

WHAT OPPRESSION CANNOT STOP

Exodus 1:8-22 – Week #2

Background:

Overreach, oppression, and persecution. Everyone from evil regimes to ungodly governments have used those tools to stop anything that is not to their liking. Through history, there have been oppressive rulers that have specifically targeted the people of God. It is a reality in every era and civilization.

Ungodly action against God's people is something the Church faces as well, in this era. That is exactly what Jesus told His followers (John 15:18-19). However, does that mean that God's people are at the mercy of oppressive rulers? Is there something that persecution cannot stop?

Yes, Westmount, there is. And this week in our Exodus study we will see that illustrated, not once, but twice. Join me in another full context consideration of our start to the book by reading Exodus 1-2 as you prepare for Sunday's worship together.

Call to Worship: Psalm 9

Introduction:

For over two days, in January 2015, the church in the West African Republic of Niger, was ravished and burned. In four hours, fifty evangelical buildings were brought to ruins; church buildings, workers' homes, an orphanage, all reduced to rubble. The next day, ten more buildings were torched. How sustainable is such oppression and persecution? It should have destroyed them, should have shut them down completely. Angry mobs, running about, demanding the execution of anyone who preached Christ, and burning buildings, tends to scare people. Yet by August, attendance had not fallen, but had increased to bursting in the home gatherings. This church was not floundering, it was growing. Four church buildings had been rebuilt, and in five years, the church population had increased by 29% from those violent earlier days.

The population of God's people, the church, grew under persecution. How is that? In truth, it is a 'divine' equation, 'divine' math. In spite of how powerful worldly leaders are, the more 'persecution' forced on God's people, the more God 'multiplies' the people, His people.

This truth is vividly displayed in Exodus. Israel's people, once favoured by Egypt's Pharaoh, are now facing hardship and oppression, persecution and enslavement. Years, and several generations after Joseph's time, they are now living under the rule of a different Pharaoh, and face bitter slavery, and hard and ruthless work. Yet the more they suffered, the more they multiplied, becoming a very strong people.

Exodus 1:6-7

"And Joseph died, and all his brothers and that generation. But the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them."
(NASB)

Exodus 1:8-12

"Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, 'Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply and in the event of war, they also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us, and depart from the land.' So they appointed taskmasters over them to afflict them with hard labor. And they built for Pharaoh storage cities, Pithom and Raameses. But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out, so that they were in dread of the sons of Israel." (NASB)

We are aware that oppression and persecution are naturally/normally destructive. They tear down growth, buildings, safety, assemblies, health, and life. But as happened in Niger, so also happened in Egypt. Oppression and persecution were NOT ABLE to tear down the growth and strength of God's people.

Today's study will look at the text, Exodus 1:8-22, under two topics:

- I The Wrong Fear.
- II The Right Fear.

I THE WRONG FEAR:

Exodus 1:8

"Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." (NASB)

Why is this an important detail that Egypt has a new Pharaoh, one that did not know Joseph?

In Genesis we learned that Joseph, sold to foreign traders and assumed dead, had actually earned favour with the foreign king, the Pharaoh, and had served him well, having been given authority and power to rule as second in command throughout the land. This led to the 'preservation' of God's people, the remnant. This was 'divine' economy: God meant for all that happened to Joseph and Jacob's family, 'meant it for good'.

Genesis 50:20

"And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive." (NASB)

'Divine' economy is unlike anything out in the world. Here we see two points of favour that resulted from the Sovereign God's intervention, first, 'preservation'. The people survived the famine, and were reunited as a family group. Second, the 'preserved' people 'increased' and became strong. God made them 'fruitful' and they multiplied in these good years.

