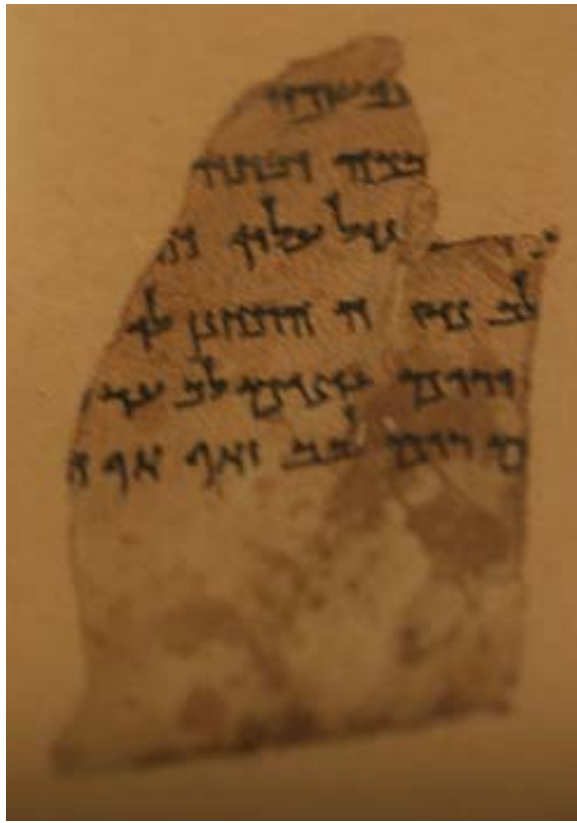


The Covenant Pulpit



EXODUS

Possessing the Promises

“CHOICES”
EXODUS 1 & 2

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"Herbie" was the sweetest little boy in the Oak Brook neighborhood of Indianapolis. He might have grown up to be an angel if his doting mother hadn't died when he was 4 years-old. Instead, his harsh father turned him into a devil who would terrorize the depression era Midwest.

Brutalized at home, "Herbie" became a playground bully. By the time he was in the sixth grade, he was a back alley brawler and petty thief. When he finished the seventh grade, he dropped out of school and became a drifter. At age 19 he was arrested for auto theft. The judge gave him probation on condition that he joined the Navy. But he soon deserted and was dishonorably discharged. He got married, but his violent temper destroyed the romance. "Herbie" couldn't win for losing.

A few months after his divorce, he and a buddy robbed a grocery store. He was sentenced to 20 years for armed robbery. When he entered the Indiana State Prison, he snarled, "I will be the meanest S.O.B. you ever saw when I get out of here!" When he was paroled eight years later, he made good on his vow. His gang became the most prolific bank robbers in U.S. history. Their brazen exploits captured the imagination of a nation mired in the Great Depression. He became the stuff of legend when he pulled off one of the most daring jailbreaks in the annals of crime and then robbed a string of heavily-guarded police arsenals.

The public adored him as a modern *Robin Hood*, but "Herbie" was a vicious sociopath who hobnobbed with notorious gangsters like "Pretty Boy" Floyd, "Baby Face" Nelson, and Ma Barker. J. Edgar Hoover declared him "Public Enemy Number One" and the F.B.I. launched the largest manhunt in American history to bring "Herbie" to justice.

Maybe you remember "Herbie" by his full name: John *Herbert* Dillinger. Mary Dillinger's little angel had grown up to become "the meanest S.O.B. you ever saw." Not long before he was betrayed by his girlfriend, and shot down in an F.B.I. ambush outside a Chicago movie theater, John Dillinger confided to a friend, "I can trace my life of crime back to when I was 9 years-old. I stole a quarter from my old man's wallet. I was scared he would find out and give me a beating. But I got away with it. After that, stealing became easy."

Little "Herbie" steals a quarter. It doesn't seem like such a big deal at the time. But it leads to a lifetime of choices that morph into John Dillinger, *Public Enemy Number One*. One thinks of the dictum by George Boardman, a 19th Century missionary to Burma: "Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny." The child who stole a quarter from his father is proof of a line from John James' poem, *An Address to Children*: "The boy is the father of the man."

No choice is insignificant. The ancient philosopher, Pythagoras said, "Choices are the hinges of destiny. A modern philosopher, Albert

Camus adds, "Life is the sum of all your choices." Gangster John Dillinger would surely agree with those two eminent sages.

All of us are on our own *Exodus* to eternity. The road to heaven or hell is paved with choices we make (or don't make). It's not by accident that the opening lines of Exodus are about choices. These choices open the Promised Land to some, and become pitfalls for others. Here's the granddaddy of all principles for seizing the promises of God:

Monumental consequences are shaped by momentary choices.

