

God Will, God's Way

Exodus: Revelation and Redemption

Exodus 1:1-2:25

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Today we're starting a new series in the book of Exodus. Exodus is not a standalone book. It's part of a much larger story. It's book two of a series. The author assumes we've read book one—Genesis. If you're back for more, then Genesis must have been a good book, but it also must have left some things unresolved. We come to Exodus looking for closure. In book one, God made a promise, and it's not yet fulfilled. So we approach Exodus with a question: Will God fulfill his promise?

Lucky for us, our writer isn't too concerned about giving spoilers. We don't get all the details yet, but the very beginning of the book of Exodus gives away the ending. It gives an answer to our question. Will God fulfill his promise? The answer given by these first two chapters is "yes, God will." But he'll do it in his own way. That's the message of our passage today: God will fulfill his promise God's way. God will, God's way. His way is often what we least expect. So as we look at this passage, we'll see three surprises that give away this ending—that God will, God's way.

1) GOD WILL FULFILL HIS PROMISE: UNLIKELY FRUITFULNESS (1:1-14)

Our passage today is Exodus chapters 1 and 2. This is a long text, so we'll take it section by section. In our first section, we can already tell that God will fulfill his promise. There's evidence of it. The evidence is our first surprise: unlikely fruitfulness. We can see this in the first fourteen verses of our text.

Exodus 1:1-14¹

¹These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: ²Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, ³Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, ⁴Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. ⁵All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt. ⁶Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. ⁷But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

⁸Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. ¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." ¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. ¹³So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves ¹⁴and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.

This is the Word of the Lord.

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

The book of Exodus begins on the same note that Genesis ended. Jacob and his sons came down to Egypt and they died there. Death was an ever-present companion in book one. But in the midst of death, God continues to bring life. Look at verse 7. If you're familiar with the book of Genesis this should ring some bells, "But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them." These words echo through the book of Genesis, and we can't hear them properly in Exodus without that echo. So I need to rewind for a bit.

In the very first chapter of the Bible, God creates the first human couple and gives them a mandate. "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth'" (Gen. 1:28). Humanity was intended to fill the earth and rule it as God's representatives. Of course, it wasn't long after receiving these instructions that the first humans abandoned their mission. Instead of representing God and ruling according to his instructions, they rebelled against God. They wanted to rule instead of God, rather than under him. So sin and death entered the world.

In the chapters that follow this tragedy, people do multiply and fill the earth with human life. But sin and death are multiplied right alongside it. And despite second chances given by God, human beings repeatedly fail to follow his mandate. It's clear that humanity isn't capable of fixing this sin problem on its own. What's to be done?

Well, God chooses a single family—the family of Abraham—and he gives a promise. God promises Abraham three things: 1) to make him exceedingly fruitful and multiply his descendants like the stars in the sky, 2) to give his descendants the land of Canaan to live in, and 3) through his descendants to bless all the nations of the earth. This three-part promise is passed on to his son Isaac, and then to Isaac's son Jacob, whose descendants came to be known by the name of Israel. These people of the promise would be God's instrument to fix his world broken by sin.

But at the end of the book of Genesis, a famine threatens the family of Israel—threatens the fruitfulness God promised to them—so God provides food for them in the land of Egypt by getting Jacob's son Joseph into the court of Pharaoh himself. God continues to make his people be fruitful and multiply. Genesis 47:27 says, "Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen. And they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied greatly."

Now we come to the book of Exodus, about four hundred years after Joseph, and Israel continues to multiply. That's what we see in verse 7. But we get a clue in verse 8 of our passage that this fruitfulness might be threatened yet again. "Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." This Pharaoh doesn't remember how the Israelite Joseph saved Egypt from famine. He doesn't remember why the Israelites were allowed to dwell here in the first place. In fact, he's starting to think they're a threat. Their fruitfulness is the very thing that makes them dangerous. There are too many of them—what if these foreigners in our midst join our enemies and turn against us? So Pharaoh has an idea to contain their rampant population growth while also putting it to use: he'll make them slaves. He'll "afflict them with heavy burdens."

