

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 4:18-23

To understand more about how God hardened Pharaoh's heart.

Read the Text:

Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace." 19 And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead." 20 So Moses took his wife and his sons and had them ride on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the staff of God in his hand. 21 And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. 22 Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, 23 and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'" (Exodus 4:18-23, ESV)

Study the Text:

The Journey to Egypt

Following the interactions with God concerning the signs and speech that would accompany Moses as he confronts Pharaoh, Moses returns to his father-in-law, Jethro, and asks him permission to return to Egypt with his family, and Jethro grants him permission (Ex. 4:18). It might seem strange that Moses seemingly has to ask for permission from Jethro to leave, but this is more of a sign of respect and maturity rather than submission. Recall that Moses was an employee of Jethro (Ex. 3:1), and also rightly desired the blessing of his father-in-law to take his family with him (Ex. 4:20). If anything, it shows the graciousness to Jethro that Moses possessed.

Moreover, Moses likely would have felt nervous about returning to Egypt considering the way in which he left and the number of people who wanted him dead, and so God graciously comforts him: "And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, 'Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead'" (Ex. 4:19). Again, graciousness is given, this time from God to Moses. While nothing is required of God, He is kind towards those He sends. God is both specific and strict with regard to His standards and also gracious and kind with regard to His people. Thus, Moses, along with the "staff of God," and his wife Zipporah and their son Gershon "went back to the land of Egypt" (Ex. 4:20). That Zipporah and Gershon are with Moses will trigger an event that takes place in next week's study. For now, take note that they are with Moses on his journey back.

The Plan in Egypt

The LORD speaks to Moses in verses 21 through 23, and in this short but important dialogue, several key details emerge. Below is a brief outline of a few of them.

INSTRUCTION, NOT INSTINCT

In verse 21, God tells Moses that he will go before Pharaoh to "do all the miracles that I have put in your power." This raises an important question, however, concerning what miracles God is referencing. It's

tempting to assume that God is simply referring to all that takes place in verses 1 through 17, but there are some issues with this. For one (as mentioned in Session 7), Moses ends up only performing two of the three miracles described (the staff to serpent and the blood in the Nile). The miracle that entails leprosy and the healing of leprosy is never explicitly practiced before Pharaoh. There's a variation of it in Numbers 12:9-15, but it is never practiced before Pharaoh nor is it intended to be. Beyond that, Moses performs not two or three miracles before Pharaoh, but ten (including the Passover).

So this raises the question: Is God in this passage referring to additional miracles that He taught Moses that were not specified in verses 1 through 17? The answer is, likely yes. This raises an additional important point. It is not uncommon for Christians to think that all revelation is recorded in Scripture, but this is not so. There are actions of God in human history that are not recorded that are revelatory in nature. Daniel is told to seal up some of the end-time instructions to not be known (Dan. 12:4). John indicates that if all of the actions of Jesus were recorded, "the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (Jn. 21:25). Sometimes there are events that take place in redemptive history that the Bible acknowledges but doesn't necessarily record, and this is likely one of them. Moses had been given all that was needed to perform the miracles in Egypt. Whenever I used to imagine the Exodus story as I read it, I always imagined Moses being led on by the Spirit of God through a sort of instinct, almost as if he didn't really know what he was doing, but was sort of just trusting God as he went. But Moses wasn't being led by instinct; he was led through instruction. God prepared Moses for this moment. He trained him. He taught him. Moses knew exactly what to do when he arrived.

A HARDENED HEART

Another important theological detail is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart that is mentioned in verse 21. God will use Moses to perform signs and wonders before Pharaoh, not to convince Pharaoh, but to make known His power over Pharaoh to all people for all time. Pharaoh was "a vessel of wrath prepared for destruction" (Rom. 9:22). Of Pharaoh, the Lord said: "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (Rom. 9:17). This is not to say that Pharaoh is somehow innocent; he himself will harden his own heart many times over as well and Moses had already been warned that despite all of the miracles, Pharaoh would not believe (Ex. 3:19-20). However, we need not make apologies for God for hardening Pharaoh's heart. It isn't that Pharaoh was especially evil, but that he like all people are sinful and rebellious. Pharaoh's own wickedness was being used in concert with God's divine purposes. Pharaoh sought to challenge the LORD, and thus he would serve as an example to the rest of the world to arrogant men like him.

