

God Remembers: Reasons Not to Listen

Exodus 6:9–7:13

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Now would you take your copies of God's holy Word in your hands and turn with me in them to the book of Exodus, chapter 6; Exodus chapter 6 - page 49 in the church Bibles. Before we read, would you bow your heads with me as we pray. Let's pray together.

O Lord, Your Word is now spread before us. Would You open our hearts and our minds to understand and receive and rest upon Jesus Christ as He is offered to us in the Gospel. Would You give us ears to hear what Your Spirit is saying. Would You tune out the myriad of competing voices that demand our attention and help us, help us to listen to You, such that we turn from every counterfeit and every empty and broken cistern and turn instead to the Lord our refuge and delight and the fountain of never-failing and all-satisfying water. Would You do that please for Your own great glory in our midst, in Jesus' name. Amen.

The Background to Exodus 6 and 7

We're going to pick up our reading in verse 9 of chapter 6. A few words by way of reminder of the story thus far, however. You will recall that God has sent Moses back to Egypt to be the deliverer of His enslaved people. Moses has brought the message of God to the elders of Israel who receive that message with gladness and then Moses has now gone to Pharaoh the first time with the same message. But Pharaoh, unlike the elders of Israel, is distressed and rejects Moses' message and in fact makes the life of the Hebrew slaves much, much worse. Their backbreaking labor and the hostility of their taskmasters drive the elders of Israel now to go into Pharaoh and ask him for relief. And when that is denied them they turn on Moses and Aaron. Moses cries out to God at the end of chapter 5 for help, and the first eight verses of chapter 6 are God's response where the Lord provides a reminder for the people of Israel through His servant Moses of His faithfulness to His covenant promises and His resolve to be their deliverer.

And we pick up the reading in verse 9. Before we get there, however, I do want to

just point to the genealogy that stands right in the middle of the passage we'll be thinking about today. We will not be addressing the genealogy in this sermon so a quick word about the genealogy now. It is an account of the family tree; the genealogy particularly of Moses and Aaron and it is there to show us their significance in God's redemptive plan. And it does remind us as we read that God stands over all the events in this chapter, and indeed the events in the book of Exodus, as the sovereign Lord who works all things together for the good of those who love Him, who has organized and choreographed the generations to bring Moses and Aaron to precisely this point at precisely this moment to do this marvelous work on His behalf. So let's turn our attention now to the reading of God's Word; Exodus chapter 6 at verse 9. This is the very Word of Almighty God:

Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery. So the Lord said to Moses, "Go in, tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the people of Israel go out of his land." But Moses said to the Lord, "Behold, the people of Israel have not listened to me. How then shall Pharaoh listen to me, for I am of uncircumcised lips?" But the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron and gave them a charge about the people of Israel and about Pharaoh king of Egypt: to bring the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt.

These are the heads of their fathers' houses: the sons of Reuben, the firstborn of Israel: Hanoch, Pallu, Hezron, and Carmi; these are the clans of Reuben. The sons of Simeon: Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jachin, Zohar, and Shaul, the son of a Canaanite woman; these are the clans of Simeon. These are the names of the sons of Levi according to their generations: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari, the years of the life of Levi being 137 years. The sons of Gershon: Libni and Shimei, by their clans. The sons of Kohath: Amram, Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel, the years of the life of Kohath being 133 years. The sons of Merari: Mahli and Mushi. These are the clans of the Levites according to their generations. Amram took as his wife Jochebed his father's sister, and she bore him Aaron and Moses, the years of the life of Amram being 137 years. The sons of Izhar: Korah, Nepheg, and Zichri. The sons of Uzziel: Mishael, Elzaphan, and Sithri. Aaron took as his wife Elisheba, the daughter of Amminadab and the sister of Nahshon, and she bore him Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. The sons of Korah: Assir, Elkanah, and Abiasaph; these are the clans of the Korahites. Eleazar, Aaron's son, took as his wife one of the daughters of Putiel, and she bore him Phinehas. These are the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites by their clans.

These are the Aaron and Moses to whom the Lord said: "Bring out the people of Israel from the land of Egypt by their hosts." It was they who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt about bringing out the people of Israel from Egypt, this Moses and this Aaron.

On the day when the Lord spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt, the Lord said to Moses, "I am the Lord; tell Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I say to you." But Moses said to the Lord, "Behold, I am of uncircumcised lips. How will Pharaoh listen to me?"

And the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them." Moses and Aaron did so; they did just as the Lord commanded them. Now Moses was eighty years old, and Aaron eighty-three years old, when they spoke to Pharaoh.

Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "When Pharaoh says to you, 'Prove yourselves by working a miracle,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.'" So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

Amen, and we praise God that He has spoken to us in His holy Word.

