

# GOD'S PURPOSE PREVAILS

## SERIES: EXODUS - JOURNEY TO FREEDOM



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Exodus:1-22  
First Message  
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*Exodus:1-22*

This morning, I have a hammer. When I think of something that has been created for a very specific purpose, a hammer is one of the first things that comes to mind. This hammer was created primarily to do one thing: hit nails.

Here is a board of wood and a nail. When I put the nail into the board, most of us know that this hammer is perfectly suited to striking this nail and lodging it into the block of wood. It is almost as if the hammer *wants* to do this. This creation, which was made for such a specific purpose, is practically crying out to fulfill the reason for its existence. Seeing it here, we want it to fulfill its purpose. Can you hear it? Can you hear the hammer longing for fulfillment?

Do you have any sense at all that you were created for a particular purpose? This question is the kind we ask when life slows down and we have a minute to reflect. Why am I here? What am I supposed to be doing? Is there a reason that I was put on this earth?

Some of us may feel we have a sense of our purpose, but it is hard to fulfill. Things keep getting in the way of us living the life we were meant to live. Instead of fulfillment, we find frustration. Instead of purpose, we find procrastination. Instead of getting into the flow, we find ourselves stuck in a rut. We want to have lives of meaning. But too often, the things we are doing seem pointless and the things we want to be doing feel too complicated or difficult.

This morning we are kicking off a series in the book of Exodus. We have subtitled this series, *Journey To Freedom*. We plan to spend most of the academic year working through this book with intermissions during the seasons of Advent and Lent. This book divides up easily into three sections. First, we will see God's people delivered from oppression in Egypt. Second, we will see them given a covenant agreement with God. Lastly, they will receive instructions on building the tabernacle to foster worship.

Freedom. Covenant. And Worship. This is the story of Exodus. Each of these has to do with God's people becoming who they were meant to be all along. A community that freely reflects his image, lives according to his design, and worships him with their whole lives.

This morning we will look at the first chapter: Exodus 1. In this chapter, it will be very clear that the challenge God's people face has to do with not fulfilling the purpose that they were created to fulfill. It is as if God's people were a hammer, and someone keeps trying to prevent them from striking the nail. We will see three challenges put before God's people. And three times, we will see God help his people to continue fulfilling their purpose. We will watch as God's purpose prevails.

One of the amazing things about studying the Bible is how you can find patterns and connections between all the different books of the Bible. It is one of the things that keeps me believing. This book was written by around 40 authors over a period of 1500 years. The fact that it presents such a cohesive and interconnected message is proof enough that God inspired every word.

In the first chapter of Exodus, there is a word that shows up four times. That word is "multiply." We will see how that word drives the whole message of this chapter. But to understand the significance, we must know why this is such an important word.

In the first chapter of Genesis, God gives his newly created humans a command. This command seems to be at least part of the purpose that should guide them in life.

**Genesis 1:28:**

**And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it"**

There is that word: "multiply." The first command that God gave people after creating them on this earth is to be fruitful and multiply. We were created, at least in part, to multiply.

This command could probably be a whole sermon, but being created to multiply means much more than having babies. Having children is part of it, but not by any means all of it. We were created to fill this world with life—to multiply life and life to the full in dozens of ways.

Life multiplies. This is how life works. If you have ever been in a rainforest, you have seen the multiplication of life on earth. If you have ever been scuba diving, you have seen the multiplication of life in the sea. If you have ever been on our playground after the second service, you have seen the multiplication of life at PBC.

In the first chapter of Exodus, the ability of God's people to fulfill their purpose—to multiply—constantly comes under attack. Three times in three different ways. Each time the obstacle to their purpose escalates. It gets worse and worse and worse. But every single time, God's purpose prevails. Without fail. Nothing stops the people of God from doing what he created them to do.

As we see their story play out, we will be asking how our story resonates with theirs. What challenges do we face? What stands in the way of living as God created us to live? Can we trust that God's purpose will prevail in our lives today?

## Vulnerable

In Hebrew, the book of Exodus begins with the word “and.” The first five verses attempt to catch us up to the story from Genesis.

### Exodus 1:1-5:

**These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: 2 Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, 3 Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, 4 Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. 5 All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt.**

The first phrase is an exact replica of Genesis 46:8. This is a connection to the past. God led his people to Egypt. These verses present a picture-perfect view of the Israelites in Egypt. Twelve sons. Seventy people. Both of those numbers are significant. This is as good as it gets. Joseph is the second in command. These were the good old days.

We are tempted to look back at the past and remember how perfect everything was. That is how

Exodus starts. Everything was great, but then things changed. Our first challenge comes in Exodus 1:6.

### Exodus 1:6:

Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation.

The good old days ended. They always do.

Joseph died. Everyone who came into Egypt died as well. This was a new generation. And it was more than just the fact that the generation had turned over. Joseph had been their protector. They were foreigners living in Egypt, but they had an advocate. Now they had lost the context for why they were still in Egypt in the first place.