Management guru Steven Covey says, "While we are free to choose our actions, we are not free to choose our consequences." Who could have figured that a 9 year-old boy's impulsive decision to steal a quarter would set in motion a life of crime that sidetracked a nation, and left a trail of broken lives and bodies in its bloody wake?

In your lifetime you will make millions of choices. Most are *reflex* responses, *snap* decisions, *unconscious* choices, *impulsive* actions, *thoughtless* reactions, some so insignificant they don't warrant a second thought, or so subconscious they don't register. But these forgettable choices are tiny threads that weave the inescapable fabric of our lives.

Today, you might be facing a monumental decision. How you choose will have lasting consequences for you, your family, and even eternity itself. You will make your decision based on a character that has already been set by a lifetime of previous choices.

Most of you aren't facing a monumental decision. But hardly a second goes without scores of *easy* choices. They may be as simple as whether or not you will eat a second donut or get up an hour earlier to pray. And you don't even realize that those *momentary* choices are shaping character that will decide how you make future *monumental* choices.

Philosopher and poet, Alfred Montepert warned, "Nobody ever did or will escape the consequences of his choices." Here's what we learn about choices from the opening lines of Exodus:

1. PHARAOH'S FOLLY: lives are not wrecked by blowouts as much as they are by slow leaks.

Eight verses into Exodus story we see its first major player: "Then a new king, who did not know Joseph, came to power in Egypt." His subjects called him Pharaoh, and worshipped him as a god. As ruler of the world's greatest empire, he was the most powerful man on planet earth 3400 years ago. According to verses 9&10, he had just ascended to his throne when he faced his first critical test of leadership: "'Look,' he said to his people, 'the Israelites have become much too numerous for us. Come, 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.”

Verse eight says that this new king “did not know Joseph.” The book of Genesis tells the story of Joseph, the favorite son of the Israelite patriarch Jacob. He was sold into Egyptian slavery by his jealous brothers. In a “rags-to-riches” story, he rose to become Prime Minister. His brilliant leadership saved Egypt from a famine that ravished the Middle East, and a grateful Pharaoh rewarded him by giving asylum to his refugee family.

But it’s now centuries later. This new Pharaoh doesn’t even remember who Joseph was. Nor did he remember the covenant that a distant Pharaoh made with Joseph 400 years before: that the descendants of Jacob could live as free herdsman in their corner of Egypt forever. But no one expected those 12 brothers to spawn such a prolific birth rate.

Verse 7 says, “The Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was full of them.” In 400 years, this population of alien immigrants exploded from twelve to 3.6 million Israelites. When verse seven says, “the land was full of them,” it is telling us what historical demographers now know: the Jewish growth birth rate was at the tipping point. Within 50 years, they would outnumber the Egyptians.

Before you judge Pharaoh’s panic, think of the angst in America today over illegal aliens. This is beyond irritation that today’s crop of aliens don’t “learn to speak English” or assimilate into the American “melting pot” like former generations of immigrants. There’s justifiable fear that this alien population explosion is spawning cataclysmic cultural, economic, political, and religious changes that will radically alter the landscape of America. Frantic voices warn that our national security is at risk if borders aren’t closed and all illegal immigrants sent packing.

American angst is a whimper next to the anxiety raging across Europe where the Muslim population is exploding. Within 25 years, there will be 350 million Muslims in Europe, making Islam the predominate culture. When you read, “the Israelites multiplied greatly” think about a recent boast by Libya’s dictator, Moammar Kaddafi: “What Islam could not conquer by the sword, we will win by our birth rate.” Maybe now you understand the Pharaoh’s fear.

But no one can justify the Pharaoh’s draconian response. Verses 11-14 tell us that he made a monumental choice to enslave the Jews. Verse 14 sums up the harshness of his new immigration policy: “...in all their hard labor, the Egyptians used them ruthlessly.” The sinister motive behind this brutal enslavement was literally to work the Jewish men to death as a deadly means of population control.

But it didn't work. The Israelites multiplied like rabbits. So in verses 16 and 21 he made another monumental decision: "Kill all the Jewish boys." It was history's first experiment with genocide. It was said that Adolph Hitler loved little children and S.S. chief Himmler was a good family man. How can Heinrich Himmler or an Egyptian Pharaoh preside over genocide and then go home to cuddle their own babies?

You already know the answer to that: monstrous acts *gradually* and *imperceptibly* evolve out of a lifetime of *increasingly*-sinister choices. Let me repeat the principle of Pharaoh's Folly: **lives are not wrecked by blowouts as much as they are by slow leaks.** A recent Safety Council report said that highway accidents caused by blown tires aren't usually from slow leaks, not sudden blowouts. Moral failures that wreck lives are almost always the same.

