

God Remembers: Take Up the Cross

Exodus 5

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Now if you would take your Bibles and turn with me to Exodus chapter 5 or if you're using one of the church Bibles turn with me to page number 48. Exodus chapter 5. Before we read, it is our custom to ask for God to help us understand and believe His holy Word. Would you bow your heads with me then as we turn to God in prayer? Let us all pray.

Our Father, we pray as we sit under the Scriptures, under Your Word, that You would give us submissive and receptive hearts. Teach us, instruct us, correct us, rebuke us, and train us in righteousness that we may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. We thank You for the Holy Scriptures that are able to make us wise unto salvation. We ask that You would wield them to that end in every heart here present, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Exodus chapter 5. This is the Word of Almighty God:

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.'" 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." 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." 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." And Pharaoh said, "Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens!" The same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their foremen, "You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as in the past; let them go and gather straw for themselves. 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.' Let heavier work be laid on the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words."

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. Go and get your straw yourselves wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced in the least.'" So the people were scattered throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. The taskmasters were urgent, saying, "Complete your work, your daily task each day, as when there was straw." 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?"

Then the foremen of the people of Israel came and cried to Pharaoh, "Why do you treat your servants like this? 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." But he said, "You are idle, you are idle; that is why you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.' Go now and work. No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number of bricks." 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." They met Moses and Aaron, who were waiting for them, as they came out from Pharaoh; 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."

Then Moses turned to the Lord and said, "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."

But the LORD said to Moses, Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand he will send them out, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land."

Amen, and we give thanks to God that He has spoken in His holy and inerrant Word.

Laboring In Vain?

When I was newly ordained as a Gospel preacher I well remember the dawning of the discouraging realization that not everyone who first heard me would instantly be revolutionized by my brilliance. I was naive, enthusiastic, gripped by the romance of preaching, and to be fair, I preached faithfully, but the truth is, very little, at least to the naked eye, very little changed. And it was discouraging.

Now most of you are not preachers, but I suspect no matter the sphere of Christian service in which you have been engaged, if you've ever sought to be faithful to God's call on your life something like that has happened to you. You're doing the right thing and not a whole lot changes and you wonder why you're laboring so hard; you're obeying and things are still difficult, maybe even they get worse and not better. And you think to yourself, "I thought if I did what God wanted He would take care of the hard stuff. I thought if I was obedient to God's call in my life, life would sort of shift gears and run much more smoothly from here on out. And actually, the more you do what He asks, the bumpier the road has seemed to get. Can you relate to that? There are seasons like that, aren't there? The more you obey, things don't get easier, they get worse; the bumpier the road seems to get.

This morning we're looking at Exodus chapter 5 at an episode in which something very much like that happens in the experience of Moses and Aaron. Would you take a look at it with me please? Moses and Aaron have now at last come home to Egypt. They have been in the wilderness and they are being called by God to go back to Egypt to become the human instruments of the deliverance of the Hebrews who were there enslaved. And they delivered, at the end of chapter 4, remember, they delivered God's message to the people of Israel and the elders of Israel and it was met with jubilation and thanksgiving and a ready reception. "The people believed and they bowed and they worshiped." There was a revival, an awakening in Israel at the preaching of Moses and Aaron. That was chapter 4. And now as we rejoin the action here in chapter 5, it's time to go and preach the same message to Pharaoh; the same message to Pharaoh. And so here they come, Moses and Aaron, flushed with excitement, adrenaline pumping, made bold by the successes of their recently ministry among the Hebrew slaves, marching into the courts of Pharaoh's palace with the Word of the Lord thundering from their lips, "Thus says the Lord, 'Let my people go!'" And their enthusiasm comes to an abrupt and jarring halt as it butts up against the ignorance and rebellion of the heart of Pharaoh. He will not let God's people go. It was doubtless a discouraging moment as Moses' prayer at the end of the chapter seems to indicate. And it was a moment that spelled only increased suffering rather than immediate deliverance for God's people. And they're obeying God, remember? They're preaching. And not only is Pharaoh unimpressed, but things take a dramatic turn for the worse.