But now, a 'new' Pharaoh has risen, and he did not know Joseph, so we know that much time has elapsed, many years, because we are told that this ruler knows nothing about Joseph. The 'favour' that was on Joseph back in Genesis is not remembered. It is a time of 'new circumstances'. Changes have occurred in the years that have

passed. It is no longer a 'remnant' group of seventy that has the favour of the earlier Pharaoh. No. Time has passed, and the 'remnant' group of seventy, that has flourished under Pharaoh's favour, has multiplied, has become many, and now Egypt's land is swarming with Hebrew people, "*was filled with them*" Exodus 1:7b (NASB), and they had become "*exceedingly mighty*," Exodus 1:7b (NASB). And this aroused 'FEAR' in this new Pharaoh. He was most anxious about these 'many people', these 'too many people', who are not like him, and who have become 'mighty' in the land.

Exodus 1:9-10

"And he said to his people, 'Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply and in the event of war, they also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land.'" (NASB)

This 'new' Pharaoh, in his 'fear' of the Hebrew people, makes assumptions, that, for example, they are apt to turn against the Egyptian people, may take up arms against them, and/or may depart from the land thus leaving them stranded for workers. All of this is deemed possible because there are 'more of them' than Egyptians, and they are 'mightier'. And in that horizontal fear, this 'new' Pharaoh reacts, and exerts his power, and resorts to oppression of the people.

Exodus 1:11

"So they appointed taskmasters over them to afflict them with hard labor. And they built for Pharaoh storage cities, Pithom and Raamses." (NASB)

So Pharaoh, believing he is acting 'shrewdly' with the 'potential problem' of these Hebrew people, sets taskmasters over them, and burdens them with harsh labour and enslavement. But we are able to discern the 'irony and instruction' that comes from this decision by Pharaoh. We read about the results of Pharaoh's actions.

Exodus 1:12

"But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out, so that they were in dread of the sons of Israel." (NASB)

So Pharaoh's efforts do not 'harm' the people, but in fact 'help' the Hebrews, for they 'increase' more than ever. Yet as Israel multiplied, Egyptian 'fear' moved to 'dread' of the Hebrews. Dread is wrong fear. Movement from 'fear' to 'dread' happens when we have 'wrong fear'. Pharaoh feared 'the people'. This is 'human to human fear', and 'human to human fear' always breeds assumptions. It fears the worse, and leads to dread. It is fearing the wrong thing, however. It is horizontal fear. Have you been there? You fear, you make assumptions, then you must act on those assumptions, and things get worse. You cannot just 'sit' in 'wrong fear', you are compelled to react.

NB: WRONG FEARS NOT ONLY COMPOUND THE PROBLEM, WRONG FEARS COMPOUND THE FEAR.

And so the Egyptians ruthlessly made things worse. They made the Hebrews slaves. They pressed into their fears, and pressed the Hebrews into slavery. They pressed into the 'wrong fear' and pursued it with more fear. So 'in fear' they step things up.

Exodus 1:13-14

"And the Egyptians compelled the sons of Israel to labor rigorously; and they made their lives bitter with hard labor in mortar and bricks and at all kinds of labor in the field, all their labors which they rigorously imposed on them." (NASB)

But the ruthless slavery did not work, did not help the Egyptians with their problem. So once again, Pharaoh steps up, going yet a step further, escalating his response to his fears. This time he commands that killing them is the solution. If you cannot stop them, then kill them! He devises a plan of action.

Exodus 1:15-16

"Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah, and the other was named Puah; and he said, 'When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live.'" (NASB)

So Pharaoh speaks to two midwives, likely two of the chief midwives, and commands that when they are helping to deliver the Hebrew babies, that when the mother is squatting on the birthstool, the birthing stones, in the process of delivering, that they, the midwives should take note of the sex of the child, and if the child is a boy, they are to kill him, take the life of all males born. The girls could live on. (The killing of babies ... the same happens today... infanticide is everywhere in the world.) The midwives play an important role. It is her hands that first touch the baby. She collects the new baby, and cuts the cord, performs the salting ritual on the baby, preps and wraps the baby. She would have lots of opportunity to kill that child, subtly.

So why the males? The males would grow up and become soldiers and fight in armies. They are stronger physically, and would be more of a threat to the Egyptians. Therefore, cut the Hebrews off at their power source. Secondly, there is the matter of the spiritual reason. Male babies and the 'male seed of Israel', would always face evil pursuit (Genesis 3:15, Revelation 12:4). This was another chapter in that cursed drawing out attempt since Eden. The edict to the Hebrew midwives here simply offered another opportunity to go after the Seed of Israel.