But instead of the result he desires, something unlikely happens. Verse 12 says "But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread." Pharaoh's plan backfires. He thinks he's shrewdly managing this Hebrew problem, but he's only making things worse. For

someone who thinks he's in control, that's the scariest and most frustrating kind of problem to have. So "The Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel." Pharaoh's hatred and paranoia grow even more intense. He burdens them with even harsher slavery. Look how many times the word "work" is mentioned in verses 13 and 14. Work, work, work, work—"they *ruthlessly* made them work as slaves."

And when that doesn't work, Pharaoh gets even more ruthless. His next tactic is infanticide—he orders the midwives to kill every male child who's born to the Hebrews. He's directly threatening the promise of many descendants given to Abraham. But look at what happens in verse 20. It says "the people multiplied and grew very strong." The people are becoming many and mighty, the exact thing that Pharaoh was afraid of in verse 9. God is Pharaoh's worst nightmare, because despite the slavery and the infanticide, he's able to fulfill his promise to multiply the descendants of Abraham.

Pharaoh's oppression recalls something from the beginning of the Bible. The curse in Genesis 3 that resulted from humanity's sin affected two main areas: childbearing and work. Because we've rebelled against God, the very things human beings were made to do—filling the earth by having children and having dominion over the earth by working productively—have become painful and difficult. And the oppression of Pharaoh epitomizes the effects of the curse. What kind of work could be more toilsome than slavery? And what could make childbirth more painful than killing babies once they're born? So Egypt is about as far away from the garden as it gets.

And yet, it's in Egypt that God is fulfilling his promise. He's bringing about unexpected fruitfulness. In the very place where the brokenness of creation is felt most strongly, he's causing his people to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, as they were meant to in the beginning. In the words of Jesus, "What is impossible with man is possible with God" (Luke 18:27). No matter the opposition, no matter how unlikely it appears, God will fulfill his promise. Pharaoh is an agent of un-creation. Like sin itself, he tries to undo the good that God created. But the creator God is more powerful. He won't fail to fulfill his promise to multiply Abraham's descendants.

But what about the second part of his promise—to give them the land of Canaan to possess? That promise is threatened too. They're slaves in Egypt, at the mercy of an evil dictator, and Pharaoh clearly doesn't want to let them escape. Well, if God is fulfilling one promise, he can be trusted to fulfill another. If he was able to bring about unlikely fruitfulness in Egypt, then he can bring about unlikely freedom as well.

God was not surprised by these four hundred years in Egypt. His plans were not derailed or postponed. God doesn't go back to the drawing board. Look at Genesis 15:13-14. This is what God promised to Abraham hundreds of years earlier: "Then the LORD said to Abram, 'Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.'"? God saw this coming. A God who sees the beginning and the end can bring about his good plan even in the midst of evil. Only that kind of God can keep his promises even when it seems impossible. Only that kind of God can turn evil into good.

Going down to Egypt was part of the plan. It didn't stop his promise to multiply them, and it won't stop his promise to bring them into their own land. So the book of Exodus immediately implies an answer to the question we bring to it: Will God fulfill his promise to bring his people into their own

land? Will he save them from Egypt? The answer is yes, God will. But *how* he'll do it is just as important. God will, God's way.

2) GOD'S WAY: UNLIKELY HEROES (1:15-2:10)

In the next section of our text we see another surprise, and we start to realize that God's way is not what we might expect. We can tell because he works through unlikely heroes. Let's continue reading in verse 15.

Exodus 1:15-2:10

¹⁵Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶"When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live." ¹⁷But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. ¹⁸So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and let the male children live?" ¹⁹The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." ²⁰So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. ²¹And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²²Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live."

²¹Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as his wife a Levite woman. ²The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months. ³When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank. ⁴And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him. ⁵Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her young women walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it. ⁶When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby was crying. She took pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children." ⁷Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" ⁸And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. ¹⁰When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "Because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

In this passage we see Pharaoh going from bad to worse. But really he's sticking pretty close to the evil dictator playbook. How do you prevent people from rising up against you? You keep them busy with harsh, demeaning labor, and you take out the males. If they don't have any young men to fight for them, then they can't rebel. And it's even better if you can turn their own people against them and have them do the dirty work, so his first tactic is to order the Hebrew midwives to kill Hebrew boys. It's common sense really. He learned this in *Authoritarianism 101*.

