Scripture: Exodus 1:8–13
Title: An Unbroken Spirit (Transl. Wi, Chung Il)

1.
I have a confession to make to you all. I failed to cultivate the land God gave me and did not live a life that bears fruit. What do I mean by that? Last week, during the Wednesday prayer meeting, I was reading the lectionary passages. I noticed that three different texts—in Isaiah, Psalms, and Matthew—all contained God's rebuke regarding a vineyard where vines were planted but failed to bear fruit. Reading these passages convicted me deeply. Last year, I obtained permission from my landlord to create a small vegetable garden in the backyard. I planned to dig up the lawn in a long rectangular shape to plant crops. At first, I was enthusiastic; I even piled up the dug-up turf and added food scraps to create compost. However, perhaps because the backyard was out of sight—or simply because my passion had cooled—I missed the crucial timing this spring to fertilize, mix in good soil, and plant vegetables and fruit-bearing crops. Instead, white goosefoot weeds began to grow. I neglected them, leaving them unchecked, and when I looked again a month or two later—good heavens—the weeds had grown taller than I was. Far from harvesting fruit, I had to struggle with a shovel last month, during a rainy spell, to dig out the weeds by the roots. It was a time when I learned a profound lesson: "If you do not sow seeds while weeping, you will reap weeds while weeping." It was a moment that allowed me to feel just how disappointed a master must be when he hopes for a harvest but finds none. I reflected on the situation and resolved to ensure a fruitful harvest next year. However, seeing the field overrun with lamb's-quarters, I was truly amazed by the weeds' capacity to propagate. When I recall how weeding was the most grueling task my farming parents faced in my childhood, the sheer vitality of these plants is astonishing. The vitality and reproductive power of the Israelites in Egypt were much like that of the weeds. Exodus 1:7 tells us that the Israelites had many children and flourished; their numbers grew, their influence expanded, and eventually, they filled the land. Does this passage bring another verse to mind? It reflects the fulfillment of God's command in Genesis 1:28 to "be fruitful and multiply." It is said that the Bible contains 365 prohibitions and 248 positive commands—making for a total of 613 commandments. The very first of these positive commands is to be fruitful and multiply. In that sense, perhaps weeds are the creatures that best obey God's first command.

2.
There is a reason why the opening of Exodus evokes the content of Genesis. It is because the four books spanning from Genesis to Numbers are, in fact, a continuous narrative. Consequently, some scholars refer to these four books—excluding Deuteronomy—as the "Tetrateuch" (the four books of Moses). This is because the Hebrew texts of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers all begin with the conjunction "And." As I mentioned last week, the opening sentence of Exodus begins with the words, "And these are the names..." Genesis reveals not only the beginning of human history but also the inception of the history of salvation. It depicts the start of God's grand project to save all nations through a single individual: Abraham. The narrative of Genesis centers on God calling this one man and the story of the family that emerged from him. It is a book that illustrates how God works within history through individuals, families, and the relationships formed within them. Exodus takes the story a step further, expanding the narrative as the family grows into a nation, enters into a covenant with God, and transforms into a priestly kingdom for the whole world and all nations. Consequently, echoes of motifs found in Genesis appear throughout Exodus.

The final verses of Genesis record Joseph's dying words: "God will surely come to your aid. When that happens, you must take my bones from this place and carry them there." If you visit Luxor, Egypt, you can see the mummy of King Tutankhamun; similarly, the closing passage of Genesis describes how Joseph

was embalmed with spices and placed in a coffin, much like a king. Although four hundred years had passed since his death, it is evident that Joseph's body remained preserved and intact. His tomb likely held immense symbolic significance for the people of Israel, serving as a vital focal point that united them and helped them preserve their identity. It seems that his final instructions and the details regarding the handling of his remains were included in the concluding verses of Genesis for precisely this reason.

3.

