

## Exodus 1 Overcoming Adversity

### Introduction

The small Christian community in Iran in 1979 had been holding its own and the church was surviving but hardly growing amongst the increasingly youthful population. Then before our eyes the seemingly all-powerful Shah and his government was overthrown by the supporters of an extremely fanatical Shia Cleric Ayatollah Khomeini. For a number of years it appeared as if some very dark and difficult days were about to engulf the Christian Church and reduce their numbers further. Yet this did not happen. A generation later when this religious revolution had failed to deliver on its promises of reform led to a growing number of younger people becoming disillusioned with the extreme form of Islam that was dominant in their own country. The repression that followed for those who spoke out, together with anger at the rigid control of the electoral process has led increasing numbers to turn away from Islam and seek to engage with God through faith in Jesus Christ. The spiritual state of the Christian Church in Iran at the present time is as encouraging as it has been in living. Overcoming adversity has been their experience. A similar account, albeit different in the cultural details concerns the Christian Church in China. In 1949 there were only around two million Protestant Christians in the country despite the greatest missionary investment in history in one country by missionaries from the historically Christian countries in the West. First, oppression by the Japanese in the 1940s and later the Cultural Revolution and its purges in the 1960s provided adversity in abundance, yet out of the furnace of affliction God's Spirit was at work. Today approximately 100 million Protestant Evangelical Christians live for Jesus in that country. It is not difficulties that are the problem in themselves, it is how the people of God respond to it that makes all the difference. If we can think and act in a truly Christian way with respect to both our prosperity and our times of adversity, then people will take note and see a faith that is truly both relevant and applicable to the circumstances they are dealing with day by day. This is an attractive gospel that is truly worth proclaiming to the world.

### 1. The background to this story

(a) The immediate context in the time of Joseph (Genesis 50:24-26) In Genesis 50:24-26 we have the last words of Joseph and the brief account of his death. *Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.'*<sup>25</sup> *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.'*<sup>26</sup> *So Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt.* Four hundred years of biblical silence will pass before the start of the events described in the book of Exodus. We need to grasp that God's purposes will be fulfilled for His people and in His world, but the timescales are often not what His people would have preferred at the time! Four hundred years on our timescales is a very long time! Yet Joseph was convinced that God would keep His word. When the remarkable day finally came and the Israelites left the patriarch's wishes were fulfilled. Exodus 13:19 states: *Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the Israelites swear an oath. He had said, 'God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place.* God keeps His word. Do you need to hear that today? The timescales are often very different to what we would wish for, but He will

not break His promises. Sometimes we need that reassurance to keep our focus on our calling, at this moment in time in history. God is on the throne. When ill-health comes, unexpected bereavements, loss of employment or some other difficult challenge crosses our path it is so easy to wonder why God has allowed it to happen. I thank God for the inspirational Christian examples in my hearing who have said why not me? I have no right to avoid the kinds of things that other people have to face. May this trust in the Lord be our experience as well.

(b) **The original context** (Genesis 3:15) Why are so many of our spiritual triumphs taking place in contexts of adversity over which we must triumph? Why are there spiritual battles and challenges that may be our experience even at the present day? Genesis 3:15 is a Bible verse that gives us a glimpse into the spiritual bigger picture of what is going on in the world. This verse is a prophetic declaration of the struggles of God's people in a sinful world as they seek to follow the Lord. It pointed forward to the battles between good and evil, between the evil one Satan and those who reject God's way with the people of God that would take place in human history. It states: *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel*' (Genesis 3:15). The book of Revelation will point forward to the final triumph of King Jesus, but there is a lengthy history of struggles and triumphs in between these two events in history. What is most important is that we already know the beginning and ending of the story of human history. We also know of the significance of the greatest events in history- the death and resurrection of Jesus. God's final triumph is assured.