But Pharaoh continues to run into problems. The usual tactics aren't working. Because this is an unconventional uprising. It's not an armed rebellion. It's not a coup. Israel is becoming many and mighty, but they're not going to fight against him as he fears.

The heroes who will oppose him are not the ones we might expect. Pharaoh thinks that the Hebrew males are a threat to his power, but really it's the females.² First, the Hebrew midwives foil his plans and deceive him. He thinks he can coerce them into murdering their own people, but it turns out

² J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, The Bible Speaks Today

that these women fear someone else more than Pharaoh. Twice it says, “the midwives feared God.” They feared God more than man. It’s something we saw throughout our series in Acts and something that’s been seen throughout history: God can do amazing things with just a few people who fear him above all else. He can use a couple of midwives to foil the plans of a dictator.

We tend to think like Pharaoh, don’t we? We expect the flow of history to be controlled by those who are powerful and influential. We expect God to play by the world’s rules, using the people who are strong and capable. But God’s ways are not our ways. Sometimes we discount ourselves or others from doing something based on ability when what’s really needed is faithfulness. But maybe God doesn’t need someone who’s strong, maybe he just needs someone who fears him.

Of course the midwives aren’t the only people God works through in this story. He even uses people who don’t know him. Everyone who Pharaoh fails to recognize as a threat turns out to be one, and his biggest threat is God. God is enacting an unconventional uprising with unexpected heroes. First, these Hebrew midwives. Then the mother and sister of Moses who put him into the river in a basket. And then Pharaoh’s own daughter who takes in this child drawn out of the water and makes him her own. The seeds of Pharaoh’s undoing are planted by the people he ignored: the women.

And notice a few more ironies in this story. Pharaoh thought he would turn the Hebrew midwives against their own people, but God turns Pharaoh’s own family against him. Pharaoh thought he would use the Nile River as a means of destruction for the Hebrew babies, but God uses it as a means of salvation for baby Moses. Pharaoh is trying to undo Israel with cruelty, but God is undoing Egypt with mercy shown by these unlikely heroes. Pharaoh has never been in control. Everything that he meant for evil, God is using for good. God will not be stopped from fulfilling his promise. And he’ll do it his way—with the people Pharaoh least expects.

But there is one male Hebrew who Pharaoh was right to be worried about. He’s named Moses. He’s an unlikely hero as well, because he really ought to be dead. The Nile should have killed him. Pharaoh’s daughter should have killed him. But instead, she saves him. Moses...the boy who lived.

We already know he’s going to be special. It’s the kind of story we’re familiar with. In the midst of death and hopelessness, against all odds, one baby boy survives. A spark of hope. Besides his unique birth, he has a unique upbringing. He’s nursed by his own mother, but he’s adopted into Pharaoh’s family. An Israelite and yet an Egyptian; a slave and yet a prince. He’s going to be no ordinary man. Surely he’ll be the one to save his people. Surely he’ll be like Joseph who came before—an Israelite in Pharaoh’s court, who used his influence to save his people! Let’s see what happens next, picking up in verse 11 of chapter 2.

3) GOD’S WAY: UNLIKELY MEANS (2:11-25)

Exodus 2:11-22

¹¹One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. ¹²He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. ¹³When he went out the next day, behold, two Hebrews were struggling together. And he said to the man in the wrong, “Why do you strike your companion?” ¹⁴He answered, “Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Then Moses was afraid, and thought, “Surely the thing

is known.”¹⁵ When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian. And he sat down by a well.

¹⁶ Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. ¹⁷ The shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and saved them, and watered their flock. ¹⁸ When they came home to their father Reuel, he said, “How is it that you have come home so soon today?” ¹⁹ They said, “An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds and even drew water for us and watered the flock.” ²⁰ He said to his daughters, “Then where is he? Why have you left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread.” ²¹ And Moses was content to dwell with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah. ²² She gave birth to a son, and he called his name Gershom, for he said, “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land.”