However, a new king arose who did not know Joseph. The phrase "did not know Joseph" implies that the strong relationship with the royal court—established through Joseph—had been severed. It also signifies the end of the special privileges and goodwill the Egyptian royal family had extended to the Israelites. A king had appeared who viewed this goodwill and privilege with displeasure. Verse 9 explains why they feared the people of Israel. It seems their reproductive rate surpassed that of the Egyptians. An imbalance had apparently developed where the Israelite population in the land of Egypt exceeded the Egyptian population. Naturally, the Egyptian royal court felt threatened. They believed that leaving the situation unchecked could lead to trouble—such as an uprising—should the Israelites rebel. Furthermore, they feared a disastrous outcome if the Israelites were to join forces with an enemy nation during wartime. Verse 10 states, "Come, we must deal shrewdly with them." The Hebrew word for wisdom is *chokmah*, and that is the word used here; the instruction is to deal with them "wisely" (or shrewdly). Yet, the imagination born of their wisdom amounted to nothing more than oppressing and suppressing a foreign people. They incited hatred against the Hebrews and strategically spread malicious rumors and "fake news" to keep them down. They did not stop there; they subjected them to forced labor. And what is forced labor? It is labor performed without compensation. How disheartening it must be to work without receiving fair compensation? Above all, forced labor signified that the Hebrew people were no longer free citizens. It was akin to someone living in South Korea suddenly being dragged off to forced labor in a North Korean coal mine—or perhaps like travelers aboard a luxurious ferry suddenly finding themselves forced to work on a shrimp boat. I want you to imagine just how drastically and painfully their circumstances had shifted. While their ancestors had been granted the privilege of living as free people in the land of Goshen, they had now been reduced to the status of slaves, forced to toil merely to survive in Egypt.

4.

Yet, it is said that the more dire their situation became, the more they flourished and grew stronger. This fact implies two things. First, God's wisdom is superior to and more powerful than the wisdom of the empire. The Egyptian Empire believed that oppression and suppression would keep everything under their control, but that was not the case. Instead, God blessed the people of Israel. A paradox was unfolding: the promise God made to Abraham in Genesis—regarding his descendants—was being fulfilled precisely amidst that very oppression and persecution. Second, it speaks to the resilience of the Israelite people. Even with God's support and intervention, it would have been to no avail had they not possessed the fortitude to endure. Yet, relying on God's help, the Israelites successfully navigated this crisis. For them, hardship served as a catalyst, giving them all the more reason to flourish. They realized that in such difficult times, they needed to stand united and grow stronger by bearing more offspring. They were like a spinning top that spins more upright and vigorously the harder it is whipped. What was the force that made them stronger as their hardships intensified? They likely remembered the covenant God had made with their ancestors; I believe this covenant gave them a long-term perspective. It would have been nearly impossible to endure such a harsh world without holding fast to the promise of a future—brought about by God's guidance—rather than collapsing under the weight of immediate suffering. The sudden hostility and hatred from the locals, coupled with a forced descent from free people to slaves through compulsory labor, created a storm of adversity that would have broken the spirit of most people. Yet, it appears that external circumstances did not dictate the Hebrews' future. The

paradox of their flourishing despite abuse holds profound meaning for us; it brings to mind the importance of an unyielding spirit.

5.
One more point worth examining in this text is the true face of the Egyptian Empire. Verse 10 reveals why the Egyptians feared the Israelites. While they cited the risk of rebellion or siding with enemies during wartime as pretexts, the real reason is disclosed at the end of the verse: they feared the Israelites might leave the land. If they disliked the Israelites so much, wouldn't the logical solution have been to simply drive them out? Isn't it contradictory to loathe a group of people yet simultaneously refuse to let them leave? The reason lies in the sweet benefits they reaped from the labor provided by the Hebrew slaves; they found great advantage in exploiting and utilizing them. The labor of Hebrew slaves was indispensable for massive state-led development projects, such as the construction of vast grain storehouses. Furthermore, their labor was incredibly valuable in brickmaking and agriculture. This hidden desire explains why the Egyptian king and his people clung to the Hebrews despite their animosity toward them.

This "true face of empire" is a characteristic shared by all empires throughout history—not just Egypt. The Roman Empire, Nazi Germany, and the Empire of Japan all operated in the same way. These empires viewed people not as beings worthy of respect—as individuals created in God's image—but merely as instruments to be used. Imperialism grew by feeding on hatred and exclusion. This same phenomenon is evident in today's neoliberal capitalist society. Terms like "labor force," "human resources," and "utility value" are, in reality, words that should never be applied to human beings. The noble value of human dignity—the idea that every human being deserves respect and proper treatment simply by virtue of their existence—seems to find no foothold in the face of the rise of imperialism and the prioritization of efficiency. Living in a society dominated by such imperialistic values, we often internalize them without even realizing it. The Exodus, as planned by God, represents a form of resistance against this imperialistic system of Egypt. Through the Exodus, God sought to realize His dream of a peaceful community where all brothers and sisters are treated with dignity and respect.

