

Sermon 3, How to Live During Genocide, Exodus 1:15-22

Proposition: Even in the midst of genocide, those who fear God will be rewarded.

- I. Fear God and Disobey Pharaoh, vv. 15-17
- II. Be Ready to Face the Consequences of Fearing God, v. 18
- III. Don't Be Afraid of Being Shrewd, v. 19
- IV. Trust God to Reward You for Fearing Him, vv. 20-21
- V. Know that Your Efforts May Feel Pointless, v. 22

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the title of this morning's sermon should not be read as a promise that if you fear God and refuse to comply with state-sponsored genocide you will survive. It is not "how to survive," but "how to live" — how to live, I mean, even though you are killed by a wicked Pharaoh. It is righteousness that delivers from death! The way of righteousness leads to life, and in its pathway there is no death. That doesn't mean that the righteous can't be slaughtered like sheep. Jesus of Nazareth is exhibit A in this regard. But Jesus lives, because death cannot hold the righteous.

If you think that physical survival is the most important thing, you will gladly strangle newborn babies to stay on Pharaoh's good side. If you think that physical survival is the most important thing, you will happily become a kapo in Auschwitz, stripping the gold fillings and the rings from the corpses of your fellow inmates. If you think that physical survival is the most important thing, you will go along with any government policy, any orders from a man with a gun, no matter how evil. Do you know what a commitment to physical survival makes you? Evil. And that's no way to live. No. Our text this morning charts a different way forward. It shows us the path of fearing God. How will you live when you fear Yahweh? You will live like Bonnie and Sparkle did. We will look at how they lived in five different points this morning. But the bottom line is that even in the limit cases, even when evil is vaunting itself to the extreme limit of fallen human capability, even then you and I must live in the fear of God. And when we do, He will bless us for the sake of His Son who survived genocide.

I. Fear God and Disobey Pharaoh, vv. 15-17

The first point to know is that if you live during a time of genocide, you need to fear God and disobey Pharaoh. You will get clear orders from the wicked rulers. The powers that be are going to be quite explicit in the expectations they place upon you. You will not misgender your students. You will not suggest that Big Brother is ungood. You will not express counterrevolutionary sentiments, teach your children the catechism as though it were true, support missionary work, or show hostility toward the LGBTQ agenda. You will sit down, shut up, go along to get along, and be as woke as the next guy, or heaven help you.

That is the message that will be communicated in a time of genocide, and really in every time when evil is spreading abroad and flourishing and the good and their resistance to it are marginalized and damned.

So let me say this carefully: You are going to know what the powers that be want you to do. There will be no illusions in your mind on that point. You will be aware that those same powers threaten tremendously bad consequences if you make it clear that you aren't going to do it. Rarely will it start as the Pharaoh's conversation with the midwives started here, with a command that you murder babies. Nor will it always end up there. If your job is a high-skilled one, particularly in the medical profession, you are more likely to be directly told to kill. Most of the time, though, you will only be required to grant the regime legitimacy. Don't. Instead, you must fear God and disobey every command of the state that would require you to break His law.

Now, the text does not tell us how the midwives learned to fear God. But it does tell us that they feared Him. And so must you and I. If you don't fear God, you will fear Pharaoh and decide that on balance, it is better to do the evil that Pharaoh wants you to do than it is to do the good that your conscience is telling you to do. "I can't do what's right, because I will get hurt or even killed if I try. It wouldn't do any good anyway." You will be tempted to think that in an era of genocide. So practice fearing God now. That means setting up your life in a way as sin-free as possible. If you keep falling in a certain area, take steps to tame that sin. If you keep falling even after you've set up a plan, that's a major clue that your plan isn't working.

Let me be blunt. If you don't fear God now, you won't fear Him when Pharaoh says "Kill the baby or else."

If you won't get rid of your gluttony, your porn, your self-righteousness, your outrage over non-Christians being non-Christians, your habit of looking down on your mother-in-law, or any other sin, then you are not walking in the fear of God. And genocidaires will find you quite amenable to their cause.

II. Be Ready to Face the Consequences of Fearing God, v. 18

So practice fearing God now. The consequences of fearing God are good. You will be happier. You will be blessed. Your conscience will be at peace and your family will be saying, "What happened to you? Why are you different than you used to be?" But if you fear God in front of a tyrant who wants you to fear him, know that the consequences of fearing God might get very bad indeed. We don't know what Pharaoh wanted to do to the midwives. But if he is not opposed to killing babies, we can guess that he might not be opposed to killing anyone who doesn't carry out his orders.

Are you ready to face the consequences of fearing God? Do you value God's good opinion more than you value physical life, health, prosperity, and peace? You should, because God made you, He can destroy you, but He has saved you through the work of Jesus Christ. That is the message that you and I need to absorb, the attitude that you and I need to have. In other words, when Pharaoh or your boss or your principal or your congregation or your local cop calls you on the carpet, don't say "Oh no! I thought God rewarded those who fear Him. Why am I getting in trouble?" You are most likely going to get in trouble for fearing God. Get that in your

mind now. That doesn't give you a license to be a jerkface. You can get in trouble for being a jerk just as easily as you can get in trouble for being a Man of God and Righteous Martyr and all that jazz. If you're in trouble, let it be for actually fearing God, not for being an insufferable idiot.

In other words, the martyr complex is not a legitimate part of fearing God. To fear God means to have a reverent attitude toward His rushing energy. It is to know that He can and will kill you if you give yourself to sin.