(c) **The historic context** (Genesis 15:13-16) Why was there such a lengthy time for Jacob's family the Israelites in Egypt? The answer is given in a message to Abraham from God recorded in Genesis 15:13-16: <sup>3</sup> *Then the Lord said to him, 'Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and ill-treated there.'* <sup>14</sup> *But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions.* <sup>15</sup> *You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age.* <sup>16</sup> *In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.'* The first part of the message correctly identified the lengthy time in Egypt and the enslavement that would bring their stay to an end. The last part of the message indicated that the Israelites were not given the Promised Land at any sooner point in their history because God in His grace was giving the Canaanite peoples that lived there time to repent of their brutal ways- but they did not do so and consequently forfeited their land. They were guilty of horrific cruelty especially in the sacrifices of children. God did not take kindly to a society that affirmed the willful taking of life of some of its most vulnerable members. It is a warning to our present generation that each country will be held accountable for how it treats its youngest and oldest members –that is the test of civilization, then and now. There are groups at different times in history that cannot be allowed to continue with their wicked ways. IS in Syria and Iraq is a current example of a group running a large area of the Middle East in an appalling way that cannot be allowed to continue. In the middle of the last century the Nazi regime in Germany was another case in point. However, Western Governments have been too quick in recent years to look for military solutions to problems when diplomatic efforts might have been more effective. Quick fix solutions are rarely the best ones. The promises God had made to Abraham centuries earlier concerning his descendants would come true, but I suspect that the timescale and the way things came to pass was quite different from what Abraham thought might happen at the time. It is no different in each and every subsequent generation. God is at work fulfilling what He has promised. May we expect Him to be at work in our midst in the coming days.

## **2. The blessings of God in prosperity** (Exodus 1:1-7)

<sup>1</sup>*These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each with his family: <sup>2</sup>Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; <sup>3</sup>Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin; <sup>4</sup>Dan and Naphtali; Gad and Asher. <sup>5</sup>The descendants of Jacob numbered seventy in all; Joseph was already in Egypt. <sup>6</sup>Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, <sup>7</sup>but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.*

Returning to the Israelites in Egypt, there had been around four centuries of good times and relative material prosperity. If that state of affairs had continued how many people would have wanted to accompany Moses and Aaron to Canaan where life would have been much harder and more basic? I suspect very few indeed. Many centuries later after a series of exiles of sections of the population to Babylon, that culminated in the destruction of the nation in 587-586BC, the people worked hard to overcome their disadvantages as an immigrant population. Jeremiah had given them this well-known advice which they had taken to heart: *This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup>'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. <sup>7</sup>Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.'* ... *This is what the Lord says: **'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my good promise to bring you back to this place.** <sup>11</sup>For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. <sup>12</sup>Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. <sup>13</sup>You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup>I will be found by you,' declares the LORD, 'and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,' declares the LORD, 'and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.'* (Jeremiah 29:4-7, 10-14). However, the prophesied seventy years of exile brought about by God as a judgement for the nation's sinful behavior (by Jeremiah - II Chronicles 36:21) had drawn to a close. How many people would go back with Zerubbabel the national leader in 538BC? Approximately 50,000 people according to the list given in Ezra chapter two. Later a second group of exiles returned with Ezra the priest in 458BC, but a special appeal had to be made to get some descendants of those who had served as Levites and Temple servants to offer to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:1-20); this group was likely to have been significantly less than 10,000 adults. The numbers sound large to us, but they are not much more than the equivalent of a third of the population of our city in Dundee. Restarting a nation and restoring its control and management of its towns and cities would take generations. It is no surprise that the majority of Jews in Babylon had no intention of leaving for the hardship of rebuilding their ancestors' homeland. It takes people of faith and vision to give the best of their time and finances and efforts for a work that might not reach fruition in their lifetime. The great blessing might come in their children or grand-children's lifetimes. We rejoice in the encouragement of the blessings in the early days of the work in Panmurefield Baptist Centre, but some of us will not live to see it reach its full potential. I was deeply moved, a week before he died, in the passionate prayer Rev Peter Clark prayed for the people that would be converted through the new witness in Panmurefield. He was someone who knew he would not live to see it but was thrilled at what God would do in future days as we stepped out in faith. Are you and I willing to be pioneers for Him in the ventures of the church here in the communities in which He has placed us –for the glory of God? I hope and trust that all of us will say –‘Count me in!’