As a side note, Romans 9 does not present an argument for divine, *personal* election. While the Bible speaks plenty of such a doctrine, Romans 9 speaks of divine, *corporate* election. God elects Israel as a people to be the vessel through which the Messiah is born. Despite Israel's multiple failings, "it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy" (Rom. 9:16). Pharaoh is often used as an example of a normative action of God in some churches, as if God is trying to keep people from believing the Gospel. This is backwards. God does not need to keep anyone from believing the Gospel; we are incapable of believing it on our own. God's active role as it pertains to belief is to grant belief, not prevent it (Phil. 1:29; Eph. 2:8).

FIRSTBORN SON

Verses 22 and 23 conclude with a message Moses is to deliver to Pharaoh: "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you: Let my son go that he may serve me. If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'" The terminology of firstborn son is important for a number of reasons. For one, it establishes the special relationship that God has with Israel. Israel is not simply

a chosen people, but a son. This relationship is further highlighted through the minor prophet Hosea: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hos. 11:1). This firstborn son terminology not only highlights the relationship between God and Israel, but also foreshadows through typology the relationship between God and Jesus (Matt. 2:15).

Further, the mention of killing the firstborn of Egypt foreshadows the tenth and final plague that Moses will carry out in the Passover wherein the firstborn of every household that does not have the blood of the lamb covering the doorpost of the home will be killed (Ex. 12:1-13). Moreover, it highlights what will soon be required of Moses himself in the very next passage that we will examine next week (Ex. 4:24-26).

What About Now?

One takeaway is the sovereignty of God. God, throughout every moment, is in control. He has raised up Moses. He has instructed Him with miracles and signs and wonders. He has raised up Aaron to be Moses’ voice. He has raised up Pharaoh as an example of God’s wrathful power to the world. He has been behind every move and yet He has not violated the will of anyone involved. God is sovereign over all things and yet none are without excuse when we violate His will (Rom. 9:19-21). Another takeaway is the importance of preparation for God’s mission. God does not raise people up and send them without clear calling and instruction. Moses learned what God desired him to do before he did it (Ex. 4:21). If God has called you towards a particularly ministry objective, He has also called you under His instruction. God is sovereign, but that doesn’t mean we should carry out His plans through improvisation. Finally, the importance of respect is highlighted in Moses’ request to leave from Jethro. While not necessary (God commanded him to leave, after all), it showed a sense of real care and respect towards Jethro to which Jethro responded with blessing (Ex. 4:18).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 4:18. Who did Moses return to and what did he ask of him? How did Jethro respond? Was this necessary of Moses? If not, why do you think he did this?

2. Read Exodus 4:19. What did the Lord say to Moses?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 4:20. Who did Moses take with him? What did he take with him? To where did he travel?

2. Read Exodus 4:21. What did the LORD tell Moses to do when he arrived in Egypt? What did the LORD say He would do?

Day Three

1. Read Romans 9:14-19. What does Paul say concerning Moses and Pharaoh? Why did God do things this way?

2. Read Exodus 4:22. What is Moses to say to Israel? What is significant about this? (Hint: See above notes)

Day Four

1. Read Hosea 11:1 and Matthew 2:15. What each of these passages point to?

2. Read Exodus 4:23. What does verse 23 foreshadow?

Discuss the Text:

Week 8 Discussion: Respect

One detail in this week's passage points to the beauty of respecting others, especially when it isn't *required* of you. Though Moses is commanded by God to leave Egypt and must obey God, he still respectfully asks Jethro for his permission to leave. Talk as a group about the importance of kindness and respect towards others, especially when making requests of them.

1. Icebreaker: Is respect important to you? Why or why not?
2. How does it make you feel when someone disrespects you?
3. How does it make you feel when someone who isn't required to respect you shows you respect anyway?
4. How likely are you to bless someone who is respectful towards you?
5. What is the Christian response when someone disrespects you?
6. How important is respect to a healthy society? Why?

Takeaways:

1. God directs Moses to return to Egypt and perform the miracles He showed him.
2. Moses asks Jethro for his permission to leave, and Jethro gives him his blessing.
3. Moses is told to perform the signs before Pharaoh, but that God will harden Pharaoh's heart.
4. God foreshadows the Passover.