Wait...what? This is the chosen one? He was supposed to liberate his people! He just kills one dude, gets rejected by his own people, gets scared, and runs away to a foreign land? Now he's an exile. He's basically out of the picture, and he's just settling down with this shepherd family and making babies. Talk about a plot twist. Moses is not the hero we expected. What is happening?

God is once again doing something unexpected. We know God will fulfill his promise God's way. God's way includes not just unlikely heroes but unlikely means. That's our third surprise in this passage. God is using the means we least expect to fulfill his promise. In this case: failure. There isn't much else you can call this debacle with Moses. The first thing Moses does in this story is fail. Why?

Well, the text doesn't give us a clear reason why Moses failed, but I think it gives us some clues. Did Moses have bad motivations behind what he did? I don't think so. In fact, there are two places in the New Testament where this scene is mentioned (Acts 7 and Hebrews 11), and both of them paint Moses in a positive light. Why? Because he chose to identify with the Hebrew people rather than the Egyptians. Look what verse 11 says here, “he went out” (probably from the Egyptian royal palace) “to *his people* and looked on their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of *his people*.” Moses was raised as an Egyptian, but he knows who his people are. He sees the injustice being done to them, and he rightly acts to defend one of his people.

So where does Moses go wrong? I don't think it's his motivation that's off; it's his methods. There are two different words that are repeated three times in a row in this paragraph. The first one is the word “strike,” also translated “beat”. Starting in verse 11, he saw an Egyptian “striking” a Hebrew, then he “struck down” the Egyptian, then he asked the Hebrew men, “Why do you strike your companion?” Three instances of the word “strike.” Then we see three instances of the word “kill.” In verse 14, the Hebrew man asks Moses, “Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” And in verse 15 Pharaoh sought to “kill” Moses.

What's the point of all this? Well, it seems that our hero Moses acts in ways that aren't too different from the villains. He strikes, just like the Egyptian strikes the Hebrew. He kills, just like Pharaoh tries to kill him. And then he tries to stop his fellow Hebrews from striking one another. Unsurprisingly, they aren't about to listen to him. “Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Are you gonna kill me too? You think you're going to liberate us from Pharaoh? You're just like him!” They don't want a liberator who uses the same means as their oppressor. Moses fails because he tries to save God's people Pharaoh's way. But God means to save them God's way.

I'm not saying that this passage is condemning violence. There are times when violence is necessary, especially to defend the helpless. When Moses defends the women of Midian from the shepherds down in verse 17, he probably has to use some violence. Once again, his heart is in the right place—

he acts to save helpless people from injustice. And this time he's successful. He goes from zero to hero. Why is he a hero in Midian and a failure in Egypt?

It's not that God forbids violence. God is not a pacifist. In fact, (spoiler alert) God will use some violence against Egypt in this book. In the very next chapter, he says he will "strike" Egypt. But that's exactly the point. *God* will. After this one instance of utter failure by Moses, nobody is going to fight against Egypt, nobody is going to lift a finger against Pharaoh in this book, except God. God will.

God will fulfill his promise. He's going to deliver his people. But he's not going to do it Pharaoh's way, or Moses' way, he's going to do it God's way. Because the way he does it is the whole point! God could have brought his people out of Egypt by a slave rebellion led by Moses. That's the kind of thing Pharaoh expected. But it would have confused the message.

Revelation and Redemption

God's actions in the book of Exodus speak just as loud as his words. They send a message. Exodus is all about God revealing who he is. It's about God making himself known. The exodus from Egypt is not just a story of redemption; it's a story of revelation. God redeems in a way that reveals who he is. Who he is will be forever tied to what he's done. Every Israelite child would grow up hearing about "the Lord our God, who brought us out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Your God is *that* God, who did *that*. He is both powerful and good. He's faithful to fulfill his promises. He's the God who redeems. He's the God who saves.

