

## **The Harshness of Labor in Egypt**

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Exodus

### The Harshness of Labor in Egypt

Israel's mistreatment by the Egyptians provides the background and impetus for their redemption. Pharaoh did not allow them to follow Moses into the wilderness to worship the Lord and thus denied a measure of their religious freedom. But their oppression as workers in the Egyptian economic system is what really gets our attention. God hears the cry of his people and does something about it. But we must remember that the people of Israel do not groan because of work in general, but because of the harshness of their work. In response, God does not deliver them into a life of total rest, but a release from oppressive work.

The work that the Egyptians forced on the Israelites was evil in motive and cruel in nature. The opening scene presents the land as filled with Israelites who had been fruitful and multiplied. This echoes God's creational intent in Genesis 1:28 as well as his promise to Abraham and his chosen descendants. As a nation, the Israelites were destined to bless the world. Under a previous administration, the Israelites had royal permission to live in the land and to work it. But here the new king of Egypt sensed in their numbers a threat to his national security and thus decided to deal

“shrewdly” with them. We are not told whether or not the Israelites were a genuine threat. The emphasis falls on Pharaoh’s destructive fear that led him first to degrade their working environment and then to use infanticide to curb the growth of their population.

Work may be physically and mentally taxing, but that does not make it wrong. What made the situation in Egypt unbearable was not only the slavery but also its extreme harshness. The Egyptian masters worked the Israelites “ruthlessly” and made their lives “bitter” with “hard” service. As a result, Israel languished in “misery” and “suffering” and a “broken spirit”. Work, one of the chief purposes and joys of human existence, was turned into a misery by the harshness of oppression.