Genesis 3:15

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel." (NASB)

Matthew 2:16

"Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its environs, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the magi." (NASB)

Revelation 12: 13

"And when the dragon saw that he was thrown down to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male child." (NASB)

And so, we learn through Pharaoh's actions that the terminus of 'wrong fear' leads to death, every time, both physically and spiritually. We see this played out in abortion, medically assisted dying, and suicide. It has been so from the time of Cane, and Herod, and all the rulers since. We have been given these pictures so that we can understand that this is so.

I Corinthians 10:11

"Now these things happened to them as an example and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come." (NASB)

This is not to say that we should not fear. No. But it is a matter of 'who' you fear that matters. Let our fear be 'solitary'.

II THE RIGHT FEAR:

Exodus 1:17

"But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live." (NASB)

1. BECAUSE THE MIDWIVES 'FEARED GOD', they disobeyed Pharaoh and let the male babies live. This 'FEAR OF GOD' leads to 'responsive action': awe, reverence, honour, and subsequently, it leads to/produces obedience. The midwives do obey, but they do not obey Pharaoh. They 'feared God' and obeyed God.

2. The midwives did not fear Pharaoh, or prison, or legal consequences, or death. **THE MIDWIVES HAD 'THE RIGHT FEAR'**, vertical fear, holy fear; not fear of man, only 'fear of God'.

One cannot fear both God and man. One cannot fear two masters. This is true in the church today also. Wanting to be 'all things to all people' causes 'great tension' in the church.

Pharaoh was promoting a command against God. He was promoting opposition to God's Word, to God's command. The midwives knew this, understood this, and 'feared' to go against their God. God had said, 'go forth and multiply', and God had said, do not kill 'an image bearer'.

Genesis 1:28

"And God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth'." (NASB)

Genesis 9:1

"And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth'." (NASB)

Genesis 9:6

*"Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man."
(NASB)*

The midwives faced a choice: obey Pharaoh, or obey God. You cannot do both. There was no room for compromise. They had to do one, or the other.

Contrary to public opinion, at times these two choices, between God and government, do conflict. It is true that we do have this verse concerning the need for obedience to the rulers.

Romans 13:1-2,7

"Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves ... Render to all what is due them; tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor." (NASB)

But, such obedience is not without exception. Why? Due to sin. In Him there is no darkness, for He is perfect, but man is not perfect, and therefore, we must make God our priority. We are to fear God, and 'GOD ALONE'! And we therefore must obey 'His' edicts, above all else. Scripture shows us that this is so. Let us consider some examples:

*** Daniel's friends were commanded by the government to worship a golden image which was against the commands of God. They refused, knowing that this was wrong in God's eyes. They put God first, even before the king. They had 'the right fear'.

Daniel 3:1, 4-5, 12-18, 26b, 27b, 28

"NEBUCHADNEZZAR the king made an image of gold the height of which was sixty cubits and its width six cubits; he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon Then the herald loudly proclaimed; 'To you the command is given, O peoples, nations and men of every language, that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe, and all kinds of music, you are to fall

down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up' (And then Daniel's friends are reported.)

'There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon, namely Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. These men, O king, have disregarded you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.' Then Nebuchadnezzar in rage and anger gave orders to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego; then these men were brought before the king. Nebuchadnezzar responded and said to them, 'Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, and bagpipe, and all kinds of music to fall down and worship the image that I have made, very well. But if you will not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?' Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego answered and said to the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up'....

Then Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego came out of the midst of the fire... the king's high officials ... saw in regard to these men that the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men nor was the hair of their head singed, nor were their trousers damaged, nor had the smell of fire even come upon them. Nebuchadnezzar responded and said, 'Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, who has sent His angel and delivered His servants who put their trust in Him, violating the king's command and yielded up their bodies so as not to serve or worship any god except their own God'." (NASB)

*** Daniel's co-workers, jealous that Daniel was 'distinguishing himself' in his work and that King Darius planned to appoint Daniel over the entire kingdom, plotted against Daniel. But they could find 'no ground of accusation against Daniel, no evidence of corruption', no negligence, and so they plotted to get him using 'the law of his God'. They knew Daniel served his God faithfully, so they had the king establish a law that could not be broken, but which would cause Daniel to disobey the king's injunction by serving his God. Regardless, Daniel would not bow down and pray to any but his God. He had 'the right fear'.

