

Two Women Heroes (Exodus 1:15-22)

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 upon the birth stool, if it is a son, you shall kill him; but if it is a daughter, she shall live." 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 are delivered before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God he gave them families. 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." (Exodus 1:15-22 RSV)

Years after Joseph died the people of Israel began to face persecution. The Egyptians resented their growing numbers and prosperity, so the Egyptians enslaved them. The result was not what the Egyptians intended: **"But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied"** (Ex. 1:12). So, in this passage, the Pharaoh takes more drastic measures: **"The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, 'When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live'"** (vss. 15-16).

During any time of persecution and affliction, there are normally heroes who go beyond what is expected of them, and who show bravery in the face of danger, in order to aid the afflicted. Shiphrah and Puah are two such heroes.

It seems that these two were in some way in charge of all the midwives for the Israelites, for Pharaoh gave them the command, and then they were called to carry out the command. Apparently, the king wanted the midwives to act secretly, killing the defenseless children without the knowledge of the mothers.

The midwives would have none of the Pharaoh's evil plan: **"The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, 'Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?' The midwives answered Pharaoh, 'Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive'"** (vss. 17-19). It took a great amount of courage to defy a direct order

from the Pharaoh. The source of their courage and their admirable behavior in this episode was that they **"feared God."** The fear of God is a good thing. It keeps us from evil. To **"fear God"** does not necessarily mean that we are afraid of Him, but rather that we respect Him and want to please Him.

This is an early example in the Bible teaching that God expects us to obey Him more than we obey man, even if the man is a king or ruler of our land. They refused to obey an evil law of man, because to do so would have caused them to break a law of God. In general, of course, we are to obey the laws of the land, and in fact, we are commanded to do so (see Rom. 13:1-7; Matt. 22:21). Christians are to be the best citizens of any country they live in. But when the laws of the land conflict with God's laws, we are to say, with Peter, **"We must obey God rather than man"** (Acts 5:29).

Now, some would fault the midwives a bit for lying to the Pharaoh when they told him that they never arrived in time to kill the babies. In my opinion, to not lie in that situation would have been exceedingly reckless. God did not seem to find fault with them but rewarded them for saving the babies by risking their own lives. I certainly cannot agree, as some would contend, that there are absolutely no circumstances when it is proper to lie. For example, suppose you are hiding someone from a murderer who wants them dead – do you volunteer their location if the murderer asks where they are? See a Bible example (Joshua 2). We are obligated by God to be truthful but also we are obligated to love a brother. To tell the truth to an evildoer when we know they intend to harm others is to gravely disobey the law of love: **"Love your neighbor as yourself."** When two commandments of God are in conflict, the law of love should rule, for it is the second greatest commandment (see Matt. 22:39).

Certainly, there is no evidence that God faulted the midwives for their lies. On the contrary, He blessed them for their courage and obedience: **"So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, He gave them families of their own"** (vss. 20-21).

Pharaoh, frustrated that his plan to destroy Hebrew children by using the midwives failed, gave an order to all the Egyptians: **"Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live"** (vs. 22). Moses, the one God had chosen to be the leader of the nation of Israel, was born at such a time as this. His parents were Hebrew slaves in Egypt.

Questions:

1. Why did the midwives decide to risk their own lives to save the babies?
2. In this lesson we learn this principle: "We must obey _____ rather than man (Acts 5:29)

3. Please summarize the teaching of the Bible on obeying the government (See Romans 13:1-7)
4. Are there exceptions to this rule?