III. Don't Be Afraid of Being Shrewd, v. 19

But now we come to the question may have asked of this chapter: Did the Hebrew midwives lie? Did they commit a lesser sin to protect themselves from a greater one? Brothers and sisters, in my mind the question is stupid. The fact of the matter is that we don't know whether the Hebrew midwives lied, and to build conclusions on guesses about whether they lied or not is to completely miss the point of the passage. As we said last week, it is not only possible but quite reasonable to believe that there were around 200 Hebrew families in the days of Bonnie and Sparkle. Pharaoh's policy could have been in place for a month, and yet there could have only been three births in that entire month. We don't know whether the midwives got there in time. We don't know if they intended their answer to mean "The babies came out so fast we did not have a chance to kill them before their mothers knew that they were alive." That would appear to be what Pharaoh's command meant, after all. Even he would hardly be stupid enough to think that anyone would hire Bonny and Sparkle again after the first time they openly killed a newborn son in front of his mother.

Anyway, one commentator commented that the answer of the Hebrew midwives was very smart, because it fooled not only Pharaoh but generations of modern commentators too! I can't agree that we know enough to know that the answer was a lie. Obviously if the Hebrew women were *always* lively and never needed a midwife, then there would not have been any midwives in the community, except maybe for the hypochondriacs or the women with nervous husbands. But the midwives don't say "always." They say only that since Pharaoh told them to kill the sons, they have not been at the births because they happened so fast. Well, maybe they did. Maybe the midwives made sure they were late (not too hard a feat to accomplish, as those who know me will attest). In any case, they answered shrewdly, but I radically disagree with those who say that their fear of God motivated them to lie. Such a statement is utterly incoherent. It does not understand what the fear of God is. But furthermore, I would add that deception is not lying. Concealing some of the truth is not lying. Lying is always sin, but deception is not always wrong. Deception allows the person you're communicating to form their own conclusions. Lying openly asserts something contrary to what you believe to be true. There is a major difference between leaving a lamp on when you leave the house (deception, trying to make crooks think you're home) and saying on the phone, "I'm home" when you're not. The difference is between right and wrong. The midwives were deceptive; of course they were! They knew that Pharaoh did not want to know the whole story, and they were not about to explain it to him. But they also knew that their answer had to be true enough to be plausible, and that Pharaoh

was quite capable of asking every mother with a baby under one month old “Was Shiphrah present at the birth of your son?” Let me just say not only that if you think the midwives lied then you don’t get the meaning of the phrase “the midwives feared God,” but also that you think Pharaoh is a total simpleton. The midwives could have told the families to lie about whether they were there, but three can keep a secret if two of them are dead.

Anyway, the real point here is not to legitimize lying, but rather to inculcate shrewdness, even cunning. If you want to live during a time of genocide, then you will need to be very smart with your language. Do not lie; that is wrong. But feel free to say as little as possible, redirect, ask questions, and modify your daily routine (e.g., by getting to appointments late) in such a way that when the servants of the state ask “Are you hiding any Jewish boys?” you have the guts to say “What kind of swine-lover would do that? Are you serious that some true Germans don’t see the threat posed by the Jewish rabble?” In this vein, the response of the Hebrew midwives almost sounds like “The Hebrew women are like animals.” They didn’t lie, but they did utter a buzzword that made Pharaoh think they were on his side.

Are you shrewd? Are you cunning? Do you think that being a Christian requires you to be a blockhead? Recently, for instance, the mainstream media said things like “We know Joe Biden has not received any foreign bribes because he has released the last 22 years of his tax returns.” Well, I am not commenting on Biden’s integrity in this sermon, but I just want to ask what kind of simpleton would write on his tax return “Foreign bribe: \$15 million from the Russians”? What kind of simpleton would say “Pharaoh, I let the boys live because you are an evil snake and God is going to deal with you!” There might be a time to say that. But if you can fool the evil snake and keep him from striking you, that’s even better.

IV. Trust God to Reward You for Fearing Him, vv. 20-21

And when you do the shrewd thing and fear God, trust Him to reward you for doing so. The text tells us that God was good to the midwives, and that the multiplication of the Hebrews continued apace. We could say that the 200 families had children who grew up and became 1200 families over the course of the following 20 years. And after another twenty years, those 1200 families became 7200. But not only did God bless His people with reproduction; He built houses for the midwives. This presumably means that He gave them a family line. He rewarded them, and He rewarded them right at the point of their obedience. They saved babies, and He gave them babies.

Can you trust God for that? Do you believe that He will reward you at the point of your obedience? That if you speak the truth, He will give you the truth? That if you honor your authorities, those under your charge will honor you? That if you are generous, you will have enough? Trust God to reward you for fearing Him. He dealt well with the midwives, and He will deal well with you. It may not happen until the next life. But it will happen.

V. Know that Your Efforts May Feel Pointless, v. 22

And yet, after all the rewards of God’s favor, after all the shrewdness and fear of God you can muster, you might still walk away defeated. Pharaoh saw that the midwives weren’t going to help him kill babies, and so he simply bypassed them and set all Egypt onto the task of genocide.

The Lord can give you a privileged position where you are doing a great deal of good. Then He can take it all away and undo in twenty minutes the good it took you years to accomplish. Are you ready for that? Are you aware that fearing God may be the biggest waste of time you can engage in under the sun?

Brothers and sisters, don't be surprised if your good deeds are punished. Don't be surprised if God providentially destroys all the good you did and lets evil flood in instead. He has not promised to preserve any particular created good. But He has promised that there is a reward for those who fear Him. We're in it to win it. Absolutely. But we are not in it to win it on Pharaoh's terms. On Pharaoh's terms, Pharaoh was ahead right up until the end, when that wave of the Red Sea washed over him.

Jesus felt that His efforts were pointless (see Isaiah 49). But He feared God anyway — and triumphed. In His triumph, you and I will triumph too. It may not be until the resurrection of the just, but it will happen. Wait for it, and in the meantime, fear God and be shrewd. Amen.