Daniel 6:7-14, 16, 20b-23

"All the commissioners of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the high officials and the governors have consulted together that the king should establish a statute and enforce an injunction that anyone who makes a petition to any god or man besides you, O king, for thirty days, shall be cast into the the lions' den. Now, O king, establish the injunction and sign the document so that it may not be changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which may not be revoked'. Therefore King Darius signed the document, that is, the injunction.

Now when Daniel knew that the document was signed, he entered his house (now in his roof chamber he had windows open toward Jerusalem); and he continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God, as he had been doing previously.

Then these men came by agreement and found Daniel making petition and supplication before his God. Then they approached and spoke before the king about the king's injunction, 'Did you not sign an injunction that any man who makes a petition to any god or man besides you, O king, for thirty days, is to be cast into the lions' den?' The king answered and said, 'The statement is true, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which may not be revoked.' Then they answered and spoke before the king. 'Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the injunction which you signed, but keeps making his petition three times a day.' Then, as soon as the king heard this statement, he was deeply distressed and set his mind on delivering Daniel, and even until sunset he kept exerting himself to rescue him...

Then the king gave orders, and Daniel was brought in and cast into the lions' den. The king spoke and said Daniel, 'Your God whom you constantly serve will Himself deliver you.'

... The king spoke and said to Daniel, 'Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you constantly serve, been able to deliver you from the lions?' Then Daniel spoke to the king, 'O king, live forever! My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths and they have not harmed me, inasmuch as I was found innocent before Him; and also toward you, O king, I have committed no crime.' Then the king was very pleased and gave order for Daniel to be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no injury whatever was found on him, because he had trusted in his God." (NASB)

*** The Apostles were preaching in and about Jerusalem, and the Sadducees were jealous, and had the Apostles imprisoned. But an angel of the Lord released them from the jail, and told them to speak to the people in the temple which they did. The Apostles were reported, and were again brought back to be questioned. But the Apostles had their priorities straight, GOD BEFORE MAN. They had 'the right fear'.

Acts 5:27-29

"And when they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, 'We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us.' But Peter and the apostles answered and said, 'We must obey God rather than men.'" (NASB)

There are two observations to take from this passage in Exodus (and the above examples from Scripture):

1. That AN APPROPRIATE TIME TO OBEY GOD BY DISOBEYING GOVERNMENT EXISTS, is indeed real. This is an ever present reality. Sometimes civil disobedience is the only option, and is instituted by God.

When would this happen, you might ask? In a matter of abortion, or marrying two men or two women, for example.

The question remains: Are you ready to serve? Will you stand for Me?

We must follow God. Where no sin exists we follow the government, but more and more, the government is not wanting to obey God, is rewriting God, and is wanting to erase God. Humanity is sinful. Obey where you can, as in paying taxes, but the 'greater obedience' is to God. Have greater fear for GOD ALONE! Fear God, and obey God. Do His desire always.

2. That FEARING GOD IS NOT SAFE. Wake up, and be aware. Fearing God is dangerous, is not safe, and requires courage.

The midwives rose to the occasion, and are heroes in the story. They are not disobeying just anyone. No. They are disobeying the great Pharaoh, the most powerful ruler in the land. Yet there is no question, they obeyed GOD ALONE!

How often do we cower over small things, things that are nothing on the level of the midwives, and SO much less than the power of the Pharaoh?

And so the midwives were called to court to account for disobeying the Pharaoh's command. They know what they have done. It is not that they were seeking to make headlines. No. They were 'fearing their God', seeking to obey Him. So they face Pharaoh's wrath head on, but they are shrewd, and they strive to 'divert the Pharaoh's thinking' when he questions them, explaining their actions by way of how things were; the Egyptian women were 'pampered', whereas the Hebrew women were strong and 'vigorous', giving birth more quickly than the Egyptian women, even before the midwives had arrived.

