A people in Pain

Exodus 1: 1-22

12 July 2026

You are the One who hears Your people when they groan,

who remembers Your covenant love,

who sees our troubles and knows us through and through.

Today we come as we are —

some with joy, some with questions, some with quiet weariness —

trusting that nothing in our lives is hidden from You,

and nothing in our lives is outside Your care.

So come, Lord,

meet us in our fragile beginnings and our hidden seasons.

Draw us into Your presence,

that we may listen to Your Word

and learn to trust Your purposes.

We come to worship the God who hears, who remembers, who sees, and who knows.

Introduction

The book of Exodus opens in darkness. Joseph is gone, and the generation that remembered God's earlier mercies has passed away.

A new ruler is on the throne of Egypt, and instead of gratitude, there is fear—instead of kindness, there is cruelty.

Yet this first chapter is not a chapter about Pharaoh's strength. It is a chapter about God's faithfulness.

Even when darkness grows, grace has started its work.

That's important, because many of us expect things to improve immediately when God is at work. We think blessing should be easy, obvious, and comfortable.But Exodus 1 teaches us otherwise. Sometimes God's grace is best seen in difficult times when He keeps His word.

Let's walk through this first chapter in four movements:

1. God's people are blessed in a foreign land.
2. God's people are crushed by a fearful ruler.
3. God's people are preserved through quiet courage.
4. The chapter prepares us for the coming deliverer.

God's people blessed

Exodus connects back to Genesis by repeating the names of Israel's sons, reminding us of the continuing family, covenant, and God's promise.

What started as a household has become a people, as God remembers His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Israelites grew abundantly and mightily, reminding us that this growth is not accidental but a covenant blessing from God, even in Egypt.

This word of comfort for the church is that God's people can flourish even in imperfect surroundings.

Israel, though not yet in the promised land, is living as outsiders in a foreign land under a pagan ruler. Yet, God is at work, and the promise is alive.

Many Christians experience a similar feeling of being **spiritually** in a foreign land, in a culture that doesn't share their convictions and friends who don't honour God. Even within family life, you may feel alone in your faith.

But Exodus 1 reminds us that God doesn't need perfect surroundings to keep His promises. He can make His people fruitful even in Egypt.

Therefore, our confidence must rest in the Lord, not in the climate around us.

We don't say, "Things are working out wonderfully, therefore God can work." We say, "God is faithful, therefore He will work." The setting may be hostile, the season may be difficult, but the covenant God remains the same.

Fear becomes policy

Then comes one of the chapter's great turning points: "There arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph."

The memory of grace disappears from power.

Joseph once saved Egypt, but now a new Pharaoh sees only numbers and threats, not people.

Fear grips the nation. Pharaoh observes Israel, thinking, "They're too numerous and strong. In trouble, they might ally with our enemies."

Fear often leads to oppression, both then and now. Rather than acting justly, Pharaoh chooses worldly shrewdness, mistaking cruelty for wisdom.

So taskmasters are set over the Israelites. They are afflicted with heavy burdens and forced into hard labour. Their lives become bitter with brickmaking, building, and relentless service in the field.

Pharaoh's plan is simple: if the people can be crushed, they can be controlled.

Think Iran, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Cuba, the Sudan, Yemen, Laos, Vietnam, North Korea, Belarus, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, China, Turkmenistan, and Syria — to name a couple!

Pharaoh is not just a figure in ancient history; Pharaoh is a pattern that recurs wherever rulers absolve themselves, scapegoat the vulnerable, and build their glory on forced labour and fear.

And yet we read an astonishing sentence:

"The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread abroad."

Pharaoh can intensify the pressure, but he can't halt God's blessing.

He can make life bitter, but he can't annul the promise. He can bind bodies, but he can't reverse God's purposes.

This is a key lesson of the chapter.

Hardship is real, and the Bible acknowledges it.

Oppression is not imagined, and suffering is not exaggerated.

But suffering is not sovereign. God is sovereign, and even what's meant for harm can't finally defeat what He has promised.

That is something many of us need to hear.

Life *can* feel heavy and relentless during certain seasons. Pressures increase, responsibilities multiply, grief lingers, illness weakens, and worries drain the spirit.

We may be tempted to think that a difficult season proves God's absence, but Exodus 1 says otherwise. Sometimes the pressure is intense, and God remains near. Sometimes the story seems darker, yet grace grows beneath the surface.

