**Exodus Lesson 1 (2017)**

**ISRAEL’S OPPRESSION**

(The more oppressed, the more multiplied)

Exodus 1:1-22

Key Verse 12

*“But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread;*

*so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.”*

We are going to study the second book of Moses, “Exodus.” The book records the history of the Israelites all the way from leaving Egypt to receiving the Law at the Mt. Sinai. The word “Exodus” means “to leave.” We call it “Exodus” because the departure of Israel from Egypt is the dominant historical fact in this book, taking up the first 15 chapters among 40. The Israelites did not just leave, but God brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand and rescued them from their slavery. This book helps us to understand Old Testament history, Hebrew customs, institutions, the law, tabernacles and more. However, this book does not just give us information related to the history of the Israelites, but also many essential spiritual lessons and meanings for Christians who live today. Through studying this book, may God give us spiritual insight, enabling us to explore spiritual treasures more deeply.

Today, we are going to study the first chapter. This passage tells us how Jacob’s descendants became a great community of people and how they became slaves in the land of Egypt, where once was the land of blessing and prosperity. God allowed His chosen people to go through many hardships for a long time, but He never abandoned them. Through this passage, may we learn how God leads His people in the middle of hardships and what kinds of attitude we need to have in those times.

1. The Favor Forgotten (1-10)

Look at ***verses 1-5, 1These 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[***[***a***](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=exodus+1&version=NIV#fen-NIV-1538a)***] in all; Joseph was already in Egypt.*** The first sentence of the Exodus starts with mentioning each name of Jacob’s twelve sons. Through Genesis bible study, we learned that they had many shortcomings: they were involved in genocide, selling their brother, and committing incest. They were not perfect people. However, God had shown His mercy upon them and made each of them a pillar of the nation Israel, forming a great community of each tribe. From a human point of view, they were not significant at all. People of this world may not remember their names or their existences, but God would not forget each of them as God’s chosen people. If you feel insignificant in this world, don’t worry, God remembers each of your names and He will guide your life, considering you as a great part of His redemptive work. When Jacob and his family moved to Egypt, they numbered seventy in all. That is only direct family of Jacob, of course, not including their servants; consider, Abraham had 318 trained males in his family (Genesis 14:14). The number seventy is mentioned here because they began with a very small number, but ended in great numbers of people. It is only by God’s blessing they became numerous.

Look at ***verse 6, Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died.*** Here we learned that one generation passed away soon. In Genesis, Joseph and his brothers were once main characters in Israel’s history with many stories and events. However, after Joseph’s death, all his brothers passed away probably around the similar time as Joseph since they were not more than 7 years different in age between the eldest and the youngest, except Benjamin. (Gen 29:31-30:24) Sometimes, people act as if they live forever in this world, but there is an unchanging reality that one generation comes and passes away, and a new one takes over. This fact made me think of my days, it has come and will pass away too. All of us are without exception. Then what kind of heritage do you want to pass down to the next generation? Sometimes I wonder how Jewish people are able to keep their national identity, language, and culture over several thousand years despite the destruction of their nation and diaspora. If you are a parent, you understand how hard it is to teach your children your language in a foreign country. I have tried to hand down to my children, my language, culture, and much more. When they were younger, I sent them to Korean school on Saturday, let them practice the language at home as much as possible, but I guess it didn’t work well.

But what is the most important things to hand it down to next generation? I want to share a Jewish parable, “The fox and the fish”. A rabbi taught the Torah under Roman rule despite the prohibition of studying the Torah. A non-believer came to him and warned him for the possible death penalty. So he told people this parable: There was once a fox who had gone hungry for a very long time. When he went to the stream. The stream was filled with swiftly swimming fish. He spoke to an old fish in a whisper: “I have run all this way to tell you that men have come into this forest to catch you!” But I have come to help you, my friend. Climb out of the water onto my back. I will carry you to safety.” But the fish said, “No thank you.” The fish said to fellow fish, “A fish out of water will surely die. But as long as I am in the water I can try to avoid the fisherman’s nets, and the fox’s paws, too!” The water refers to Torah and their faith. This parable has been taught generation after generation for Jewish people to emphasize the importance of Torah and their faith. Leaving the Word of God and faith in God to escape possible danger means inviting bigger trouble, death. I think this parable says a lot for Christians too. Peter said in ***1 Peter 1:24,25a, 24For, “All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, 25but the word of the Lord endures forever.”***There are many things we can hand down to next generation, but the most important heritage is the Living Word of God which lasts forever and the identity as the children of God. It is our homework to hand them down to next generation. I know many of you are concerned about your children’s spiritual wellbeing, but one thing is clear - that if we ourselves don’t value the Word of God and live up to it, then all our effort may be in vain.

There were seventy people who came to Egypt, but their number increased greatly. Let’s look at ***verse 7, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.*** How could they become so numerous that the land was filled with them? It is based on God's covenant. God made a covenant with Abraham that He would make Abraham’s offspring numerous like the dust of the earth. (Genesis 13:15-17; 15:18-21) God gave Abraham the promise, but it was too ambiguous for him to understand in his time. Abraham only saw one son, Isaac, as the promised child and probably two sons of Isaac. But God's promise became clearer as time passed by. Eventually, God fulfilled his promise by forming a nation through Jacob's family.