Exodus 1:18-19

"So the king of Egypt called for the midwives, and said to them, 'Why have you done this thing, and let the boys live?' And the midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous, and they give birth before the midwife can get to them'." (NASB)

This was, of course, not the real reason they did what they did. The 'real reason' they did what they did was that they 'feared God'. They did this in the right way, they 'feared God'; they did not 'fear man'. They put God's laws first. Their plight was 'enough is enough, Pharaoh'. The midwives are therefore a model for us. FEAR 'GOD ALONE'.

How do you live your life? Do you do what you do because you FEAR 'GOD ALONE'? Are you motivated correctly? When the time comes, will you FEAR GOD over the ungodly government?

Honour authority, in as much as is possible. And when you do have to disobey the government, do so 'quietly'. Do not draw attention to the matter.

In the end, God was pleased with the midwives because they had acted with 'the right fear', and had 'feared God' over man. God blesses these women, and gives them families of their own. God 'approved' their actions.

Exodus 1:20-21

"So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty. And it came about because the midwives 'feared God', that He established households for them." (NASB)

Midwives were often 'barren' women themselves. So this is significant that the Lord shows His approval for the midwives 'preserving the male babies' by blessing the barren wombs of these midwives. God has taken the barren midwives, lowly among the Hebrew society, and has preserved them, protected them, and blessed them. This is 'GOD ALONE'; God harnessing the 'wrong fears', God harnessing 'evil intentions', and turning them into blessings for those who 'obey'. This is what God does. He is sovereign over all. This is 'THE SOVEREIGN GOD' working through, working over, all things.

One might suppose that Pharaoh would see this blessing, see the power of God, and relent his decision. But no, this did not happen. The fact that Pharaoh's plan of desperation had backfired sent him to even greater 'desperate' action. Pharaoh took further 'hard hearted' response instead of 'godly fear'. No longer would this 'death wish' of the Pharaoh remain a quiet secret between him and the midwives. No. More outrageous government is to show its face in the days ahead. It now becomes a 'public proclamation' to all the people, 'Kill all male babies, by order of the king'.

Exodus 1:22

"Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, 'Every son who is born you are to cast into the Nile, and every daughter you are to keep alive.'" (NASB)

But we know that our SOVEREIGN GOD will look after His people. This is what He promises to do. This is what He does. We are assured of this.

Romans 8:28

"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." (NASB)

We are reminded, in the story of Esther, of how God preserves His people, how He takes 'evil intentions' and turns them for His good will and pleasure, for 'His greater good'.

Esther, a Jewish woman, (though this is not known to the king at the time) unexpectedly, by the grace of God, becomes queen. Her relative, Mordecai, learns of a plot against the king. Esther warns the king, and the problem gets resolved. But then Haman comes to serve the king, and Haman hates the Jews, and hates Mordecai who refuses to bow down to worship him. Haman plots to destroy all the Jewish people. Esther plans to intercede for the Jews. She plans a way to let the king know what Haman is planning to do. She organizes a banquet, inviting Haman and the king, and speaks her request 'shrewdly' to the king to save her people from Haman. In the end, Haman is hanged on the very gallows Haman had built to hang Mordecai, and the king resolves the issues so that all the Jews may live full lives.

Esther 2:17, 21-23, 3:1, 5-6, 13-14, 4:8b, 14b, 7:1-2a, 3-6, 10, 9:24-25

"And the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found favor and kindness with him more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's officials from those who guarded the door, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. But the plot became known to Mordecai, and he told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name. Now when the plot was investigated and found to be so, they were both hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the Book of The Chronicles in the king's presence.

AFTER these events King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and established his authority over all the princes who were with him...

