

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 5:1-23

To understand more about the first encounter Moses and Aaron had with Pharaoh, and the outcome.

Read the Text:

Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.'" 2 But Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go." 3 Then they said, "The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God, lest he fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword." 4 But the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens." 5 And Pharaoh said, "Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens!" 6 The same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their foremen, 7 "You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as in the past; let them go and gather straw for themselves. 8 But the number of bricks that they made in the past you shall impose on them, you shall by no means reduce it, for they are idle. Therefore they cry, 'Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.' 9 Let heavier work be laid on the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words." 10 So the taskmasters and the foremen of the people went out and said to the people, "Thus says Pharaoh, 'I will not give you straw. 11 Go and get your straw yourselves wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced in the least.'" 12 So the people were scattered throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. 13 The taskmasters were urgent, saying, "Complete your work, your daily task each day, as when there was straw." 14 And the foremen of the people of Israel, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten and were asked, "Why have you not done all your task of making bricks today and yesterday, as in the past?" 15 Then the foremen of the people of Israel came and cried to Pharaoh, "Why do you treat your servants like this? 16 No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, 'Make bricks!' And behold, your servants are beaten; but the fault is in your own people." 17 But he said, "You are idle, you are idle; that is why you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD.' 18 Go now and work. No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number of bricks." 19 The foremen of the people of Israel saw that they were in trouble when they said, "You shall by no means reduce your number of bricks, your daily task each day." 20 They met Moses and Aaron, who were waiting for them, as they came out from Pharaoh; 21 and they said to them, "The LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us." 22 Then Moses turned to the LORD and said, "O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? 23 For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all." (Exodus 5:1-23, ESV)

Study the Text:

A First Encounter

Following Moses' and Aaron's meeting in the previous study, verse 1 indicates that they fairly immediately went to address the Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, but surprisingly not permanently. The purpose of their temporary departure was for "a feast in wilderness" (Ex. 5:1). Pharaoh asks in response: "Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go?" (Ex. 5:2). There is an interesting correlation between knowing God and doing what He has asked here in the text. Pharaoh, because he does "not know God," decides to not comply with His demands. Knowledge, or better, relationship with God is a necessary prerequisite to obeying Him. Moses and Aaron attempt to further reason with him, explaining that failure to comply will result in "pestilence" and "the sword," but this too fails to penetrate the hardness of Pharaoh's heart: "Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens" (Ex. 5:3-4).

Unbeknownst to Pharaoh, precisely what Moses and Aaron said will eventually come true. The "pestilence"

works itself out in various plagues (the ten), while “the sword” is term commonly used in the Old Testament to refer to decisive military defeat (the Egyptian army in the Red Sea). Also, note that while Pharaoh refers to God’s people as “the Israelites,” they continually refer to them as “the Hebrews,” a term often used towards foreigners. This whole exchange is but the beginning of many exchanges that Moses and Aaron will have with the king of Egypt, but it certainly incenses Pharaoh against the people of Israel and leads to greater consequences for them. Truly, things will get worse before they get better.

Incensed

The first encounter with Pharaoh does not help the cause of the Israelite people; it actually makes it worse. The Pharaoh, incensed by the audacity of Moses and Aaron, instructs the taskmasters charged over the Israelites: “You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as in the past; let them go and gather straw for themselves. 8 But the number of bricks that they made in the past you shall impose on them, you shall by no means reduce it, for they are idle. Therefore they cry, ‘Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.’ 9 Let heavier work be laid on the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words.” Now, in addition to the already stifling amount of work that has been thrust upon them, the Israelites will also be responsible for gathering the straw necessary to make the bricks they are responsible for producing. Typically, straw would be gathered in bundles and given to the workers who made the bricks. With this new arrangement, they would be forced to scatter all throughout the kingdom, searching for any kind of stubble that they could gather to bring back to where the bricks were made. This would have resulted in less actual time to make the bricks and significantly less materials as well. This is, in other words, an impossible task. The lack of production led the foremen, Jewish overseers of the job, to be whipped by the Egyptian taskmasters (Ex. 5:14). When they themselves approached Pharaoh, they were blamed for being “idle” or lazy since they requested time away to go and make sacrifices to their God (Ex. 5:15-17).

The stubbornness of Pharaoh is ultimately disheartening to the Israelites. They went from hopeful and full of faith at the end of chapter 4 (Ex. 4:31) to questioning whether or not what they were doing was right (Ex. 5:20-21). Moreover, even Moses is disheartened. He cries out to God: “O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all” (Ex. 5:22-23). Moses cannot make sense of why things have turned out the way they have. After saying everything to Pharaoh that God commanded him to say, the people only suffered more. Moses (and likely by extension, Aaron) as well as the Hebrew people were left with great uncertainty about what God was doing among them. One thing is certain - Pharaoh will require more than simply words to convince him to set the people of God free.

