Miserable Slaves in Egypt (Exod. 1:1–2:25)

Questions and Suggestions for Discussion

The Challenges of God’s Blessing

1. God’s very blessing, the people’s fruitfulness, gets them in trouble with Pharaoh who feels threatened by it (1:8-9).
   - Are there situations in life where God’s blessing can bring with it some real challenges?

Fears and Their Consequences

2. Exodus 1:8-14 invites us to reflect on Pharaoh’s fears, which lead him to treat the Israelites in such a cruel way. Terence Fretheim comments that ‘oppression has as negative an effect upon the oppressor as on the oppressed. Both become less human’. Paulo Freire suggests that, ‘as the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized … oppressor and oppressed alike … are submerged in the situation, and both bear the marks of oppression.’
   - What about our fears? Do they have an effect on how we treat other people?
   - Are there any fears at work in our society that lead to inhumane behaviour and threaten our society?
   - What do you make of the observations by Fretheim and Freire that oppression dehumanises the oppressor and the oppressed alike? Is it true to say that our fears have the power to dehumanise us and others?

3. Pharaoh’s fears led to deeply irrational behaviour when he attempted to extinguish the people whose labour he needed and whose escape he therefore feared.
   - Can you think of examples where your fears or those of our society have led to irrational and destructive consequences?
   - How does our text encourage us to act instead (think about the midwives)?

Acts of Resistance

4. Individual acts of resistance, the story of the midwives asserts, can make all the difference. As Fretheim says, ‘such persons are not powerless. … God is able to use persons of faith from even lowly stations in life to carry out the divine purpose.’
   - Can you think of examples where God has used seemingly powerless individuals in similar ways?
• Can you think of situations in which we may be called to act in similar ways? What does it take to act in such a way?

**Truth-telling**

5. ‘The Old Testament sees truth telling as part of a broader truthful relationship. Where there is a truthful relationship between people, telling the truth is part of that relationship. Where there is no truthful relationship, it does not isolate truth telling as an obligation. Where powerful people are oppressing powerless people, the powerless are not obliged to tell the truth to their oppressors’ (John Goldingay).

• Do you agree that truth-telling is not an unconditional value but is dependent upon a truthful relationship? What does that mean in practice? Can you think of any situations where this principle might make a difference to how we (ought to) act?

• What about truth-telling in the context of an oppressive relationship? Did the Hebrew midwives do the right thing?

**Faith**

6. God, working unobtrusively behind the scenes, saved Moses through the acts of human beings. Fretheim comments that ‘what appears to be a hopeless time is actually filled with positive possibilities. But it takes faith, “the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1), to perceive that God is at work’.

• It may be helpful to reflect on where we have experienced God to be at work in our lives, perhaps equally unobtrusively and through other people.

• Are there any situations in which we have to trust that God is at work even though we cannot see it, situations that require of us that ‘conviction of things not seen’?

**Crying Out in Pain**

7. ‘It is not explicit that [the Israelites] are “crying out” to God. They are just crying out in pain. But God has a hard time resisting a cry of protest, whether or not it’s explicitly addressed to God’ (Goldingay).

• What do you make of these comments by Goldingay?

• According to our story, it’s the people’s crying out that leads God to respond. What do you make of this? What does it tell us about prayer and lament? Where else do lament and crying out in pain feature in the Bible?

• God saw the Israelites’ suffering, and he knew. God had, as we said, intimate knowledge of their pain. What might that mean for us and our relationship with God?