

God's purposes can't be defeated

by Scott Grant

'Night' in Transylvania

In his harrowing personal account of the Holocaust, "Night," Elie Wiesel describes the intensifying affliction that the Jews of Shiget, Transylvania, endured. First, they were herded into a ghetto. Then they were sent to concentration camps. Finally most of them died or were executed in the camps. At each stage hope of some kind bloomed but was soon crushed by the next brutal measure taken by the Nazis.

A similar scene is described in the first chapter of Exodus. Intensifying affliction brought on by the Egyptians brings the Israelites to the point of destruction. But that's only part of the story. Each stage of increasing affliction is answered by God. Each attempt by the king of Egypt to rein in the Israelites is thwarted by God, who causes their numbers to increase. God will not be deterred from advancing his purposes for his people.

We may face intensifying affliction. Things go from bad to worse. But the message of Exodus 1 is clear: God's purposes for his people will not be thwarted. His purposes for us advance despite intensifying affliction and through intensifying affliction. From our perspective, things may go from bad to worse. We agonize in the pains of labor. But God is giving birth.

Apparent insignificance (1:1-7)

These verses tell us first that the book of Exodus is a continuation of the Genesis story. Genesis 46:8-27 similarly lists the sons of Israel who came to Egypt, along with their households, or families, giving the total number as 70. The last verses of Genesis are also concerned with Abraham's offspring and their future (Genesis 50:22-26). Exodus picks up the thread. Right away we see that Exodus, then, concerns the descendants of Abraham. The apparent problem is that these descendants don't seem to be receiving any answers to God's glorious promises for them. God promised first and foremost that he would be God to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 15:1, 17:7), but he seemed fairly inactive. Abraham's descendants, who were to be a multitude living in the promised land and dispensing God's blessing to other nations (Genesis 12:1-3, 7), were a ragtag bunch of 70 living in Egypt and not proving to be much of a blessing. The question then becomes, "What about the people of God whom God promised to bless?"

At first, everything seems fairly insignificant. There are 12 sons and 70 people. From our perspective, they don't amount to much. But these numbers are extremely significant. The number 12 throughout scripture is often equated with the people of God. Not only were there 12 sons of Israel, who comprised the people of God, there were 12 disciples of Jesus who did so as well. Seven is often used as a number of completeness, being most evident in the number of days of creation. Seven multiplied by 10 simply intensifies the concept of completeness. In Genesis 10, when God started over, giving mankind another chance after the flood, there were 70 nations. And that is precisely what he's doing with the sons of Israel: starting over with mankind, this time with one nation through whom he plans to bless the world. The numbers may not seem inspiring from our perspective, but from God's perspective they are perfect.

Exodus 1:7 makes it clear that what God has in mind for Israel is nothing less than a new creation. Israel is the new Adam. This verse is reminiscent of God's charge to the first man and woman in Genesis 1:28. In fact, four of the same words appear in each verse: "fruitful," "multiply," "land" (translated "earth" in Genesis) and "fill."

Like Israel, we may feel insignificant. The days of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, when things were really

happening, are gone. Exciting and interesting days may seem like distant memories. But God has us right where he wants us. His Spirit is hovering over the waters of our lives, and he is about to give birth.

The biggest explosion that the earth can produce comes from its smallest parts: atoms. The Lord says through the prophet Zechariah, "For who has despised the day of small things?" (Zechariah 4:10). Certainly, not the Lord. We may feel small, like nobodies. Far from despising us, the Lord wants to give birth to explosive new growth in our lives. As he made Israel physically fruitful in Egypt, he wants to make our lives spiritually fruitful, so that we "bear much fruit" (John 15:8), bear fruit "in every good work" (Colossians 1:10) and bring forth the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23), impacting people through our love for them.

The Exodus creation sounds even greater than the Genesis creation, adding words such as "increased greatly" and "exceedingly mighty." If we open our eyes, we will see that God is always doing something greater than what he's done before. What God does in our lives today is better than what he did yesterday. Far from pining for "the good old days," we should seize God today, knowing that he is doing something greater today and will do something greater still tomorrow. So it's never too late for a new start, even for lives that have been apparently trashed. He is constantly creating and re-creating.

The answer to the question, "What about the people of God?" is another question, "Who is God?" It is a question that the book of Exodus, as we can see even in the first chapter, answers emphatically. God is all-powerful, and God is actively for us, creating and re-creating, giving birth to great things.

Accompanying any birth, however, are labor pains. Israel endures such labor pains, and so do we.

Increasing affliction (1:8-14)

In verse 7, things seem to be looking up. God is giving birth, showing himself faithful to his promises. But then a new king comes along. We may catch glimpses of God in our lives. Perhaps a new job, a new living arrangement, a new ministry or a new relationship breeds hope, leading us to believe that God has not forgotten us. And just when we seem to be turning a corner, something akin to a new king comes along and flattens us. Hope is crushed, and God seems uninterested.