Cruelty deepens

Pharaoh sees forced labour is not enough and that his strategy has failed. Israel continues to grow. His opposition hardens from exploitation to murder.

He summons the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, and commands them to kill the Hebrew baby boys at birth while letting the girls live.

This is a terrible moment, illustrating the consequences of fear-based power. When people are treated as problems, cruelty becomes easier to justify. A ruler starts by managing a population and ends by targeting its children. The Bible provides a clear example of how dehumanising fear can lead to this.

Here the story wonderfully narrows.

The chapter shifts from an empire to two women, from a throne to a birthing stool, from a king's policy to the conscience of ordinary people, highlighting that some of history's greatest redemption moments involve those the world overlooks.

"But the midwives feared God." That is the hinge of the whole scene.

Pharaoh speaks with the authority of empire, but these women recognise a higher authority, fearing God more than they fear the king. And because they fear God, they refuse to do what Pharaoh commands.

Now in Scripture, the fear of God is not panic. It is reverence, awe, and yielded obedience. It is to know that God is God, and therefore His will outweighs every rival command.

The midwives understand that life belongs to the Lord, not to Pharaoh and they quietly resist evil. They protect life. They stand where conscience, faith, and courage meet.

Their power lies in their unassuming courage.

They aren't generals or leaders of uprisings; they refuse to serve wickedness. Their ordinary obedience holds extraordinary significance, offering much to ordinary believers like you and me, in everyday life.

Christian discipleship involves standing against wrongdoing, speaking the truth, protecting the vulnerable, and obeying God quietly.

Though unnoticed by others, heaven and God **do** notice. In Exodus 1, the faithful women who feared God are remembered, not the rulers. God treated the midwives well, and the people multiplied and grew strong.

Despite Pharaoh's fear and violence, life and blessing from God prevail, showing that opposition does not have the final word.

Toward the deliverer

Pharaoh, still unyielding, decrees that every Hebrew son born must be cast into the Nile. The chapter ends with a chilling shadow over every Hebrew home, highlighting the depth of the need.

Exodus begins with a people under threat, a ruler against them, and a perilous future. But when darkness appears thickest, God prepares deliverance.

The next chapter introduces Moses, born under the sentence of death but preserved by God's providence.

As Christians, we see a larger pattern: later, another ruler, Herod, fears a deliverer and orders the killing of infant boys, as Pharaoh did.

Yet again, God preserves the child, and that child, Jesus, brings a greater exodus—not merely from political bondage, but from sin, death, and condemnation.

Exodus 1 prepares us for Moses and ultimately for Christ. It shows a world of oppression, fear, and bloodshed, and God sends salvation into that darkness.

Application

So how should we respond to Exodus 1?

First, we are called to trust God's promise. Israel was still in Egypt, but God had not forgotten them.

The circumstances looked threatening, yet the covenant was moving forward all the same.

We also live by promise. We trust the God who keeps His word even when the road is hard.

Second, we should expect pressure in a fallen world. Pharaoh's fear became oppression, and the people of God suffered under it.

We should not assume that faithfulness always produces ease. Sometimes obedience brings resistance. But pressure does not prove God's absence.

In this chapter, pressure became the setting in which God showed His preserving power.

Third, we are called to practise quiet courage. Shiphrah and Puah did not control the empire, but they did control their obedience.

They feared God, and that fear made them brave. Most Christian faithfulness looks like that. It is not dramatic; it is steady. It is the daily resolve to honour God in the place where He has put us.

And finally, we are invited to look to Christ, our greater deliverer. Moses is still to come in Exodus 1, but Jesus has already come for us.

He has entered our darkness, borne our sin, broken our bondage, and opened the way into freedom.

Because of Him, the people of God can live without despair even in hard times. The darkness may grow, but grace has already entered the story.

Don't lose heart.

Trust God's promise and endure pressure without surrendering.

Cultivate quiet courage and fix your eyes on Jesus Christ.

He leads His people not just out of Egypt but all the way home. Amen.

Closing Benediction

Now may the God who remembered His people in Egypt, who saw their oppression and kept His promise, strengthen your hearts to trust Him in every hard place you face.

May He give you courage like the midwives—to fear Him more than every lesser power, to cherish life, to do what is right, and to reflect His justice and mercy in this village and beyond.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, our greater Deliverer; the love of God the Father, who will not forget His covenant; and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, who walks with you through every season, be with you, now and always. Amen.