Ironically, the seeds of this genocide were sown 400 years ago by Joseph himself. During seven years of plentiful harvests, he filled the government granaries with wheat. During the following seven years of famine, the Egyptian people came to the Pharaoh begging for food. On Joseph's advice, the Pharaoh fed them in exchange for all their money. After that, he fed them from the government trough in exchange for their land and livestock. Finally, he fed them in exchange for them becoming his slaves. When the famine ended, the Pharaoh owned all the money, land, and people in Egypt. All future Pharaohs were the absolute masters of Egypt, holding the power of life and death over everyone.

Decisions made 400 years before, and reiterated over the ensuing centuries, determined the choices made by *this* Pharaoh. From the time he was birthed in a royal palace, he was doted on by servants who catered to his every whim. His tutors taught him that he was a god on earth. He even married his own sister so that the DNA of mere mortals wouldn't corrupt his bloodline. When he ascended the throne, centuries of choices had brought him to the place where he took it for granted that his decisions were a god's choices. If Egypt and its citizens were his to do with as he pleased, then surely it was his divine right to work Jewish slaves to death while killing all their baby boys. Eighty years later, when a desert prophet named Moses came demanding that the next Pharaoh free the Jews, why would he listen to the "God" of a slave people when he was the living god of the most powerful nation on earth?

Pharaoh's life and land were wrecked by slow leakage. When plagues devastated the next Pharaoh's country, it wasn't a sudden blowout. When his firstborn son was struck dead by the Death Angel on Passover night, it wasn't a sudden blowout. When his army was drowned in the Red Sea, that wasn't a sudden blowout either. How many times had that Pharaoh refused to listen to Moses? How many times did he set his jaw and harden his heart against God's commands? Pharaoh proves our principle: Monumental consequences are shaped by momentary choices.

We are shocked when a 25 year marriage blows up in divorce, or a respected preacher wrecks his ministry, or the career of a “family values” politician is wrecked by moral failure, or a blue chip company suddenly careens out of control into bankruptcy. The headlines make it seem like a sudden blowout. I can guarantee this: in every case, it was slow leakage of moral compromise in momentary choices over the years. Few lives fall apart over night—not the Pharaoh’s life, nor ours.

2. THE MIDWIVES’ MINDSET: when we base our life on principles, 90% of our decisions are already made.

In verse 15 we are introduced to Shiphrah and Puah. The world hardly remembers these two women whose lives are defined by two words: *Hebrew midwives*. They’re ordinary women who earn pennies a day assisting in the births of slave babies. It must have been frightening for these ragged midwives to be ushered into the royal presence of a god-king who held the power of life and death over them. Their hearts must have missed a beat when he spoke from his lofty throne in verse sixteen: “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.”

The Pharaoh’s genocide is diabolically elegant in its design: work the Jewish men to death, kill their baby boys, and then leave their girls to intermarry with Egyptian men. Pharaoh could have mouthed that jest made by Adolph Hitler: “The Jews will soon be a distant memory.”

You should not to be shocked by Pharaoh’s “final solution” to the Jewish problem. Our own Supreme Court agreed with it in *Row v Wade* in 1973. That convoluted piece of jurisprudence was the realization of Margaret Sanger’s sinister vision in the 1920s. Sanger was appalled at the birth rate of immigrants and poor people in the slums of New York City. She was as worried as the Egyptian Pharaoh and Americans today about an exploding immigrant population. In her book, *Pivot of Civilization*, she wrote that blacks, immigrants, and indigents are “...human weeds...reckless breeders...human beings who should never have been born...” Her solution was enforced birth control, sterilization, legalized abortion and selected infanticide. Thank God that Margaret Sanger wasn’t a midwife in Egypt. But she did found *Planned Parenthood* to accomplish her dream, and 48.5 million abortions later we are killing babies on scale that dwarfs the genocides of Egypt and Nazi Germany.

Shiphrah and Puah must make a monumental choice: either obey Pharaoh or principle. In a postmodern culture we are increasingly loath to define what is “right” lest we offend some special interest group. Political correctness has hijacked moral imperative. If we say that killing unborn babies is wrong, we are branded as morally simplistic and relegated to the lunatic fringe. In our age, moral issues are made complicated by relativists who opine, “How can you be so sure that this lifestyle or that behavior is wrong?” This is a morality of convenience

for an age of softness. If we can't define very much as morally wrong, then we are not required to pay the cost of standing up for very much.