This new king did not know Joseph. Joseph had been sold into slavery by his brothers, but as he continually proved to be a blessing to the Egyptians with whom he came in contact, he rose to a position of prominence. Because God revealed to Joseph the future and enabled him to interpret Pharaoh's dream, he was able to prepare Egypt for a famine. Pharaoh recognized Joseph's qualities, saying "there is no one so discerning and wise as you are" (Genesis 41:39) and made him a ruler in Egypt. This new king, however, didn't know how Joseph had blessed Egypt. So Joseph's people were unappreciated and overlooked.

We may feel that we have a lot to offer in a career, a ministry or a relationship. There are wonderful qualities that God has built into each of us. But much of the time we go unappreciated and overlooked. This new king didn't "know" Joseph. We may feel that no one really "knows" us. Therefore, we feel unrecognized and passed over.

As a community of believers, we feel that if the world only knew us as we really are, it would value us. Because it doesn't, we are prone to develop a bunker mentality, hunkering down in fear.

It's not difficult to see in this and other Egyptian kings a picture of Satan. Like Satan, the king violently opposes God's people. Like the serpent in the garden, the king is wise, or crafty, in his opposition to God's people (1:10, Genesis 3:1). Like Satan, he mimics God: As God placed (Hebrew: *shom*) his man in paradise (Genesis 2:8), Satan appoints (*shom*) taskmasters over God's people (1:11).

Satan is violently opposed to God's people and will stop at nothing in attempting to thwart God's purposes for them. He is especially active in his opposition to new life in God's people. If God's people begin to be fruitful, Satan gets out his ax and starts chopping at the root. That's why often new growth in our lives and in our churches is accompanied by new affliction. Satan hates the new things God is doing and knows that we are most vulnerable at the outset. Just as the Israelites were a threat to the Egyptian king (1:9), so we, as God's

people, are a threat to Satan.

But Satan can't win. First, he's fighting the wrong foe. It's not God's people he has to worry about but God himself. The Lord is a warrior who fights for his people (15:3). Second, even if he were fighting the right foe, he still can't win. If the Lord is a warrior, Satan loses.

But he won't go down without a fight. So for the Israelites, things go from bad to worse. It's one thing to be unappreciated; it's quite another to be opposed. Perceiving their growing numbers to be a threat, the king takes harsh and ever-intensifying measures. He forces them into hard labor, making them build the cities of Pithom and Raamses. Then he made them labor "rigorously," or ruthlessly. The taskmasters he appointed over them were brutal and hated. One of them was quite possibly the one who is depicted as beating a Hebrew in 2:11. Something of the hardships that a brick maker endured can be seen in an Egyptian text known as "The Satire on the Trades": "He is dirtier than vines or pigs from treading under his mud. His clothes are stiff with clay; his leather belt is going to ruin. Entering in the wind, he is miserable. ... His sides ache, since he must be outside in a treacherous wind. ... His arms are destroyed with technical work. ... What he eats is the bread of his fingers, and he washes himself only once a season. He is simply wretched through and through."

Perhaps there are times when we feel "simply wretched through and through." We want to use our lives to build a strong tower for people to find refuge in, but we feel trapped into building cities for Satan that afflict people. We want our lives to be fruitful, but sometimes it seems that we hurt people more than we help them. And we're miserable.

But we're not looking closely enough. The more the Egyptians afflicted the Israelites, the more they multiplied. The text doesn't tell us how this happened. But we don't have to crane our necks to see that God is causing growth despite the affliction. In fact, there is a correlation between affliction and growth. The greater the affliction, the greater the growth. The king's plan not only fails, it backfires.

Affliction and growth not only coexist, affliction contributes to growth. When we feel so oppressed, we may feel that God is inactive and the growth is non-existent. But it's not true. God is bringing increase, but we can't see it, because all we see is our pain.

The increase often comes when we learn that Christ has borne our burdens. The Hebrew noun for "hard labor" (1:11) stems from the verb for "bear," which appears in connection with the activity of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53: "Surely our griefs he himself bore" (Isaiah 53:4); "He will bear their iniquities" (Isaiah 53:11). The Servant of the Lord, of course, is none other than Christ, who we discover in penetrating ways amid affliction to be the one who bore our sins. As we appreciate Christ more, we understand that affliction is well worth it.

John Toland, in a biography titled simply "Adolf Hitler," ends his study by saying that Hitler succeeded in bringing to pass the very thing he was trying to prevent. He attempted to exterminate the Jews, but three years after he committed suicide, the state of Israel was formed, in large part because of his effort to exterminate them. So it is with Satan's opposition to the people of God. He can't win. God uses Satan's opposition for great things.

Still, the enemy won't give up. If plain affliction won't work, he'll opt for outright destruction.

Threatened destruction (1:15-22)

Things get progressively worse for God's people. First, they seemed insignificant. Then they were overlooked. Then they were afflicted. Now destruction looms. The king attempts to have the sons killed because it is boys who grow up to be warriors, and he was worried that the Israelites would ally themselves with another nation and fight against Egypt (1:10).