There are countless man-made religions in the world. How do you know that God you believe is the true God among many gods? Man-made religions have its limitation that there are not many prophecies related to events in human history, so there isn’t much fulfillment. Most of them focus on how to accept present reality and to encourage people doing good works for good fortunes and a better afterlife. However, God has given many promises and prophecies concerning Israel and its surrounding nations, people, and the Messiah, and all of them were fulfilled in God. In other word, God has revealed himself in human history. This clearly tells us that the God in the Bible is the living God and only true God, not one of many gods. God gave us many promises through His Son Jesus Christ. Sometimes God’s promise seems to be delayed, but we have to know that it is always sure; ***though [God’s promise] linger, wait for it; it will certainly come… (Habakkuk 2:3)*** Do you receive God’s promise in your hearts, but tire of waiting? Be patient because it surely come in an appointed time.

Look at ***verse 8-10, 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.”*** A new king was established in Egypt. He didn’t consider at all what Joseph had done for Egypt, saving nations from the catastrophic disaster of seven years of famine. Joseph’s name and his works were forgotten. Why? Obviously, much time had passed after Joseph’s death. Also “a new king” might mean a new dynasty. A hero in a previous dynasty didn’t mean much for them. Joseph’s work was appreciated by his contemporaries, but it faded away as time passed by. For a new king, God’s blessing for the Israelites came for him as a threat. He entertained in his mind every possible scenarios against the Israelites, what if, what if… and then the problem appeared bigger and bigger for him. There is no evidence that Israel had war like intentions or that they were stronger than Egypt, the most powerful kingdom at that time, but the king thought that the Israelites were stronger than them. Eventually, he was gripped with fear and insecurity. However, he didn’t want to expel them out of Egypt, he wanted to deal this problem shrewdly.

1. The Israelites under the Bondage (11-14)

Look at ***verse 11, So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh.*** The Pharaoh’s plan was to make the Israelites slaves. Once the land of Egypt was a land of hope and dreams, providing shelter for the Israelites, but now it turned into a land of oppression and bitterness. For Pharaoh, it was a perfect plan, killing two birds with one stone. Through the new policy, Pharaoh tried to weaken them by keeping them as slaves; to break their spirit by robbing their hopes and dreams; to ruin their health by harsh labor; to discourage them from marrying and having children by making their life insecure.

It became apparent that the Israelites suffered from an evil king. However, it was God’s plan from long ago. God said to Abraham in ***Genesis 15:13, 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 mistreated there."*** God knew already that His chosen people would become slaves and be mistreated for a long time, but He allowed these cruel things to happen to them. Why? Many times we don’t know why God allows undesirable events to happen to His people. We like to argue with God that “Lord, you shouldn’t have let these things happened in my life”. However, God said in ***Isaiah 55:8-9, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways are my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”*** God is saying that He is not limited to doing things the way that we think things ought to be done or that we would think proper. Sometimes, things that we are fighting and praying against the most, are the things through which God brings us into another level of understanding of who He is. Troubles, hardships! Nobody wants them. If possible, we don’t want to face any of them, even a single one. However, God allows things to happen in our lives. When we face troubles and hardships, it is like climbing up a high mountain, but soon after climbing over the mountain, another mountain is waiting for us. Life seems like endless climbing.

When I was in Korea, I volunteered to go out as a missionary and applied for a U.S visa as a poultry worker in the second year of my college. Receiving the visa was like a mountain, I had to work hard to pay the processing fees and waited for a long time. I wanted the visa desperately, but it took a lot longer than I expected, taking almost 9 years. Finally I got the visa and came to the U.S.A, but being a poultry worker was not easy, standing in one spot all day long working like a preprogrammed robot, the same job, the same motion with minimum payment. I wanted the period of one year’s contract to end, counting down the days like a solider waiting for release from duty. Seemingly, I had to deal with one problem after another: job security, health, nursing study, issues with raising children, and more. Some were easier to handle, some were out of my control. However, ironically, the problems I struggled with the most, I got the most encounters with God and helped me to grow my faith deeper. When I was struggling with future security, God showed me He is my true security; when I was in need, God showed me He is my provider; when I was sick, God showed me He is my healer; when I was lonely, God showed me He is my everlasting company; when I was groaning for unfairness of the world, God showed me His goodness. Probably, many of you may have had a similar experience as me. Have you ever heard of “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder”? It is an anxiety disorder that stems from a life-threatening event or psychological trauma. The symptoms manifest as nightmares, intense remembrance of the event, and insomnia which throws off the balance of one’s life. Back in 1995, researchers at the Trinity Western University in Canada found that such trauma can actually be beneficial if it’s handled correctly. They called the phenomena, Post Traumatic Growth (PTG). The growth resulted in: gratitude for being alive, positive changes in their priorities, stronger spiritual beliefs, greater meaning in their lives, and more. So troubles and hardships are not necessarily bad, but they may be a chance to grow.