However, in the Christian Church as a whole and the Jewish nation then it was only a minority that viewed things this way.

### 3. **The opportunities created by adversity** (Exodus 1:8-21)

The book of Exodus really begins with the fact of the new native dynasty in Egypt that wanted to reduce the influence and numbers of the immigrants in Egypt. The Hyksos African dynasty that had been so welcoming to Joseph and his family had been ousted from power and the historic Arab ruling families from northern Egypt had reasserted control over the country under a strong nationalist agenda of Egypt for the Egyptians! This would be the first time that the family of Jacob in Goshen would feel less than welcome in Egypt. From the perspective of the Arab dynasty this family that began with seventy people four centuries earlier was now two million strong; they were living in the best farming land in the nation at a time when food security was a major government issue. The issue for the people of Israel to work out was this: what might God be saying to them through the change of circumstances in which they found themselves? Bringing it forward to the present day, how many years did we as a church look at different sites and premises to explore the possibilities for the future work of our congregation? It was a lot of places and over a good number of years, but none of them seemed to fit what we were seeking—which was a source of disappointment. Then, on our existing St Vincent Street premises, how many conversations did our development group members have with the Council planners without long-term success? This process culminated in the four year conversation with the planner about erecting a major extension here at a cost of more than a million pounds. Yet those plans were rejected and we stopped for prayer for nine months to ask the Lord what He was seeking to communicate to us through this rejection of the last set of proposals we had on the table. In a minor sense we could call it adversity. Yet it was at this same time that people in Panmurefield Village Church were praying about the future work on that site – and the rest we have come to know as history. Our Bible text for 2013 was Revelation 3:8: *See, I have placed before you an open door that no-one can shut.* There had been adversity but it was God’s opportunity. In faith we seized the provision God had for us and the new work has begun. However, it is good to recognize God’s hand in permitting our frustrations about other sites to take place; and in allowing the Council to reject our proposals for this site, because He had something better in store for us in the prime location of Panmurefield.

(a) **Undeserved difficulties** (Exodus 1:8-14) (i) **A willful overlooking of history** (Exodus 1:8-10) <sup>8</sup> *Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.* <sup>9</sup> *‘Look,’ he said to his people, ‘the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. <sup>10</sup> 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.’* This new nationalist dynasty did not like the fact that so many foreigners had come into their land and had changed it. Horror of horrors! Some of them were regarded as great citizens like this Israelite vizier Joseph who had been allowed to run the country and totally reform its economic foundations. The grain cities and the waterways built in Joseph’s day to handle the excess flooding of the Nile delta that had led to the seven-year famine were still powerful witnesses to what had happened all those generations earlier. Therefore, the new government wanted new cities and new monuments built in their day that would be a statement about the new Egypt going forward. This vigorous and confident regime would be self-sufficient and need no foreigners to run its affairs. No outside interference would be permitted to affect the affairs of Egypt. The superpower of the past would soon be restored to its former glories. This

was how they viewed the situation at that time. But would it be the last word? Certainly not! God had been at work in the past and had brought Jacob and his family to Egypt to keep them alive during a famine. Members of this dysfunctional family had sought to eliminate from their future the most gifted but annoying younger son Joseph. But God overruled their foolish plans. Listen to these words of Joseph that were spoken to his brothers after the death of his father Jacob, recorded in Genesis 50:19-20: *But Joseph said to them, 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?'<sup>20</sup> You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.* History is important! Not least because it is His Story! The outworking of God's purposes through the lives of His people; God does not change; therefore, it is right and proper that we learn from the past. In this case for the Israelites in Egypt to recall Joseph's words and see how evil intentions and actions could not prevent God's will from being done. Jacob and family were most reluctant to go to Egypt at first, yet this temporary measure was actually within the purposes of God. The evil actions of the older brothers in selling Joseph into slavery in Egypt became the means God used to get His person into place in the highest circles of the then government of Egypt. Setbacks and obstacles arise in our lives- the challenge for us in these settings is to ask: what might God want to say to me, or you, or us, through this situation that we might not have been open to had circumstances been more favourable? How often in history have obstacles over time become unexpected opportunities? To spend a few moments reflecting on this fact can encourage us in our faith. In the short-term - which may be days or months, but can also be some years we may struggle to see how God is at work in a situation, but to be encouraged that often He is at work in ways we hadn't expected.