Have you ever walked into a room and then wondered why you went there in the first place? I know I was about to do something; I just cannot remember what it was. Why am I standing in the kitchen?

That is what happened to the Israelites. They were living in Egypt, and then everything that came before them was gone. They looked around, saying, “Why am I here again?” Even more importantly, the Egyptians must have looked at them and said, “Why are you here again?” It made sense for them to be in Egypt when Joseph was there. But now, they had no reason to be there. That is a dangerous place to be.

Joseph died, and the good old days ended. God's people were vulnerable.

I relate to this feeling. Maybe you can too. Maybe you have lost someone in your life who used to be an advocate: a parent, child, or close friend. Or perhaps you find yourself in a situation where you feel vulnerable. No one is on your side. You don't have anyone to champion you or be your cheerleader. Maybe things used to be different. But now you feel like you are not sure where you belong.

Does any of this resonate? Are you vulnerable?

I have good news if you sense that this is true for you. Vulnerability is part of the human condition. Human children take more time to be self-sufficient than any other species on earth. And that is not even counting thirty-year-olds living in their parents' basement.

Our bodies are weak and frail. Our feelings are easily hurt. Temptations are hard for us to resist.

Communication is so often misunderstood. Relationships become complicated and painful. Nothing works the way it ought to. Sometimes it feels like there is danger around every corner. We are vulnerable creatures.

Listen to the next verse.

**Exodus 1:7:**

**But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.**

There's that word! They "multiplied." This verse contains several references back to Genesis. They were fruitful. The land was filled. They multiplied. Even in their vulnerability, they were able to do what God originally asked them to do. Even as they faced a challenge which could have left them confused and aimless, they fulfilled their purpose.

Joseph died, but the people multiplied. They lost their connection to the past. Still, God's purpose prevailed.

But then things get worse.

## **Enslaved**

The people of Israel go from being vulnerable to being actively oppressed.

**Exodus 1:8-10:**

**Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, 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."**

A new king arises in Egypt, and he worries about having such a large community of foreigners living in his country. This is a common fear—we see it all the time, even today. Any country with a large foreign or refugee population starts to worry about "those people." The author describes Pharaoh's fear as he was afraid "lest they multiply."

There is the same word from Genesis 1:28. The author wants us to see what is happening on a theological level. In a strictly earthly sense, Pharaoh is protecting his

nation from a foreign ethnic minority. But the author wants us to know what is actually going on: Pharaoh wants to stop the people of God from doing what they were created to do. He is pitting himself against the very purposes of God for his creation.

This conflict is not Pharaoh versus the people of God. This is Pharaoh versus God Himself. What becomes clear as the story progresses is that Pharaoh has picked the wrong enemy.

But Pharaoh doesn't know that yet. This is what he does next:

**Exodus 1:11:**

Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses.

Pharaoh made the people of God enslaved people. This is worse than being vulnerable. They are being actively oppressed. They are building cities to store Pharaoh's wealth and don't even benefit from their hard work.

But remember that the purpose is not just to get free labor or a lot of work done. The reason the people of God were enslaved was to make sure they did not multiply. This was not only an economic arrangement. Pharaoh was trying to destroy their humanity—to make them less than human.

Last week we heard from Reverend Kaloma Smith from the AME Zion church next door. He told a story of a woman from Alabama whose grandparents were slaves. Not long ago, this was the situation in our country. An entire ethnic population was enslaved in a way that made them less than human. That is why the book of Exodus has a special place in the Black Church. It was such a privilege to hear his perspective on this powerful book.

Thank God that none of us here face literal slavery. We enjoy economic and political freedom and cannot take that for granted. But there are still things today which threaten our humanity. Not to the extreme that was true during slavery. But there are things that control us.

Many of us carry heavy burdens and feel trapped by them. We do not have actual taskmasters. Nonetheless, some of us live our lives with the voices of parents, bosses, teachers or even our own voice, which drives us to miserable work.

My question for us to consider is: What are you enslaved to?

What drives you? Success? Reputation? Avoiding shame? Creating financial security for your family? Finding personal fulfillment? Often the things that motivate us can turn into taskmasters which afflict us with heavy burdens. When that happens, they get in the way of our fulfilling the purpose for which we were created.

The Bible calls this sin—anything which gets in the way of our living as God intended us. Sin stops us from multiplying life in the world.

In Egypt, it was Pharaoh who tried to stop them. Here is what happened in Exodus 1:12:

**Exodus 1:12:**

**But 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.**

Did you see that? “The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied!” Pharaoh’s plan backfired. He tried to oppress the people of Israel to stop them from multiplying, but it only made them multiply more. This is how God works.

I have been spending a lot of time lately thinking about how to help followers of Jesus integrate their faith into their work lives. In our area, while people are not literally enslaved, many people act and live like they are slaves to their jobs.

