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Five Strong Women Charged With...

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Text: Exodus 1

Have you ever broken the law? If you have, think of the circumstances. Would you do it again if you could do it over? Why did you do it?

If you haven't—why not? A commitment to the law, or afraid of getting caught? Are there circumstances under which you would? What would those circumstances be?

This past week I heard a small news clip saying that the doctor who assists people to commit suicide has been charged with that which in that state has recently been outlawed. The prosecuting attorney spoke to the reporter, saying that while he has personal sympathy for the doctor and the patient and for the cause, nevertheless it is his job to uphold the law and prosecute those who break it. He said, "We have to work with the law as it is—not as we wish it to be."

I'm not going to talk about "Dr. Death" this morning or the right to aided suicide—but I am going to talk about breaking the law. In fact—there are five women whose names I will bring before you. They—each of them—have broken the law. I will ask you to be the jury. You will have a chance to hear the case for and against them and decide what they are charged with, if anything.

The court calls Miriam.

Prosecuting Attorney:

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, we have before us one of the saddest things there is: a young girl gone bad.

Now I'm sure the defence will ask you to pardon her because of her youth—she isn't even in her teens—but I ask you to consider what I say very carefully.

Here is a young girl who might be saved from ruin if we don't look the other way, but punish her and thereby convince her that what she did was wrong. *First*: She put the life of that baby in great danger by putting that basket in the water—there are crocodiles and worse in the Nile. What was she thinking? *Second*: She was clearly trespassing when she lurked in the water, spying on Pharaoh's daughter as she bathed. *Third*: Most of all she shows flagrant disrespect for the law, for authority, and for her elders by ignoring the word of the Pharaoh.

For her sake as an example to all young people, I ask you to convict her. What will become of our society, if young people aren't taught to respect the law?

Defence:

Members of the jury. Miriam, daughter of Jochabed and Amram, is a very brave little girl.

She is operating with four strikes against her to begin with: (1) She is a Hebrew in Egypt—a foreigner; (2) She is a slave—no rights, no freedom; (3) She is a female—no rights, no freedom; (4) She is a child—no rights, no freedom.

One can only hope that in centuries to come, these things will change. She acted to save her baby brother. Can we blame her for that? She broke the law, yes, but that law was going to kill her brother! She acted selflessly, and to save a life. What harm can one Hebrew baby do anyway?

She shows remarkable intelligence. When the princess found the baby, shaking and terrified though she was, she stepped forward and offered to find a wet nurse for him—his own mother. That took not only great intelligence, but a quick presence of mind that is most admirable in a young woman. She also, incidentally, has a lovely singing voice.

I predict that, with her courage, her intelligence, initiative, ability to think on her feet and her desire to protect the vulnerable, she will grow up to make a great contribution to this country and I encourage you to allow her to do so.

The court calls Jochabed.

Prosecuting Attorney:

Jochabed—mother of this baby called Moses—is a cunning woman.

She stands before you today, wanting you to feel sorry for her when in fact she is a dangerous criminal.

Let me remind you, ladies and gentlemen, that Egypt is no two-bit power—no uncivilized, mediocre country. No indeed. This is the 19th dynasty of Egypt. Egypt has already known 2000 years of existence. Its wealth and the fertile Nile Valley make it a leading and rich country. Its developments in the fields of culture and knowledge, science, art and government have already become the wonders of the world.

This enlightened and educated society finds itself overrun with foreigners—who threaten our way of life. It is a simple decision to control the population. Not a cruel and calculated murdering, as Jochabed would have you believe.

It has to be done. Our language and culture have a right to be defended. At first we formed a political party to protect us from these foreigners, and the law was the next obvious step.

This woman hid her baby from the authorities and then conspired to break the law further by abandoning him—*then* committing fraud by masquerading as his wet nurse.

As much as we would like to say otherwise, we simply cannot make an exception. If we pardon Jochabed, whom else will we have to pardon—and where will it stop?

The law is the law—and you must find her guilty.

Defence:

I don't need to tell you that no matter what the prosecuting attorney would have you believe, this woman loves her baby and was acting out of strong parental instinct—to protect and save its life.

Egypt *may* be a developed, educated, enlightened country—but this is a law that is an edict for *murder*! It is *not* “simple population control”—and furthermore it arises out of blatant racism.

It is never acceptable to practice “ethnic cleansing” or to protect your own language and culture at the expense of someone else's. This law is wrong.

Here is a mother—a mother of three, and her third child almost surely to be drowned by the government for being the wrong race and the wrong gender.

Many of you are parents. What would you do?

Imagine her terror—imagine the nights of horror for the baby's first three months as she hid him and froze in raw fear every time he cried...listening for footsteps and that deadly knock on the door.

Imagine the heartbreak of deciding to give him up to the river in the hopes that by some miracle he would escape death.

