

## What's in a Name?

### Part 2

Exodus 1:8-2:10

The name *Joseph* meant nothing to Pharaoh. The new Pharaoh. He'd never heard of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. He didn't know that this family was blessed by God, or promised great things. He'd never heard the stories about Joseph and his dreams, or how Joseph had single-handedly saved Egypt from famine. All he knew was that he was threatened by them, Joseph's family.

I don't know how many generations it takes for a clan of seventy to become a multitude, but by the time this particular king came along, God's promise of enough descendants to populate an entire nation was well under way. In fact, when the narrator describes Joseph's family, he uses language that is reminiscent of the words he uses to describe the plague of locusts: they "were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them."

Joseph's family was enjoying the good life down in Egypt. They had land, family, plenty to eat, all the things that Joseph had promised them, and no indication is ever given that they were inclined to be disturbers of the peace or revolutionary. But still, Pharaoh was afraid of them. Irrationally afraid, apparently. You would think that he would be worried that, if anything, they would stage a coup and take over the government, but what he tells his people is that he is afraid they will join forces with Egypt's enemies, and then leave. Go back where they came from. Sounds like that would be a good thing for them to do if you were afraid they were overpopulating the land, but paranoia does funny things to you, I guess.

So, here's what happens when we don't know someone, when a group of people are different from us and we don't take the time to get to know them, develop a relationship with them: we become mistrustful of them, and find a way to put them down. To keep them in their place. And that's exactly what Pharaoh did. He turned their villages into labor camps. He worked them to the bone; he worked them into submission. He worked them so hard they had nothing left to put into any sort of uprising or resistance, if they were so inclined.

But here is the irony of Pharaoh's little plan: the harder he worked them and tried to beat them down and keep them in their place, the more fruitful they became. The narrator is subtle here; he never mentions God by name, but God is clearly behind this. This is God's promise and blessing to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, continuing to come to fruition (excuse the pun!). And hopefully, it is a not-so-subtle sign and reminder to this family that no matter what Pharaoh plots and plans, he can never undo God's greater plan. God is still with them. God's promises are still being kept.

When Pharaoh sees that his plan is backfiring he goes even further in his oppression of them. At first they were simply worked like dogs. Now, they are "ruthlessly" oppressed. At first their lives were hard; now their lives are "bitter". Hardly worth living. But even

that doesn't slow Jacob's kin down, so Pharaoh's desperation ramps up, and his efforts and his humanity sink even further: genocide. Infanticide. The nameless Pharaoh commands the two named midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill all the baby boys they help deliver. But, as we all know, they will have none of this. They tell Pharaoh that his instincts about these people are right – these people are so robust that their women just take a few minutes break from their manual labor to have their babies and get right back to it; the midwives have virtually been put out of business.

And again, God sneaks back into the picture and rewards these cunning and faithful little liars by making them fruitful – even more children to add to the rolls of Jacob's clan.

All this, of course, is told as the backdrop of the Exodus and describes the bleak and desperate lives of Jacob's clan. It paints a picture of a people desperately in need of saving, and sets the stage for the birth of the one who is to rescue them.

But before we dash off to hear about Moses, our reluctant hero, there is something to be learned from this story. It is a story about naming.

Three weeks ago, Lynnea preached on another story about naming. After a lifetime of scheming and trickery, Jacob at long last seems to have found a conscience and decided to walk the high road. His first order of business is to go home and make peace with Esau, if he can. He stops for the night on the way, and gets jumped by God, literally. God wrestles with him all night long, and when morning dawns Jacob walks away from the experience with three things: a blessing, a limp, and a new name. He is no longer Jacob, he is Israel. He is no longer to be accounted as a single individual, but he is a nation, a people. And the name they bore was intended to tell them who they were, who they belonged to, what their history was, and what their purpose was.

Israel, of course, eventually finds itself living and thriving in Egypt. Only this king who does not know them or trust them comes along and gives them a new name: Hebrews. Now the scholars are divided about whether or not the name Hebrew is derived from the word "hapiru", which was used to describe invaders and outlaws and rebels and mercenaries and the like; but either way, the effect was the same. Like other names we give people it created fear and distance and distrust. It set the Egyptians apart from the people who had been their neighbors for generations. It created the climate where they could be bitterly, ruthlessly oppressed.

But this sermon isn't about the names we give other people to set them apart, to create distance and make sure they understand that they are beneath us. This is about claiming the name that has been given to us.

You see, this new pharaoh is still around, still burdening and oppressing people with his names. His name for us? There are probably many, but the ones that stick out in my mind most these days is "superman", "wonder woman". And, honestly, at first it seemed like a compliment: we could do anything. In fact, we could do everything. Parent, grandparent, employee, coach, committee chair, volunteer, board member, PTA,

booster club, Lions Club, traveler. The more hats we wore, the more amazing we were. The more sites where your name popped up when you Googled it, the greater your super powers. The more you were involved in, the more important you were.

And for a while it seemed great. For a lot of us it meant that we were finally able to break out of molds that we had been told we had to conform to our whole lives. We had more freedom, more opportunities. But as a pastor, I have to tell you that in the past few years I've been seeing people under greater and greater burdens of stress than ever before – even before the economy tanked three years ago. Depression and anxiety are on the rise. People are overwhelmed by the sheer number of commitments they've made and they are finding they don't have time for the things that are really important to them. They are being pulled in so many different directions and they find their lives are managed by the demands of everyone else, instead of their own priorities. Folks, we've bought into this new pharaoh's name for us, hook, line and sinker. We've bought into the lie that we have to do it all, that if every minute of our day isn't scheduled that we are nothing. And folks, let me tell you – it's slowly killing us.

But that's not your real name. The name God has given you is a very different name: Christian. One who belongs to Christ, not pharaoh. And just like Israel, your name should be a constant reminder of who you are, and who you belong to, and what your purpose is. It tells you that you are important and loved, not because you are some super person, juggling home, work, church, sports, and a host of other outside activities, but just because God chooses to love you.

Danny Massie, the minister I worked with in Kingsport, ends every service with the same benediction: *Go into the world remembering that you are the people of God and that you bear the name of Jesus Christ. Bear His name carefully, for you are not your own. Bear His name gratefully, for you have been purchased at a price. And bear His name joyfully, for He enlists each of us in His service.*

God meant for Israel to have freedom, to be blessed, and to be fruitful. But Pharaoh meant to oppress them, bitterly, ruthlessly. Bearing the name of Christ should be freeing, not burdensome. It should bring blessing, not bitterness.

Here is my question for the week: Whom will you serve? That will become the main question of the Exodus. Whom will you serve? God, and be free and blessed and fruitful, or Pharaoh, or a Golden Calf, or the expectations that your culture has put on you, and be oppressed and burdened? Choose life.