When Haman saw that Mordecai neither bowed down nor paid homage to him, Haman was filled with rage. But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him who the people of Mordecai were; therefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews; the people of Mordecai, who were throughout the whole kingdom Ahasuerus. And letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to seize their possessions as plunder. A copy of the edict to be issued as law in every province was published to all the people so that they should be ready for this day."

(Mordecai gave Hathach, whom the king had appointed to attend her (vs5), "... a copy of the text of the edict which had been issued in Susa for their destruction that he might show Esther and inform her, and to order her to go in to the king to implore his favor and to plead with him for her people. ... 'And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?'

Now the king and Haman came to drink wine with Esther the queen. And the king said to Esther, ... 'And what is your request?'

Then Queen Esther answered and said, 'If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me as my petition, and my people as my request; for we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed and to be annihilated. Now if we had only been sold as slaves, men and women, I would have remained silent, for the trouble would not be commensurate with the annoyance to the king.' Then King Ahasuerus asked Queen Esther, 'Who is he, and where is he, who would presume to do this?' And Esther said, 'A foe and an enemy, is this wicked Haman!' Then Haman became terrified before the king and queen. ... So they hanged Haman on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordecai, and the king's anger subsided.

For Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the adversary of all the Jews, had schemed against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur, that is the lot, to disturb them and destroy them. But when it came to the king's attention, he commanded by letter that his wicked scheme which he had devised

against the Jews, should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows." (NASB)

This is God, 'preserving His people', working behind the scenes of history, preparing the way, opening and closing doors, that His people would survive and live for Him. He 'preserved' the 'remnant of seventy'. through Joseph. He 'terminated' Haman's wicked plot to annihilate the Jews through Esther.

Yet we see that the people must go through the 'tough time', the afflictions, the days of hardship, as God works through His 'preservation'. God carries us through the persecution; He does not remove it. He uses these persecutions and times of hardship to 'grow the church' and to 'strengthen His people'. We see this not only in Old Testament days, but also in the days of the New Testament church. Commentator, Matthew Henry, has made this apt observation, "The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the churches."

We read of Stephen, "*a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit*" Acts 6:5 (NASB). Stephen, "*full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.*" Acts 6:8 (NASB) But some men from the Synagogue "*were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking*" Acts 6:10 (NASB), and they stirred up the people and "*dragged him away, and brought him before the Council.*" Acts 6:12 (NASB) So, Stephen, ravished and falsely accused, defends his God, defends how God has 'preserved' His people through the ages (See Acts 7). Stephen points out to them: "*You men who are stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did.*" Acts 7:51 (NASB) "*But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears, and they rushed upon him with one impulse, And when they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him, and the witnesses laid aside aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!'*" Acts 7:57-59 (NASB) Stephen's execution was followed by persecution of the Church by Saul.

Acts 8:1-3

"And Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him (Stephen) to death. And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison." (NASB)

Now, while one might think that such persecution would end church growth, kill it at the root, this indeed was not the case. God used the persecution to 'grow' the church, and the church spread to Asia, Macedonia and Rome. We read, for example, "*Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. And Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.... But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.*" Acts 8:4-5,12 (NASB) And Peter and John also were preaching in Samaria, "*preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.*" Acts 8:25b (NASB)

So while the Word of God was still being preached, Saul continued and increased his persecution.

Acts 9:1-2

"NOW Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." (NASB)

But Saul has his own conversion experience, and he "began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God'. And all those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, 'Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priest? Acts 9:20-21 (NASB)

That Saul, the greatest persecutor, becomes 'the church planter' to the Gentiles, and who ultimately aids in the 'preserving and growth' of the church, is CONFOUNDING to the world. But as we have learned previously, PERSECUTION results in MULTIPLICATION! And it has been observed that in some regions, where 'oppression' has been the most, that they are estimated to have the largest churches.

OPPRESSION CANNOT STOP GOD'S KINGDOM OR CONFOUND GOD'S KINGDOM! Sovereign God will stand, and will work through and for His people, and His people will endure.

Let us ready ourselves for the 'days coming'.

"And Simon Peter answered and said, 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Barjonas, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it.'" (NASB)

May you go in the fear of God, and may He be with you, always. Amen.