

Service, Adversity, and God's Sovereignty: Moses and Pharaoh (Exodus 5:1-6:8)

"It was, indeed, possible for God to overwhelm [Pharaoh] at once, by a single nod, so that he should even fall down dead at the very sight of Moses; but . . . He . . . chose more clearly to lay open His power; for if Pharaoh had either voluntarily yielded, or had been overcome without effort, the glory of the victory would not have been so illustrious . . ." ~ John Calvin

I. Investigation: An Examination of Exodus 5:1-6:8

A. Introduction

Despite the Lord telling Moses that Pharaoh would not allow the Israelites to leave, Moses seemed shocked at Pharaoh's negative response. Not only did the Egyptian tyrant refuse to release the Israelites, he increased the severe treatment of the Israelites slaves. This outcome not only surprised Moses, it also complicated matters for this future deliverer. Instead of the Israelites rallying around Moses, they rejected both Moses and his message! In the midst of shattered hopes, overwhelming fear, a litany of questions, and intense doubt, the Lord once again rehearses for Moses His person and character. No Egyptian god or manifestation of a god can compare to the great "I am"!

B. The First Encounter with Pharaoh (5:1-9)

v. 1 - How well does Moses follow divine directives? Compare what God instructed Moses to say to Pharaoh (3:18) with what Moses actually declares.

Hamilton writes, "The difference between the two is obvious. God's language is courteous and diplomatic. Moses' language is abrasive, in-your-face confrontation" (*Exodus*, 88).

v. 2 - Pharaoh's response can be taken two different ways. First, his response could be read as a statement of arrogance (cf. Judg 9:28). A second way to interpret Pharaoh's response is that this Egyptian ruler truly does not know Israel's God. Either way, Pharaoh's words raise a central question in the Book of Exodus: "Who is the Lord?". Interestingly, a later rabbinic writing, the Jerusalem Targum, paraphrases Pharaoh's reply: "I have not found the name of the Lord in the Book of the Angels. I am not afraid of him, nor will I release Israel."

Underlying this entire scene is a great spiritual battle. "The critical issue to be settled is nothingness than who is in charge, who has the authority over the people of Israel and ultimately over all nations and all of creation: the God of Israel or the gods of Egypt, manifest in Pharaoh" (G. Larsson, *Bound for Freedom*, 46).

v. 3 - Moses softens the tone in his second appeal to Pharaoh. In fact, these words align much closer with the Lord's directives in 3:18.

Was the "three-day" request dishonest? Common interpretations are as follows:

- It was a veiled request to be allowed to depart from Egypt permanently.
- A dictator, such as Pharaoh, who was opposed to the things of the Lord, had no right to the truth.
- Moses never said anything about returning. He simply requested a 3-day journey. Moses' request was reasonable in a culture that permitted "holidays" for religious observances. This time off was even granted for Egyptian slaves (cf. Kitchen, "From the Brickfields of Egypt," *TynB* 27 [1976], 145-46).
- The three-day request was a test to see if Pharaoh would listen to the Lord.

At the end of the day, the Exodus was a display of God's power. One commentator writes, ". . . Israel was released solely because of the power of God, and not because of any generosity on the Egyptians' part or because of any heroics on the Hebrews' part" (Garrett, *Exodus*, 239).

vv. 4-5 - Depicted on a tomb of Rekhmire at Thebes, c. 1450 BC, there are paintings of workers involved in various stages of brick-making (e.g., mixing, molding, and stacking). Straw added volume to these sun-dried bricks and served as a binding agent. Without the straw, shrinkage and cracking was far more likely.

Working outside in the hot Egyptian sun under the watchful eye of brutal taskmasters would have been horrific labor conditions. In light of this type of employment found in Egyptian records from the time of Moses, one scholar writes, "It does not take much imagination to conclude that the severe 'rigor' imposed on the Hebrews resulted in many of them dying of dehydration, heat prostration, heatstroke and the like" (H. Vos, *Bible Manners and Customs*, 61).

vv. 6-9 - A two-tier administrative system was common in Egypt at this time. The "taskmasters" were Egyptians and the "foremen" were Hebrews.

C. No Straw, but Much Complaining (5:10-21)

Throughout their appeal to Pharaoh, the Israelites referred to themselves three times as "your servants" (vv. 15, 16). One commentator observes, "They [the Israelites] were so used to being in bondage that they could not think of themselves as anything but slaves. Rather than seeking to be free, they went back to renegotiate the terms of their captivity" (Ryken, *Exodus*, 156).

D. Reconfirming the Lord's Identity (5:22-6:8)

5:22-23 - One minute the Israelites were worshiping the Lord; the next minute they were cursing Moses. This well-laid plan appeared to be in shambles. Once again, Moses found himself rejected by his own people—the very people he was supposed to lead out of Egypt! Instead of questioning Yahweh, Moses should have remembered the Lord's words (3:19; 4:21).

Note what accusations Moses brings against the Lord:

6:1 - Amazingly, the Lord does not rebuke Moses.

6:2-8 - This entire passage is placed with an *inclusio*: "I am YHWH!" (This declaration is also repeated throughout this section—vv. 2, 6, 7, 8.). Another *inclusio* is the reference to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at both the beginning and end of the poem. "The name of Yahweh functions as a guarantee that the reality of God stands behind the promise and will execute its fulfillment" (Dodd, *Exodus*, 115).

In this poem, the Lord identifies three things about Himself: (1) that he revealed Himself to the fathers; (2) that He made a covenant with the fathers; and (3) that He knows the current persecution of the Israelites. The Lord then states three things He will do: (1) He will deliver the Israelites; (2) He will become their God; and (3) He will give them the land of Canaan (cf. Garrett, *Exodus*, 250-51).

Note that the Lord's words did not reveal new revelation; rather, these words were the same words the Lord had spoken to Moses on Mt. Sinai. This time, these words were meant to reassure Moses of what he had learned from the Lord previously. God never offered Moses an explanation for why He allowed additional suffering for the Israelites. Nor did the Lord attempt to justify Himself. Ryken states it so well: "Even Pharaoh's hard-hearted refusal was part of the plan of salvation. God was setting things up so that Pharaoh would not only let God's people go but would help drive them out himself! The all-wise and all-powerful God had everything under control" (*Exodus*, 166).

II. Intersect

A. Failure to acknowledge and honor the Lord will result in ultimately exalting oneself. One commentator writes, "It is hardly surprising for someone who is pursuing selfish ambition, indulging in sexual sin, or living for material gain to still have doubts about Jesus Christ. Disobedience has a way of perpetuating ignorance" (Ryken, *Exodus*, 145).

Romans 1:18, 19, 21a -

B. As followers of Christ, we need to ask the Lord to grant us patience in seeing God's big picture rather than complaining or arguing about God's timetable. We need to allow the Lord to be the Lord.

Romans 9:14-18 -

C. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the same God we worship today. He is consistent, all-powerful, and faithful to His promises, just as Moses encountered in his life time.

Hebrews 13:8 -

"O Father, you are sovereign in all affairs of man;
No powers of death or darkness can thwart your perfect plan.
All chance and change transcending, supreme in time and space,
You hold your trusting children secure in your embrace."

~ M. Clarkson