What in the world is going on? How are we to make sense of things when obedience to God is followed not by ease and comfort but by suffering and hardship and discouragement? And all I want to do this morning as we look at chapter 5 is to work through the material of the chapter and then try to answer that question. How do we make sense of things when obedience to God is followed not by ease and comfort but by suffering and hardship and discouragement? That is actually a question the passage itself confronts us with, particularly if you notice the contrast established by the narrator between Moses and Aaron on the one hand and Pharaoh on the other. Moses and Aaron begin

this story, verses 1 to 5, and they end the story at 20 to 23. They sort of bracket all the action and in the middle there is the tyrannical megalomania of Pharaoh played out with all its terrible implications for the lives of the suffering Hebrew slaves. So on the one hand we have Moses and Aaron who really do provide a pattern of service as we watch them, going in obedience to the call of God - a pattern of service. But then on the other hand, and by contrast, we see Pharaoh whose behavior gives us a pathology of sin, reacting to the Word of God with rebellion and unbelief. And those two poles present us with the dilemma we're trying to understand - obedient servants of God on the one hand; evil men causing great suffering on the other. And we want to know, "How do these two realities fit together? How do they mesh? How can obedience result in trials and hardship and pain like this?" A pattern of service, then a pathology of sin, but then at the end, to answer the question the chapter forces upon us, we're going to look at chapter 6 verse 1 where we're going to see what God has been doing all along. It is the plan of the Savior. A pattern of service, a pathology of sin, and then finally, the plan of the Savior.

I. A Pattern of Service

So let's think about the pattern of service that Moses and Aaron present us with first of all. I don't want to spend a whole lot of time on it but do look at the two appearances of Moses and Aaron in the narrative at the beginning and end of the chapter. In verses 1 to 5, the focus rests on their proclamation and in 20 to 23 it rests on petition. They are preaching and they are praying. The only times Moses and Aaron appear in the chapter this is what they're doing - they're speaking to people about God and they're speaking to God about people. And I think that's actually a rather good description of Gospel ministry. That's our task. If you're a minister of the Word of God, a Gospel servant in any capacity, that is the task of the church, that is your task - to speak for God to the world and to speak for the world to God. To speak about God to the world and to speak about the world to God. Proclamation and petition. To go preach and pray. That's what Moses and Aaron do here.

Preaching

Look at their preaching first, verse 1 and verse 3. There's a great deal we could say about their message. They don't give Pharaoh the whole story, do they? One thing they emphasize both in verse 1 and in verse 3, however, is God's purpose. God's purpose, His goal in seeking the deliverance of the Hebrews from slavery, notice it does not terminate on the Hebrews. What is God about? Why does He want Pharaoh to let them go? "That they may hold a feast to Me. That they may go three days' journey and sacrifice to the Lord." God's grand design in the exodus is worship. God's goal in Moses and Aaron's preaching is worship. That is the purpose of God in all that He does - your worship. When God delivered the Hebrews, it was not simply that He might focus His attention on the Hebrews but

that the Hebrews might focus their attention on the God who saved them. And when God delivered you, believer in Jesus Christ, from sin and death and hell by the work of His Son the Lord Jesus Christ, He did it not to make much of you but that you would make much of Him, that He might be the sun at the center of the solar system of your life and everything about you revolve around Him. That is the purpose of God in the preaching of Moses and Aaron.

Proclamation

Do notice, secondly, also, with reference to their preaching what they say. They don't come to Pharaoh as spin-doctors, you know, causally and loosely interpreting the message of God with a view to manipulating the best outcome from Pharaoh. What do they do? They come with a, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel." They come as heralds, speaking the very Word of the Lord. That is our task. That is what we are to do. Not to adjust the message to make it palatable that it might be more effective in our own opinion but to deliver the *ipssisima verba*, the very words of God to a world that does not know Him, to speak God's Word after Him. So preaching, proclamation.

Petition

Then look at verses 20 to 23. They're preaching and now also they're praying. That brackets the chapter - proclamation and petition. Their boldness in preaching of course has not been too terribly effective. Pharaoh has responded to God's commands with menace and creating burden and deepening the sufferings of Israel. And after a failed attempt to persuade their masters to lighten the load, look at how the foremen respond to Moses and Aaron. Verse 21, "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. We stink in their sight. When they think about us they make a face as though they were smelling something dreadful. And the result of this terrible burden is they're going to drive us, they're going to grind us into dust. This will be the death of us. And it's all your fault, Moses and Aaron! Some deliverers you turned out to be!" They don't pull their punches, do they? And now you see the crest of the wave that Moses and Aaron had been riding at the end of chapter 4 comes crashing down in a dreadful reversal. The Hebrews who heard their preaching at first received it with joy and here they are now uttering an imprecation, a curse. "The Lord judge you for making our lives a misery," they say.