But this wasn't a complicated choice for Shiphrah and Puah. Verse seventeen says, "The midwives however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do." They made up their mind to disobey and deceive him to keep those babies alive. Their decision was forged by a principle that guided all their decisions: they "feared God" more than people. There are only three motivations that decide every choice: pleasing or protecting *yourself*; pleasing or protecting yourself from *others*; or pleasing and finding your protection in *God*. **When we base our life on principles, 90% of our decisions are already made.** By standing on God's principles, they brought life to millions of babies yet to be born. Whenever you face costly choices remember verse 21: "And because these midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own." You can't lose when you choose principles over Pharaohs.

3. A PARENT'S PREROGATIVE: if we limit choices to what is reasonable and possible, only compromise is left.

Pharaoh responded with another choice, when in verse 22, he ordered he ordered the Egyptians, "Every (Hebrew) boy that is born you must throw into the Nile..." Imagine turning your own people into a nation of baby-killers. Some 80 years later, God exacted a terrible retribution on the Egyptians for their complicity in mass murder when he sent his Death Angel to kill every firstborn Egyptian boy. Momentary choices do have monumental consequences!

And now, as we come to the second chapter of the book of Exodus, we see a nameless couple. We know they are the descendents of Joseph's brother, Levi, destined to live and die in a slave's obscurity. This slave woman didn't know that she was carrying a liberator in her womb. It would have been reasonable for her to abort her baby, or just to give up and let him be drowned in the river. A lot of other Jews compromised in order to make their slave masters happy.

But this woman hatched a desperate plan to save her baby. She would put him in a basket and let the current take him down the Nile and into the bathing pool of the Pharaoh's daughter. What audacity! Did her friends whisper that it would never work? There were hungry Nile Crocodiles waiting for their daily feeding of Jewish babies. If the baby's floating basket made it, how could they trust the daughter of the very Pharaoh who ordered the genocide? Even if the Egyptian princess found some tenderness for a Jewish baby, wouldn't she just raise him as an Egyptian prince? What would it matter if this slave woman saved her Jewish baby only to have him grow up to be an Egyptian slave master?

It was not a reasonable decision. But we learn from her that **if we limit choices to what is reasonable and possible, only compromise is left.**

What motivated her to make an impossible choice? Hebrews 11:23 gives the answer: "By faith Moses' parents hid him for three month's after he was born, because they saw that he was no ordinary child and they were not afraid of the king's edict." God rewards faith choices. Chapter two of Exodus tells us the boy's sister followed his basket down the Nile. She was there when Pharaoh's daughter found him. And, in a scenario that could only be drawn up in heaven's playbook, the princess of Egypt wondered how the 3 month-old would eat. Little Miriam stepped out of the bulrushes and offered in verse seven, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew woman to nurse the baby for you?" For the next few years his birth mother nursed this new *Prince of Egypt*. Along with her milk, she gave him her faith. She made him aware of his identity as a child of the covenant of Abraham, and prepared him to liberate his people. We do well to learn from this nameless slave woman that great choices are not always made on what is reasonable or possible. If we fail to grasp that, we are doomed to exist in the grey shadowlands of compromise.

**MOSES' MOMENT: easy choices *now* make for a
harder future; hard choices *now* make for an easier future.**

The Exodus narrative fast forwards from his infancy to Moses as a 40 year-old Egyptian prince. In our next episode of Exodus, we will look at more closely at *his* momentary choice and its monumental consequences. In our first glimpse of him as a man, he is confronted with a choice in Exodus 2:11: a Jewish slave is being abused by an Egyptian overseer. Moses must be a man of conflicting emotions. On the one hand, he is the son of the Jewish woman who taught him compassion for his people. On the other, he is a child of the palace who has been taught to act like a prince of Egypt. So he does what any Pharaoh would do: he kills the overseer. It was the *easy* decision. Now 40 years of conflicting emotions explode, and he tries to spark a slave uprising. But his impulsive revolution collapses. The Jews don't trust him because they see too much *Pharaoh* in him. The Pharaoh no longer trusts his adopted son because he sees too much *Jew* in him. So we read in verse 15, "Moses fled and went to live in Midian." He is now a fugitive murderer who drops out of sight. What the Pharaoh's palace couldn't do to shape a leader, it will take 40 years for the wilderness to accomplish.

From Moses' rash moment we learn that **easy choices *now* make for a harder future.** Certainly, John "Herbie" Dillinger discovered that tragic truth. So did the Pharaoh. And so have you and me. We have spent years wandering the in the wilderness of hard consequences because we took the easy route in our momentary choices. But our Lord made a "hard" choice in Gethsemane. He said, "Not my will, but yours be done." That's what Shiphra, Puah, and Moses' parents decided. It's never easy to face the Cross. But it opens to us an eternity of promises!