It resonated with me when someone pointed out that the whole book of Exodus is, in some ways, a story of work being redeemed. Here in the first chapter, we see a people who are enslaved by a hostile king. They are forced to do work which doesn’t benefit them under brutal conditions. The whole system that they live within is designed to keep them down and oppress them. Someone is actively trying to prevent them from living the way they were meant to live.

By the end of the story, everything has changed. Exodus ends with an incredible picture of God’s people coming together to build the Tabernacle, where they will be able to worship YHWH in freedom. At the end of the book, they are free. They are doing meaningful

work that orients them toward worshipping God. Their master is a good and loving God who does everything he can to help them live the way they were meant to live.

Their work lives have been transformed.

When Jesus redeems us, he transforms everything. We are not just saved in a spiritual sense. We are saved holistically. The reign of God takes over every aspect of our lives. That includes the area which dominates a lot of our time: work or study or raising kids or whatever it is we do when we are not at church.

Exodus is a grand story of redemption, and that redemption includes our work.

## Genocide

Our chapter began with a picture of perfection. God’s people are happy in Egypt. Then Joseph died, and they became vulnerable, but still, they multiplied. Then a new king arose who enslaved them to limit their numbers. Still, they multiplied. But now, things take an even darker turn.

**Exodus 1:15-16:**

**Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, “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.”**

“If it is a son, kill him.” We’ve moved beyond vulnerability and slavery to full-blown genocide. The Genocide Convention defines the term in this way: “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, or religious group.”<sup>1</sup> That’s a pretty good description of what Pharaoh is trying to do.

As the story grows darker, it also becomes more inspiring. Up to this point, we don’t know the name of the Pharaoh. We don’t know the names of any of the Israelites living during this time. The only names that have been mentioned are the ancestors. But here, we meet two women: Shiphrah and Puah. We are told their names because they are extraordinary.

Listen next to what they do.



### Exodus 1:17-19:

**But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and let the male children live?” The 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.”**

I am in awe of these women. The king of Egypt gave them a command, and they disobeyed it. Then they are called into his office, and he confronts them. The women lie to his face and tell him that the Hebrew women keep giving birth before they can arrive. They do not only stand up to him; they work in a subtle jab at how Hebrew women are superior. How do they have such courage?

If you're looking for heroes in the Bible, look here. Shiphrah and Puah.

This is also the first time God appears in the book of Exodus. He has been in the background all along, but the first direct mention of him is when we are told that these two women fear him. Their faith introduces God into the story of Exodus!

In the first two cases, God protected the Israelites quietly, but this time he uses these two women to bring about salvation. I think you can guess what happens to these people.

### Exodus 1:20:

**So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong.**

“The people multiplied.” Here is the fourth usage of that word in this chapter. Because of Shiphrah and Puah, the people multiplied and continued to fulfill the purpose for which God created them. Nothing can stand in God's way.

Here is what we need to know. Whether we are vulnerable, enslaved, or even oppressed as victims of genocide, God's purposes will prevail. God's purposes will prevail.

We will see this over and over again throughout the book of Exodus. The people of Israel might be

multiplying, but they still live as slaves, under the threat of violence, in a foreign land where they have no protection. All of these things will be addressed as the story progresses.

No matter what happens, the people are able to multiply.

Here is what we've seen this morning.

Our passage began with 12 sons and 70 people—the picture of perfection. Then Joseph died. The people were vulnerable, but they multiplied. Then Pharaoh tried to stop them from multiplying by enslaving them. Their lives were made bitter with ruthless labor. Still, they multiplied. Finally, he escalated his oppression into genocide. He commands to kill every boy. Still, they multiplied.

Nothing can stand in the way of God's purposes for his people. But the chapter ends on a cliffhanger. The escalation continues. Here is the last verse in Exodus 1.

### Exodus 1:22:

**Then 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.”**

The first command was given to the Hebrew midwives. Now he tells all “his people” to murder every young boy. He tells them to throw the boys into the Nile, where they will drown and their lifeless bodies will float past all the people living near the shore.

The chapter ends in horror—pure ruthless evil. We have seen God's purposes prevail up to this point. Will they continue? That's what we find out next week.

### Conclusion

This hammer longs to strike this nail. I *could* go ahead and do it now. I think we all want this nail to be finally struck. But I won't because I want you to know that I am capable of preventing this hammer from doing what it was meant to do.

I can stop this hammer from fulfilling its purpose. But no one and nothing is capable of standing in the way of God. Throughout the book of Exodus, we will watch Pharaoh learn that lesson. By the end of the book,

these oppressed people will be building a temple with the wealth they have multiplied; that word will appear again. Nothing can stand in the way of God's purposes.

This means that God will ensure that his purposes are fulfilled in our lives. We have a role—he will invite us into the process. But the ultimate success will come from his faithfulness to make it happen. Our response is just like the Israelites: to multiply our resources by overflowing in worship. We praise him and give him the glory that only he deserves. As we continue to worship in song, may your joy be multiplied and your hearts overflow with praise for God.

## Endnotes

1. "Genocide Convention," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genocide\\_Convention](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genocide_Convention).