You may have wondered why God chose to use the route of the plagues and Moses' repeated visits to the younger Pharaoh of this dynasty in the years prior to the Exodus from Egypt. It was quite simple. A message was being sent about who was ultimately in control. God must have the last word! Secular regimes like many today or those with another form of ideological agenda will endeavour to exclude the God of the Bible from their reckoning. He will allow them to do it for so long before circumstances are permitted that force them reluctantly to look in His direction and acknowledge who is in charge in His universe!

(ii) **A determination to exclude and oppress** (Exodus 1:11-14) <sup>11</sup> *So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh.* <sup>12</sup> *But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites* <sup>13</sup> *and worked them ruthlessly.* <sup>14</sup> *They made their lives bitter with harsh labour in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labour, the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.* It was a reign of terror with the Israelites penned into Goshen like a ghetto and forced to work without pay for their cruel masters. The Nazi death camps motto: 'Work makes free' has disturbing echoes here. The intentions were exactly the same. The language of genocide was not known to the Twentieth Century AD, but the conduct fitting this description had been witnessed over many centuries including the attempted annihilation of God's people at this time in history. If we want to seek to understand what was going on here over around eighty years (See Exodus 7:7 for the approximate date) take a look at the pictures of what was happening to the Jews in Germany and neighbouring countries in the 1930s and early 1940s in the various ghettos where they were forced to live. Because we have no pictures of this era we can fail to grasp how awful it was to live at that time. Yet through the events that happened in the middle of the last century to the Jewish people we have a lens that allows us a glimpse into the kind of psychological and physical terror they were experiencing around the time that Moses and Aaron and Miriam were born to Amram and Jochebed (Exodus 6:20). Evil

people in every generation will do their worst to oppress others. The apparent success of their plans can cause people to ask many questions about God and His interventions into history. We often will have no clear words to say about the specifics of particular circumstances at the time, but sometimes looking back we can see why God permitted things to happen in the way they did in our lives or those of other people. Although we need to be honest that there are other circumstances we will never truly understand in God's purposes this side of heaven.

(b) **Unexpected blessings** (Exodus 1:15-21) <sup>15</sup> *The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah,* <sup>16</sup> *'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.'* <sup>17</sup> *The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.* <sup>18</sup> *Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, 'Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?'* <sup>19</sup> *The midwives answered Pharaoh, 'Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.'* <sup>20</sup> *So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous.* <sup>21</sup> *And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.* <sup>22</sup> *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.'* Eventually the true intentions of the evil regime were declared with the revealing of their evil plan for the annihilation of the Jewish race. Sadly, it was far from unique. II Kings 11:1-3 records the attempt of the wicked Queen Athaliah to wipe out the royal line of King David that came so close to success, only the young prince Joash survived. Fast forward to the time of the Persian Empire and the Arab Prime Minister Haman (Esther 3:8-10) who proposed the total elimination of the Jewish race to the Emperor Xerxes (486-464BC), who had no moral difficulties with accepting this proposal prior to God's intervention through his young wife Esther. There is a very clear pattern here, but God will always raise up His people to make a stand to prevent such a calamity taking place. Here it is two midwives Shiphrah and Puah who frustrated the plans of the wicked Pharaoh. Two ordinary people who lived for God and did what they could in their generation. You and I are His people in this generation. It is good for us to remember God's words to Eli, the spiritual leader of Israel nearly five hundred years later. *Those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise me will be disdained* (I Samuel 2:30). Who knows what this may mean in practice in the coming days for you and for me, but may we trust the Lord and be found faithful to Him in our generation, Amen.