Which means his character is revealed most clearly when *he* does the saving, not us. His power is made perfect in human weakness. That's what Exodus is about. The message of the book will become more and more nuanced as we go along, but here's the message so far: *You cannot save yourself. Only God can save.* You really need to get that. If you miss it, you'll miss the point of the book of Exodus, and you'll probably miss the point of the whole Bible as well. This book is not about how to be a Moses. It's not about how to improve yourself. It's not about what you can do to save yourself. It's about what only God can do. His people are not those who have the strength to save themselves but those who turn to the Almighty God and are saved by his hand.

That's what's foreshadowed at the end of our passage today.

Exodus 2:23-25

²³During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. ²⁴And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

God heard, and remembered, and saw, and God knew. That's an interesting way of putting it. Because God sees and hears everything. He forgets nothing. He knows everything. It's not as if God was taking a nap for the past four hundred years and the cries of the Israelites just disturbed his slumber. It's not that he was lacking motivation until he heard their cry. But he's about to act in a new way, and it's a response to his people crying out to him for rescue. God acts precisely when he means to, but in his providence he causes his action to coincide with his people's dependence upon him in prayer. Why? So there's no confusing who the savior is. You only cry out to God like this when you realize you cannot save yourself, when you realize that only God can save. God works

through the unlikely means of human failure, and weakness, and dependence, so that God alone is the savior and God gets the glory.

Some of you have been crying out to God about something for a long time now. Maybe you're crying out for healing. Crying out for justice. Crying out for help. This image is for you: God hears. God sees. God knows. God knows the pain that comes with this world broken by sin—broken bodies, broken systems, broken homes—a world so broken, so far from Eden, that we can barely remember what wholeness feels like.

But God remembers and he sees. God doesn't just know the pain of our broken world, he cares. He's not indifferent. He remembers what it was like in the beginning, when he made all things good, and he's promised to make things good again. He's promised to make things whole. He bound himself to that promise in a covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and he never forgets his covenants.

For the people of Israel in our text today, that means God will fulfill his promise to bring them out of slavery and into the land he swore to their fathers. But for us it means something far better. Because in the fullness of time this very same God visited his people in human form, born of a woman, a descendant of Abraham, in order to forge a new covenant. He saw our pain with human eyes and heard it with human ears and knew it in his own human flesh. He made a covenant in his own blood so that we could be freed from slavery to an even crueler master than Pharaoh: sin, the original agent of un-creation. God the Son, the creator of all things was broken so that his creation could be made whole, and that includes us. Through Jesus Christ the third promise to Abraham's family was finally fulfilled: blessing upon all the nations of the earth.

But once again, his redemption is contingent upon something: a cry for help. A confession that we're slaves to sin and we cannot redeem ourselves. Human weakness and dependence; those are God's unlikely means of redemption. Salvation comes through the most unlikely of heroes—Immanuel, God with us, not to conquer and kill but to die. And the most unlikely of means—repentance and faith, a simple cry for help. That's God's way.

The problem is that we often want to be saved our way. We're like Moses. We pursue the right goal by the wrong means. There's something within us that wars against a salvation that requires us to be weak rather than strong. But it's the only salvation there is. There are likely some of you here today who've never truly trusted in God to save you. You might think of God as someone who gives you a leg up, a God who helps those who help themselves. You think that salvation is about what you can do with God's help. If that's you, then God's word to you today is, "Stop trying to save yourself. Only God can save. Trust in Jesus Christ and you will be saved."

But maybe you've already done that. Maybe this all seems really obvious to you. God's message to you is, "Don't forget who saved you." You'd be surprised how easy it is to forget. One of my favorite passages in the Bible comes in Deuteronomy 6, where Moses warns the Israelites about the dangers of forgetting. He says "When you get to the promised land, don't forget who got you there. When you find rest in Canaan, don't forget slavery in Egypt and the God who brought you out of it."

Because when you forget who saved you, then the false gods of the people around you start to look a lot more useful. Money? Likeability? Knowledge? The perfect outfit or the perfect put-together

family? If you're basically a self-saved person who just needs a little leg up, then these might be just the gods you need. So why not bow down and worship?

But if you remember that you were a slave—that you were powerless and cried out for help and God saved you—then you know just how worthless these false gods are. May you never forget your exodus. May you never forget who saved you.