Once again, the handiwork of Satan is evident. Beginning in Genesis 3:15, when God declared that the serpent and the promised "seed" of the woman would war against each other, Satan tried to snuff out the seed. The seed through whom God's blessing would come is Christ, who was to be a descendant of the woman

(Genesis 3:15), Abraham (Genesis 22:18) and David (2 Samuel 7:12). Cain killed Abel, but God answered with Seth (Genesis 4:8, 25). The wicked Athaliah killed all the royal offspring, but God answered with Jehoshabeath, the king's daughter, who hid one son, Joash, through whom the Savior would come (2 Chronicles 22:10-11). When Jesus was born, Herod slew all the male children near Bethlehem, but God answered with an angel, who told Joseph to flee to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-18). Satan, appearing as a red dragon, himself is depicted as ready to devour Christ, but God answers by enthroning him (Revelation 12:3-5).

In similar fashion, the Egyptian king tries to kill all Hebrew male children at birth, but God answers with two midwives. The king was worried about thousands of Hebrew men fighting against him; he should have been worried two Hebrew women who feared God.

The two midwives are juxtaposed against the two cities. The king builds two cities, but God has all along been building two women. One of the cities, Raamses, was known for its beauty. One of the women is named Shiphra, which means "beauty."

In this account, the name of the powerful Egyptian king is never mentioned. But the text prominently names two lowly midwives. The author leaves no doubt who had the greater impact.

At great risk to themselves, the midwives follow God and disobey the king, letting the boys live. The reason given for their actions is that they feared God (1:17). But when asked by the king for an explanation, they lie. The reason for their letting the boys live was not because the Hebrew women gave birth before a midwife could arrive. That may have been true and, in light of the king's apparent non-punishment of the women, probably was true. But it wasn't the reason for their non-compliance. Given the fact that the text says they feared God, they lied not to save themselves but to retain their positions as midwives, by which they could continue saving lives.

(The midwives disobeyed government authority, and they lied, and the text treats them very favorably. Scripture teaches submission to government authority [Romans 13:1, 1 Peter 2:13] but upholds such civil disobedience when a person is ordered to do something that is against God's revealed will. The resistance to authority offered by the apostles [Acts 4:19-20, Acts 5:29, Acts 12:7-8] was according to the revealed will of God. For us that revealed will is the word of God. For example, if we were commanded to participate in an abortion, non-compliance is the right course of action. But we have no sanction from the word to take illegal actions in order to block an abortion from being performed.)

Assuming that the midwives' report about the Hebrew women is true, and there is every reason to believe that it is, the women are said to be "vigorous," a word related to the word "life" and meaning something along the lines of "having the vigor of life." Again, in the midst of intense affliction, we see life. Affliction doesn't prevent us from living vigorously, confidently trusting in God.

God was good to the midwives and gave them households, or families, not because they let the boys live but because they "feared God" (1:21). Their obedience was a simple outgrowth of their relationship with God. God is a "rewarder of those who seek him" (Hebrews 11:6).

The more important outgrowth of their faith was what God did with it - "the people multiplied and became very mighty" (1:20). Again, the king's opposition backfires. As affliction intensifies, so does God's blessing.

Like the Israelites, we may experience something beyond affliction. It may seem that we're on the verge of destruction. It may seem that we have nothing left to live for. The weight of life seems poised to crush us. But God is poised to answer with a midwife. A midwife brings forth physical life. A spiritual midwife brings forth spiritual life. Perhaps he'll give us just one friend who can offer just enough comfort who speaks just enough encouragement so that we hang on to the Lord and his faithfulness.

God raised up such a midwife in my life in 1981. I started a new job in a new city at the same time that I suffered the devastating loss of a cherished relationship. I was alone. For some time I had noticed in my apartment complex a green Datsun with a fish sticker affixed to its bumper. One day I saw its owner getting

out of his car. We talked briefly. I mentioned the sticker and asked if he were a Christian. He said yes. I said I was, too. Gary and I became close friends very quickly. We went to church twice a week together. We shared and ate and prayed together. Hardly a day went by when we didn't see each other. A few months later I was gone, off to another city. But the spiritual fruitfulness that occurred in my life at that time is immeasurable. And Gary, God's faithful midwife, was there to assist.

In the king's final assault against God's people, he orders that all the male children be cast into the Nile. God answers this assault in Exodus 2, by preserving Moses, whom he would raise up to deliver the Hebrews from bondage.

The womb of God

Egypt is not a nice place. In our spiritual Egypts, we feel insignificant, we are unappreciated, we endure increasing affliction and we may even feel on the verge of destruction. But at each point, God is there. God answers. God gives increase. God's purposes for his people cannot be thwarted. His purposes advance despite intensifying affliction.

Egypt, and all the desperation it represents, then becomes, of all things, the womb of God. It is the place where God gives birth. It is the place where new life springs forth. It is the place where fruitfulness busts loose. Things may get worse before they get better. Labor pains always intensify. But God, deep in the womb, in quiet and unseen ways, is nurturing new life. And he will give birth. "Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting. He who goes to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed, shall indeed come again with a shout of joy, bringing his sheaves with him" (Psalm 126:5-6).

[PBC Homepage](#) | [Discovery Publishing](#) | [Scott Grant Library](#)