What About Now?

There are a few takeaways in this passage, but ones that require a bit more attention because of just how badly we need to hear them.

Perhaps the primary takeaway of this passage is the reality that *doing God’s will does not necessarily translate into better circumstances in life*. That is an important reality with which Christians should grapple. There is a prevailing idea in evangelicalism that as long as you are doing what God commands you to do, He will bless you, take away your troubles, and make your life better. That simply is not true. In this instance, God clearly tells Moses and Aaron what to say to Pharaoh, and the people of God (and their elders) all agree that God had heard their cries and was now acting on their behalf (Ex. 4:31). The expectation, then, was that because God

was acting on their behalf against the cruelty of Pharaoh, the cruelty would come to an end. You can imagine how devastated they all must have felt when after the first encounter between Moses, Aaron, and Pharaoh, things got markedly worse.

What is interesting is that the people of God in this passage do what so many Christians do today. Rather than accepting that God is not committed to a comfortable life for His people, they blame anyone else they can find for their problems. In this instance, the Israelites blame Moses and Aaron! They say, "The LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants" (Ex. 5:21). They ask God to judge Moses and Aaron because they have made things worse. Moses can't make sense of how God could allow them to suffer, given his obedience (Ex. 5:22-23). They cannot possibly conceive that God could be behind any of this. They, like so many of us today, struggle with accepting that the exalted life is a life marked with suffering (Ja. 1:12; 1 Pet. 4:13; Heb. 12:2; Col. 1:24; Acts 5:41).

Another application of this passage has to do with pride. Whenever a prideful person is challenged, they double down in an attempt to maintain control. Pharaoh is asked very reasonably to let the Israelites go for three days into the wilderness to worship and make sacrifice to God, and his response is to not only prohibit them from leaving, but make their current jobs even more difficult. This is intentional, and it sends a message: "Do not challenge my authority or will." Power often translates into pride which in turn translates into whatever means necessary to maintain control. So much of the heartache that Egypt will experience (including the death of every firstborn son) is a direct result of the king's resistance to humility and powerlessness.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 5:1-2. Who went to speak to Pharaoh. What did they say? How did Pharaoh respond to this request? What does this request signify about Pharaoh?

2. Read Exodus 5:3-5. What did Moses and Aaron say next? How did they refer to the Israelites, and why? (Hint: See above notes) What did Pharaoh say in return?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 5:6-9. Who did Pharaoh speak to after his encounter with Moses and Aaron, and what did he say to them?

2. Read Exodus 5:10-11. Why did Pharaoh's command make the Israelites' job harder? What additional task were they now charged with?

Day Three

1. Read Exodus 5:12-14. How did the people respond? What did the taskmasters say to them? What happened to the foremen as a result of the people not getting their job done?
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2. Read Exodus 5:15-16. What did the foremen say to Pharaoh? Who did they blame for this?
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Day Four

1. Read Exodus 5:17-19. How did Pharaoh respond to them?
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2. Read Exodus 5:20-23. Who did the Israelites blame next? What did they say to Moses and Aaron? How did Moses respond to everything that happened?
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Discuss the Text!

Week 10 Discussion: Exalted Suffering

One of the most striking applications of this text is the reality that life does not necessarily get better or easier when you walk in the will of God. The Israelites' lives become far more burdened as a result of the impossible workload foisted upon them by Pharaoh and the Hebrew foremen are beaten because of it, all because Moses and Aaron followed God's will and confronted Pharaoh. The pathway to the exalted life follows the road of suffering. Talk as a group about the unique struggles you've faced when you've been obedient to the call of God on your life.

1. Icebreaker: Does God reward good behavior? Why or why not?
2. Has your life ever become more difficult as a result of your obedience to Christ? If you're willing, share with the group the details of what happened.
3. Why is the message of exalted suffering so unpopular in churches?
4. Has the difficulty of life ever moved you away from obedience to Christ? Explain.
5. Did Christ suffer for obedience? What does this mean for those who follow Him?
6. When life gets challenging, who do you usually blame first?

Takeaways:

1. Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh and ask him to let the Israelites travel three days into the wilderness to worship and sacrifice to God.
2. Pharaoh is angered by this request and adds an impossible workload on top of an already cruel job, and then punishes the Israelites for not getting the job done.
3. The Israelites first blame the taskmasters, and then ultimately blame Moses and Aaron.
4. Pharaoh demonstrates that more than words will be necessary to move him into submission.