6.
There are two pivotal events spanning the Old and New Testaments: the Exodus in the Old Testament, and the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament. The Exodus conveys profound messages to us as believers. It was an event that compelled the descendants of Israel to remember and reflect upon the mighty works God had performed for their ancestors. Through the Exodus, they were transformed from slaves into free people. Having gained their freedom, they were further transformed into a covenant people through the covenant established with God at Mount Sinai. It is a great blessing to meditate together on the Book of Exodus—this momentous event. The opening of Exodus bears a resemblance to the beginning of the Book of James, which we studied together earlier this year. The heart of James—seeking to comfort the Diaspora, who were forced to live scattered under imperial rule and faced great suffering—echoes the atmosphere found in the first chapter of Exodus. This parallel is also evident in verse 10, where the Egyptians speak of the need to deal "wisely" with the Israelites; the Hebrew word used there for "wisdom" is *hokhmah*. The core message of the Book of James is an exhortation to the Diaspora to live by heavenly wisdom rather than worldly wisdom. Today’s passage reinforces this by demonstrating that God’s wisdom surpasses the wisdom of Egypt, urging us to follow God’s wisdom.

Worldly wisdom often appears more efficient and practical than God’s wisdom. Yet, the wisdom of the Egyptians could not prevail over God’s wisdom. If you are facing hardships while following God’s will, I encourage you not to seek ways to evade them through worldly wisdom, but to hold fast to God’s wisdom

to the end. The wisdom of God revealed in this passage is a wisdom that enables us to overcome challenges together as a community. To avoid being crushed by their suffering, the people bore many children; they sought to surmount their ordeal through the strength of the community formed in this way. They overcame their trials by affirming—together within the community—a wisdom for living that remains unshaken by external circumstances.

Observing the vibrant life of the grass growing in my backyard reminded me of the poem "Grass" by Kim Su-young. Here is the second stanza of that poem:
"The grass lies down / It lies down faster than the wind / It weeps faster than the wind / And rises before the wind."
Grass possesses the skill—or rather, the wisdom—to weep faster than the wind and rise before the wind. For Kim Su-young, the grass symbolized the resilient vitality of the common people. I believe the Hebrews possessed this very same skill: the ability to discover positive values even amidst the various negative forces that oppress our lives. This was the wisdom of the Hebrews who feared God. I hope we, too, can emulate this wisdom of faith—a faith that does not shrink from hardship but instead flourishes amidst it. Our elders used to say, "You ought to at least learn a trade." Is there any skill more valuable than this? I am speaking of the skill of finding positive value even amidst negative circumstances, rather than letting external conditions define who we are.

Reading this passage brings an image to mind: the practice of treading on barley fields covered in snow. In the dead of winter, when the snow piled high, we children had to walk over the barley fields—a farming technique known as "barley treading." We would trample and press down on the green barley shoots buried beneath the snow. It is said that this process encourages the barley to take firmer root in the soil, ultimately yielding a more bountiful harvest in the spring. From the barley's perspective, this is a form of flourishing brought about by sudden pressure and hardship. I hope that the sudden hardships you face will likewise become factors that enable you to flourish. In closing, I would like to reflect on another kind of wisdom for overcoming hardship by reading the poem "Ivy" (Damjaengi) by Do Jong-hwan. It conveys the message that there is no hardship we cannot overcome if we join hands and stand in solidarity. May we not shrink from hardship, but instead join hands and realize the dream of the community of peace that God has promised.

Ivy (Damjaengi) by Do Jong-hwan

When we feel
that it is a wall—
an insurmountable wall—
at that very moment,
the ivy silently climbs it.

When we call it a wall of despair—
a place where not a drop of water exists
and no single seed can survive—
the ivy moves forward, unhurried.

Climbing together, hand in hand,
advancing even a hand's breadth at a time,
it clings fast to that very despair
until it has blanketed it all in green.

When we hang our heads,
believing the wall cannot be crossed,
a single ivy leaf leads thousands of others
and, in the end, surmounts the wall.