys. But the midwives fear God, and not Pharaoh, so they let the boys live. When Pharaoh demands that they give an account for their lack of success, they reply, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive” (Ex 1:19). And then they proceed to have families of their *own!*

Pharaoh’s *second* plan *clearly* hasn’t worked, so he devises a *third* plan to *ensure* his control over the Hebrew people. He orders *his* people to throw into the Nile River every Hebrew boy that is born.

This is no lighthearted story – and we’re just getting started. The lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is about to be *erased* from history, all because of a fearful king who needs control.

But one Hebrew mother is *not* caught by Pharaoh’s people, and manages to find a way to keep her son secret for *three months*. “But when she [can] hide him no longer, she [gets] a papyrus basket for him and [coats] it with tar and pitch” (Ex 2:3).

What’s interesting is that the Hebrew word for “basket,” *teva*, is the same word used in Genesis 6 to describe the *ark*, which Noah built. An ark saved Noah and his family, and a small ark saved this little baby. (Interesting fact: Many church buildings have been built in the *shape* of an ark, only upside down!)

The baby’s mother sends her son along the Nile River, in hope that he may have a future. The baby’s sister stands by, watching.

Pharaoh’s daughter goes down to the Nile, and she sees the basket among the reeds. She sends her slave to get the basket, and the baby’s *lost it*; he is *crying*. She feels sorry for the baby, and tells Pharaoh’s daughter that he is one of the Hebrew babies. Instead of throwing the baby out of the basket and into the Nile, Pharaoh’s daughter *disobeys* him, and *risks*. For some reason, she decides to *save this baby*. She agrees to have a Hebrew woman nurse him for her,

who just so happens to be his mother. He is returned to her when he is weaned, and she names him “Moses,” which means “drawn” out.¹

Moses is drawn *out of the river* which was to be his death, and instead, is given *life*. He grows up, knowing who he is, a Hebrew in a position of privilege. And perhaps, *just perhaps*, his *adoptive* mother is the one who instills in him his identity. Her behavior is noncompliant with her father’s wishes in adopting him, so perhaps there is more intentionality in her than she is often given credit. Of course, the story is not about *her*, but she is *essential* to the salvation story of God’s people.

Moses grows up, *knowing* who he is, *knowing* that he is in a unique position of *power*, yet his *own people* are *oppressed*. In defense of a Hebrew slave, he kills an Egyptian, and *buries* his body in the sand. When his adoptive grandfather, the pharaoh, catches wind of what he has done, Moses flees to Midian. He makes a life for himself in Midian, marrying and having children. He is away for quite some time, and clearly has *no intention* of going back, because by the time he returns, he’s an octogenarian!

During that long time away, the pharaoh has died. “The Israelites [groan] in their slavery and [cry] out, and their cry for help because of their slavery [goes] up to God. God [hears] their groaning and [remembers] his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob.” God looks at the Israelites and is concerned about them (Ex 2:23b – 25). So he chooses one who will bring his people out of slavery, out of Egypt.

But like every hero’s story, and most call stories in Scripture, the invitation to the journey is *refused*. When God appears to Moses from the burning bush, Moses tries rejecting the call of God *four times*, before *finally* he gets kicked out of the nest. Moses tries telling God that the plan is *utterly flawed*, because: (1) Moses is unfit for the task, (2) the people are “ignorant of the character of God,” (3) Moses won’t be accepted by the people, and (4) he feels he will be completely incapable because of his lack of eloquence² and slow tongue. But God has chosen *Moses*, *regardless* of all of these hurdles. But in response to Moses’ hemming and hawing, God makes an interesting decision. He chooses Moses’ eighty-three-year-old brother, Aaron, to be his mouthpiece.

The image Hollywood has given us, is a picture of a vigorous, youth-filled man, that just so happens to have white hair, with his trusty, but *mostly unnecessary* sidekick – like a Batman and Robin kind of scenario. But Moses is a stammering *eighty-year-old*, who would rather do *anything* than this, and needs his *eighty-three-year-old brother* to come to his aid. The picture is a *little* more like this.