And imagine the stress of having to pretend he was someone else's child—hearing him call another woman “mama” and watching someone else discipline him and tuck him into bed at night.

Did she do wrong?

Did she do what *we* wouldn't do?

If so, it's only because she is a braver soul than we.

She is a mother.

She obeyed the law of love.

The court calls Shiprah and Puah.

Prosecuting Attorney:

These two women, my friends, must be punished to the full extent of the law. They are employees of the Pharaoh—and the bond and trust that exist between employer and employees must not be broken.

They are midwives—their job is to assist women in giving birth. In *this* case—under direct orders from the Pharaoh—they were not to let little boys live. Nothing painful, you understand—we are not animals—a simple slip of the knife—an accident while washing him in the Nile—the mothers would never know the truth. We don't want to cause pain—we simply must keep order.

In any case—these two and hundreds like them disobeyed the orders, and to make matters worse, *LIED* to the Pharaoh about it!

This cannot be tolerated. When a *country's own citizens* turn their backs on law and order (it's bad enough that foreigners disobey—thinking they can just import their own culture and values and eat away at our standard of living), but

when *our own people* begin to defy our laws and authority—something has to be done.

These women are criminals and liars. Please charge them as such.

Defence:

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, Shiprah and Puah are also brave and brilliant women. Their calling in life is to be midwives...to assist the birth of new life. How could they possibly—no matter *what* the law says—deny their calling and be instruments of death?

Has anyone here ever been present when a baby is born? Then you know something of the awe and the wonder and the miracle of it all.

Their brilliance is shown in this: when forced to provide a reason why they were not killing the babies, they told the Pharaoh that which he already wanted to believe: that Hebrew women are different.

When people are prejudiced against another race—when they are treating other people in a cruel and inhumane way—to make it easier on themselves they create myths to make themselves believe the other people are “different”...“not like us”. It makes the cruelty more acceptable. It’s the same as men saying “women *like* to be treated rough”. Oppressors want to believe their victims are “different”. It makes it easier to be cruel to them.

What Shiprah and Puah did was *brilliant!* They used this very tendency to save those babies. They turned that desire to believe Hebrew women were different into an instrument for saving Hebrew lives.

Marvellous irony—an ingenious plan.

These women are not criminals—they are life savers and life givers. Please find them innocent.

The court calls Pharaoh’s daughter.

Prosecuting Attorney:

Friends of the jury—I will allow that there *may* be an excuse for Miriam and Jochabed—they are uneducated, they are foreigners, and they have no loyalty to this country and the way of life it represents.

There may even be some leeway with the midwives..they too are uneducated and even though citizens of our country, there are certain classes of people from whom one cannot expect a high standard of morality. I know you know what I mean—I can see you are not of that class.

But there can be *no excuse* and there must be *no pardon* for this woman.

She is Royalty. She is the daughter of the king! She has been taught her duty from the time she was born. She is educated, cultured, and meant to be an example to the rest of the country.

Can you imagine what would happen if members of the royal family began acting like “commoners”?!

And this princess has broken the law—defied her father and therefore all the law and order that he stands for. When people in positions of power begin breaking the law, the very foundations of society begin to crumble.

She has betrayed her father. She has betrayed her country. And she has betrayed *you* who deserve from those in power, your government, that they abide by the laws they create and enforce.

She must be found guilty.

Defence:

We know very little about this woman—Pharaoh’s daughter—not even her name.

She is a princess—royalty—and no doubt has all the material possessions her heart desires. What drew her to adopt the Hebrew baby with all the risk such an act entailed? It’s one thing to break the law when you can be reasonably sure the law enforcers aren’t nearby—but when your father is the King?! Why did she do it?

Did she have no children of her own and did she long for a child?

Or was she a mother and therefore acted out of maternal compassion?

Is she opposed to her father’s edict in general?

Is this the only Hebrew baby she saved?

Did she lobby for a change in the law?

This woman, who is so silent, is a hero—a symbol of one in authority taking initiative to supersede an unjust law. She

shows us how those responsible for oppressive structures are the very ones who can turn things around.

I ask you to find her innocent.

* * * *

To sum up—we have five women who clearly broke the law. I won't pretend to be neutral. The law was cruel. The law was wrong.

What do faithful people do when the society in which they live has laws that are wrong?

These five women are models of resistance and non-violent defiance of oppressive and death dealing structures.

Jochabed the mother. Miriam the brave little sister. Shiprah and Puah the midwives. And Pharaoh's daughter.

Brave and moral women not afraid to put their own lives on the line for justice. Able to use their wits, their intelligence, and their positions to deal a serious blow to the death law. Together they saved a Hebrew baby. Possibly many more.

That baby would grow up to lead the people, with his sister Miriam and brother Aaron by his side. Together they would lead the people of Israel out of that state of slavery across the Red Sea to freedom in a promised land.