Response of Faithfulness

But do look how Moses and Aaron respond. We said, if you remember, at the end of chapter 4 as we noticed the results of Moses and Aaron's preaching to the elders of Israel, we said that their faithfulness has resulted in fruitfulness and that ordinarily that is how God works. When His people obey Him, He blesses and people believe and worship. Now we can add another principle to that from

chapter 5, can't we? Faithfulness ordinarily leads to fruitfulness but now we can also say fruitfulness ordinarily comes after many delays, discouragements, and reversals. God is going to save His people just as He had promised, but chapter 5 is a season of delay and discouragement and reversal through which both Moses, Aaron, and Israel must pass along the way. And we, all of us, would do well to remember that as we serve the Lord. Faithfulness ordinarily leads to fruitfulness but fruitfulness ordinarily comes after many delays, discouragements, and reversals.

But do look, despite their discouragements, as how Moses responds. We really don't know what they said, if anything, to their critics. Perhaps they did dash off that angry and defensive email, but they seemed to have hit delete rather than send because they turn with their complaints not to their critics but to the Lord, don't they? Verse 22, "O LORD, why have you done evil to this people? 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!" They do complain, but at least they complain to the Lord. They go to God. "But wait a minute," you say, "It looks like Moses suffers some selective amnesia! Chapter 4 verse 21 God told Moses this was how it was going to go! God told Moses, 'I will harden Pharaoh's heart so that he will not let the people go.' What is Moses complaining about? This is exactly what God said would happen!"

Unrelenting Pleading with the Lord God

Do take another look at how he complains. "Why have you done evil? Why did you ever send me? I spoke in your name; You have not delivered Your people at all." What is Moses doing? He hasn't forgotten that God was going to harden Pharaoh's heart but neither has he forgotten that God promised to save Israel either, and so he presses God to deliver on His promise. He is unsurprised by the hardness of Pharaoh's heart but he is brokenhearted over the sufferings of Israel. And so he presses the honor of God and the reputation of God on God. "These are Your people! I'm here at Your command speaking Your Word! What are You going to do? Will You let Your covenant fail? Are Your promises worthless?" Do you pray like that? The Puritans said, "We must sue God for His promises." Press Him over His promises. Say to God, "These are Your promises. This is what You have bound Yourself to. Fulfill Your Word." That's how they pray - bold, insistent, confident not in themselves, not in their own ingenuity to make circumstances turn out otherwise, but bold and confident in the unassailable promises of the God of covenant love. If in preaching we must say what God says to the world, in prayer, Moses teaches us to press what God says on God. And so there are patterns of faithfulness.

II. A Pathology of Sin

But now do look at the reaction of Pharaoh. For all their faithfulness, Pharaoh's response is a chilling picture of rebellion and tyranny, isn't it? Here's the pathology of sin. You see it playing itself out in an entire civilization brutalizing another. Verse 6, word is sent down from the palace through the Egyptian taskmasters to the Hebrew foremen and then on to the people that the quota of mud bricks required of the Israelites would remain the same as they serve Pharaoh's massive construction project. But the straw that helped provide strength and stability to those bricks will be something from now on they'll have to gather themselves. It will not be provided for them. And the reason, verse 9, the people are lazy. They need heavier work to be laid upon them so that they won't listen to these lying words from these dreadful preachers. And so inevitably, when the people fail to make their quotas, verse 11, the foremen are beaten. And when they form a trade union and send the shop stewards to go complain about unfair conditions to their bosses, verses 15 to 18, they are met with disdain. "You are idle; you are idle. Get back to work!" And so verse 19, in what really has to be an indictment of the foremen, you wonder what in the world they were thinking all this time; they're only just getting word now. The realization at last dawns on them. "The foremen of the people of Israel saw they were in trouble." You think? Trouble has been where they've been for a while, don't you think? Big trouble.

The Wicked Heart of Pharaoh

But what stands behind all of that dreadful trouble descending upon a suffering people? How is it even possible that something like this could happen? It all has to do with the heart of Pharaoh. The heart of Pharaoh; you see it in verse 2. Look how he responds to Moses' preaching. "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 the people go." You see, it's not that Pharaoh doesn't understand who God is, it's not an understanding, it's not an intellectual problem; it is something much more familiar to many of us. It is that Pharaoh wants to be God in Egypt. Actually that was the claim the pharaohs made. They were the incarnation of deity. Most of us, I'm sure, are not under the delusion that we are incarnations of deity, and yet many of us live as though we were God in our own private worlds. And so when we hear the commands and claims of Jesus Christ, don't we say with Pharaoh, "I will not. I will not have you to rule over me!" There is no God in Egypt but Pharaoh. You can see the contrast between the, "Thus saith the Lord," that Moses and Aaron deliver to Pharaoh with the words of verse 10 put into the mouths of Pharaoh's servants. God's servants come with a "Thus saith the Lord;" Pharaoh's servants come, verse 10, with a "Thus saith Pharaoh." In Egypt, Pharaoh is the only god that matters.