There is *so much* in the story of Moses that makes success truly remarkable! Moses is hidden by his mom, saved by Pharaoh’s daughter, raised knowing his identity, spared by running away, confronted by God in a way he *can’t* avoid, given the support of his brother and the promise of God that he *will* be successful. At that same time, the Israelites have *cried out* because of their bondage, and God has chosen to act, *now*, and *through Moses!*

But God’s deliverance of his people will *not* be so simple. God will *harden* Pharaoh’s heart, and he will *not* release the Israelites until *ten plagues* have *devastated* them.

¹ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h4872/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

² Eerdmans, *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, 124.

It's tempting to go through mental gymnastics to try to understand what God means when he says that he will harden Pharaoh's heart. Take, for example, Exodus 7:3 – 4: "But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in Egypt, he will *not* listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites." Does God mean that he will take over Pharaoh's will, and though Pharaoh may be inclined to let the Israelites go, God will harden his heart anyway? Is it a matter of speech, that God will harden Pharaoh's heart, and God actually means that Pharaoh's heart will be hard, without God's intervention? Or, is there some interplay of *both*, that Pharaoh is naturally *inclined* toward hardness of heart, and God lets him do it, or *makes* it happen in some way? These are *fascinating* questions, and what's even *more* fascinating, is that Exodus *doesn't* explain what God means. Exodus instead offers ten references to *God* hardening Pharaoh's heart, and ten references to Pharaoh hardening his *own* heart.³ Scripture doesn't answer this question, but places *greater* emphasis on Pharaoh's hardness of heart being the very *mechanism* for the successful deliverance of God's people. And God says in 7:5: "And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it."

God's purpose in delivering the Israelites would be twofold: (1) so that God would be proven faithful to his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and (2) so that *Egypt* would know that he is the LORD. God's purpose is for his chosen people *and* it's for Egypt and the entire *world*. God has chosen his people to be a blessing and a light to the *nations*. And though they suffered under harsh oppression, God heard their cries, and sent a deliverer, so that they could be a blessing and a light to the nations.

But that deliverance would not come cheaply; it would come after *ten devastating plagues*, the final one being the death of the firstborn animals and children. And those spared would be the ones obedient to God's command to kill a perfect one-year-old lamb, and place its blood on the doorposts of their homes, so that the plague of death would *pass over* their house.

The truth is, you and I want to believe that God can accomplish God's purposes *without* pain and death. So we try to negotiate, and amazingly, this is something God is willing to do, as we see in Scripture! But the moment we begin to *prescribe* for God how he *can* and *can't* work, we are placing ourselves as a god *over* God. As much as it is painful to admit, you and I are *not* God; you and I do *not* make the rules. And God *is* who God is and *acts* how God acts, whether or *not* we give him permission. As Catholic writer, Evelyn Underhill, wrote, "If God were small enough to be understood, he would not be big enough to be worshipped."⁴ And as theologian and pastor, Al Rogness, wrote, "I must never cease to tremble before his judgment. I must never cease to rest in the overarching mercy of his love. If I lose either, I lose God."⁵ *I must never cease to tremble before his judgment. I must never cease to rest in the overarching mercy of his love. If I lose either, I lose God.*

³ *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 123.

⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/14545-if-god-were-small-enough-to-be-understood-he-would>

⁵ Alvin Rogness in *Signs of Hope in the Thunder of Spring*, quoted in the *Lutheran Standard*, 6-7-77, page 35.

The way God has chosen to work is that deliverance, salvation, comes at a cost. It comes at the cost of a life. In Exodus, the costly death of a perfect one-year-old lamb, sacrificed to God, would allow firstborn animals and children, to live. In the New Testament, the cost of *the perfect Lamb* was the sacrifice, once and for all, for the salvation and forgiveness of sins for the *entire world*.

Because of Jesus' death on the cross for you, because of his *blood, shed* for you, you are *forgiven*. The powers of sin, death, and the devil were *broken* in his sacrifice *for you*. And all who believe in him, will have eternal life – not because of any good that you or I have done or will ever do, but because of his incredible love for you.

Praise be to God, for his incredible love, which did not spare even his own *Son*, but gave his life as a ransom for many! Amen.