What happened to the king’s population control plan?Look at***verse 12-14, 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.***  The king’s plan did not work at all. Incredibly, the Israelites were pressed harder, but they multiplied more. Pharaoh became helpless. So he pressed the Israelites harder. He made their lives bitter with hard labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their hard labor, the Egyptians used them ruthlessly (14). When God intervenes for His people, men’s evil design cannot succeed. But when God was with his people, they multiplied and increased. When we read the book of Acts. Early Christians were persecuted by religious leaders and political leaders, however, the gospel message was more powerfully spread out all over the world. Christianity always spreads more rapidly when it is persecuted. There is a saying, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” We often hear that many Christians are suffering in various parts of the world because of their faith. This contemporary culture discourages Christians from sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. However, we have to pray continually that the gospel message will go out to every corner of the world despite persecution and discouragement.

1. Shiphrah and Puah (15-22)

Look at ***verses 15-16, 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.”*** Seemingly, forced labor was not enough to reduce the population of the Israelites. The king called Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives, secretly. Midwives’ duties were cutting the umbilical cord, washing the infant in water, rubbing it with salt, and wrapping it in swaddling clothes. (Ezekiel 16:4) It would be wrong to assume that Shiphrah and Puah were the only midwives in Egypt. They were most likely high ranking midwives who were in charge of the midwives assigned for Hebrew women. The king gave them an order to kill every boy that was born to Hebrew women. Children are the future for a nation. Pharaoh wanted to kill the dreams, the hopes, and the future of the nation. How evil it was to kill innocent babies, right after their birth. We don’t know much about those midwives, their families, ages, or characters. However, what they did stands out among many great women of faith in the Bible. Let’s see what they had done.

Look at ***verse 17, “The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boy live.”*** They disobeyed the king’s order. They stood before the most powerful man in the ancient world. A simple movement of his finger could mean life or death. So, refusing to comply with the king’s order would mean their lives. However, they feared God more than the most powerful man in the world. They put God first more than anything else, no matter what. Most of us are not faced with life or death situations today like them. If someone ask you, “Do you want to follow God or the devil?” Most of us will answer “God.” However, it is not that simple or easy in a real situation. We are often in a situation where we have to decide: “Will I follow the wide and easy road that society and my friends want me to take or the narrow, more difficult road that Jesus showed to me?” Remember what the apostle Paul said to the believers in Rome, ***Romans 12:2, Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.*** If we choose to follow the pattern of this world, then we allow this world to mold us. Christians are not supposed to conform, but rather transformed. When we choose what is right before God, we begin a transforming process. Our mind is renewed and we think differently and act differently. We have to choose God’s way rather than Pharaoh’s. When you choose what movies to watch, when you pick what books to read, when you choose what the clothes to wear, what is in your mind? Do you just follow contemporary popularity, your friends, your feelings, or consider Biblical values, holiness, and modesty that God wants us to have? If you have a free ticket for a sports game that you really wanted to watch, but it was on a Sunday so that you would miss worship, what are you going to do? Shiphrah and Puah had courage to choose an action out of reverence of God against Pharaoh’s order, even it would cost their lives. We have to understand that transformation does not take place overnight. We cannot have such courage to choose God in a life threatening situation after a few days training. Such a faith needs to be developed for a long period of godly training such as personal prayers, bible studies, and repentance by confessing our sins, and committing ourselves to God and His ministry. May we not neglect godly disciplines in our daily lives, so that we may grow as courageous men and women of faith who are able to withstand the temptations and threats of an ungodly world.

The Pharaoh’s second plan didn’t work, so he investigated what was going on. The midwives said in ***verse 19, The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.”*** When the midwives made a decision based on the fear of God, God gave them wisdom with reasonable excuses to Pharaoh. God protected them from the grips of the cruel king and blessed them to establish their own families (20-21.) It is possible they married Israelites and became members of God’s chosen people. When Pharaoh’s secret plan failed to complete its purpose, he publically gave an order: ***“Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.” (22)***

In conclusion, Exodus chapter 1 narrates about the situation of the Israelites before the great deliverance came to them. They were the chosen people out of all nations to be made into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God chose them for world salvation and revealing Himself to the world. However, they were enslaved for many years in the land of Egypt. It is very ironic to see that they were proud of being God’s chosen people and despised uncircumcised people but became slaves under the uncircumcised, not for a short time, but many years, probably few hundred years. We cannot understand all about God's greatness and his wisdom, however, it was a necessary process for them to experience the bondage of slavery before receiving God’s great salvation. If you are facing some troubles and hardships in your life, don’t be discouraged. Someone said, “Sometimes God allows us to be knocked down, so all we can do is look up.”Troubles and hardships are there not to destroy us, but to make us look up to God. God wants to bless us. ***Verse 12a reads, But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread.*** If we look upon Him and depend on Him, God will surely bless us more than before even in adverse situations, deepening the level of our understanding of who God is and His saving grace.