And isn't that true for how many of us live in our own private worlds? We're in charge and we will not bend the knee to another. And so here's the dilemma; do you see it now? You've got the faithfulness of Moses and Aaron and you've got this impenetrable, stony, hard-hearted Pharaoh who the more boldly our heroes

in this story preach, the more vehemently Pharaoh denies their every claim and inflicts dreadful suffering upon the people of Israel. How do those things make sense? What do you do, how do you make sense of a world where, when you seek to obey the call of God things don't get easier, they get worse?

III. The Plan of the Savior

Here we need to look at chapter 6 verse 1. We've seen Moses and Aaron pattern service and Pharaoh's heart give us the pathology of sin; here now is the plan of the Savior.

Suffering and Glory in the Life of Israel

Look at chapter 6 verse 1. The Lord said to Moses in response to their prayers, "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh," how with a strong hand He'll send them out and with a strong hand He'll drive them out of His land. Why does God bring Moses and Aaron and Israel into still greater suffering rather than lighten their load like this? He does it, He says, because He is setting the stage for the maximal display of His glory and grace. Why does God sometimes lead us into suffering and bring us into burdens under burdens? He does it that He might say to us, "Now you will see what I will do. Now you will see what I will do. Salvation belongs to the Lord. My grace is sufficient for you and My strength is made perfect in weakness." And it's right here, precisely here, that we have a glimpse of the Gospel of grace. Isn't it? Glory and grace in the midst of, indeed out of, suffering.

Suffering and Glory in the Life of Christ

Think about John 19. It's John's description of the crucifixion. Our Savior's sufferings there are at their most acute. He's crying out in dereliction, abandoned by God, suffering unspeakably. And again and again in John 19, John punctuates his narrative with, "This was to fulfill the Scriptures" - verse 24, verse 28, verse 36, verse 37. What is John saying to us? He's saying, "This was the plan all along. This was the plan all along. The suffering of the cross was the plan of God to bring salvation and deliverance and grace to My people." Down into the darkness of Golgotha that He might bring us into the light of life. God told Moses that in the sufferings of Israel He would work a great salvation. "Now you will see what I will do." And it all points to the sufferings of another, to the sufferings of the cross by which God worked a greater salvation for all who believe. Looking there at the nail-pierced hands and the crown of thorns on His brow, looking at the cross, don't we see there more clearly than anywhere else what God can do? Glory out of pain; salvation out of suffering. Redemption from the horror of the cross.

Suffering and Glory in the Life of the Christian

And that ought to be an immense comfort for us if we are obeying God and things haven't gotten easier but have actually gotten worse. If that is how God worked in the sufferings of Israel and if that is how God worked supremely in the sufferings of His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, don't you think that's how God will work in your trials and burdens and sorrows and pains? Or have you forgotten that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose? Have you forgotten that what men intend for evil, God intends for good. Have you forgotten that God is working His purposes out as year succeeds to year? Have you forgotten that the Judge of all the earth will do right? God is sovereign; it is a safe harbor. His perfect governing might, a place to rest secure amidst all the storms. You don't need to know why or how. You don't need to know when the light will dawn through your dark night of the soul. You need only to know that God is sovereign, that underneath are the everlasting arms and you, you believer in Jesus, you are safe. Your house is built on solid Rock. And though the rains come down and the floods come up, the house that's built on the Rock stands.

And so with your trials and your sufferings and your burdens, as you seek to be faithful, what should you do? Well certainly you must go to God like Moses and Aaron and press your complaint and plead the promises of God. Press Him to be faithful to His Word. But won't you hear again His promise as you do from chapter 6 verse 1. "Here's why I've brought you down into this darkness - that now you might see what I can do, what I will do, that I might show you My glory and grace, that every other support might be stripped from you, that utterly dependent on Me you might learn that His grace, that My grace is sufficient for you. Now you will see what I will do." Sometimes when you obey God things don't get better; they get worse. But He does what He does that He might be the sun in the solar system of your life. He says to us, "Now I want you to see what I will do. Let me show you My glory and My grace." May the Lord help us to believe His promise. Let us pray.

O Lord our God, we thank You that You are true, Your Word is sure, Your promises immovable. Forgive us for seeking other foundations upon which to build. Teach us, instead, to build our house on the solid Rock, to find safe harbor in the sheltering bay of Your perfect sovereignty, and to rest on Your Word. Help us, all of us in our various trials, to see what You will do and to give You all the glory, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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