A Refusal to Listen

On the night of April 14, 1912, Cyril Evans, who was working as the telegraph operator on the SS Californian on a voyage across the Atlantic, was ordered by her captain, Stanley Lord, to warn other ships in the area of the large ice field that had brought the SS California to a standstill. Evans quickly complied, warning all the ships that they were approaching the ice. Meanwhile in the wireless room aboard the Titanic, operators Jack Phillips and Harold Bride were trying to get through a backlog of messages to be sent to the United States when Phillips received Evans' ice-warning message. Because the Californian was too close, or was so close to the Titanic and Evans had his set turned to full power, he almost blew the headset off Phillips' head. Phillips, doubtless frustrated at the interruption, was furious with Evans and after rebuking him he completely failed

to relay the ice-warning to the bridge of the Titanic. And for his part, Cyril Evans, believing himself to have fulfilled his orders, turned off his set and went to bed. Needless to say, a short time later all warnings utterly unheeded, cruising and full steam, the Titanic struck an iceberg and sank to the bottom losing over 1,500 of her crew and passengers.

It is a tragic tale and the all too human responses of Phillips and Evans I think resonate with us. How easily we might have responded just like them - Phillips, angry at the overly loud transmission sounding in his ear, dismissing the warning out of hand. Evans, shrugging off the lack of appropriate response and heading off to bed with the Titanic sailing still into danger. The truth is, like these two men, most of us are afflicted with the dreadful disease of selective hearing, aren't we? We only listen some of the time and we tune out an awful lot of what does not suit us. As we return this morning to our ongoing studies in the book of Exodus, we've come to a passage that is concerned largely with the failure of people to listen to the Word of God; a failure to listen. Can you see what in the text? Take a look with me. Verse 9 - "They did not listen to Moses." Verse 12 of chapter 6 - "The people of Israel haven't listened to me. How then shall Pharaoh listen to me?" Or chapter 7 verse 4 - "Pharaoh will not listen to you." Or chapter 7 verse 13 - "Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he would not listen to them." So this is a passage about the different reasons people have for not listening to God when He speaks in His Word. As we will see, like Phillips' failure to listen to Cyril Evans' warning that night aboard the Titanic, an absolute refusal to listen to God when He speaks will have calamitous consequences for us. And so it really is imperative as we sail on into 2015 that we have ears open to the Word and warnings of Almighty God that our souls may be safe and secure in our journey.

Now you will have noticed as I highlighted the theme of not listening the three groups of people in our text who do not listen to God.

I. Israel: The Discouraged People of God

The first of them is there in verse 9 of chapter 6. It is the people of Israel. God has sent Moses to preach to Pharaoh back in chapter 5. Instead of responding to the message and letting Israel go free, Pharaoh makes their lives a misery. He requires them to meet their daily quota of brick production without straw. They have to gather straw for themselves. And when they fail to make their quotas, their taskmasters beat them and accuse them of laziness. When they seek redress from Pharaoh they are rebuffed and now they turn on Moses and Aaron for making their lives worse not better. "Some deliverers they turned out to be!" right? And in response, in chapter 6, God has given Moses a message of reassurance and encouragement for the people. Chapter 6:2-5 God tells them He has heard their cries and remembered His covenant with Abraham. In verses 6 to 8 of chapter 6 He promises, moreover, to rescue them from bondage and slavery, to take them to be His own people, and eventually to bring them into a

land of their very own. These are marvelous promises of free, extravagant grace coming to a suffering people.

But the people, we are told now in verse 9 of chapter 6, despite these marvelous promises, nevertheless refuse to listen to God. And we're told why. Look at verse 9 of chapter 6. "Moses spoke this to the people of Israel but they would not listen to Moses because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery." So here then first of all we meet the discouraged people of God. The discouraged people of God. They do not listen to God's Word through Moses because of their broken spirit and their harsh slavery. That expression, "broken spirit," gives us the emotional counterpart to their dreadful, outward circumstances. They are enslaved. And the phrase may well point to the kind of resigned defeatism that has simply given in to the perceived inevitability of their dreadful circumstances - no change possible; cynicism and hopelessness has overcome them. That's what it may mean.

Absorbed in Suffering, Rebuffing the Promises of God

But when you notice the response of the people of Israel thus far to the crisis in which they now find themselves, perhaps a better approach would be to read these words the way they're translated elsewhere in the Old Testament scriptures. Proverbs 14:29 for example - "Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly." That expression, "a hasty temper," translates the same Hebrew phrase rendered, "broken spirit," here in verse 9 of chapter 6. It's not just that the Israelites are cynical about the possibility of change that they are now resigned to their misery and its inevitability swallowing in self pity. No, it's more than that. Their misery has made them resentful and bitter. They are angry. "They did not listen to Moses because of their hasty temper and harsh slavery." They've become so absorbed in their sufferings that words of hope and promises of deliverance ring hollow in their ears. They are incapable, it seems at this point, of responding to the Word of God in any way except in anger.

And here, let's be honest, the Word of God is opening our hearts, isn't it? It is showing us the care we must take to handle suffering well. How easy to slide quietly into resentment as we dwell under prolonged trials as the Hebrews did here. How easy to adopt a defensive posture that cuts off hope and shuts down faith and silences good news and anyone who offers encouragement, we decide, "Well they're simply being trite and simplistic and naïve. No one understands. We're unique. Our circumstances are unlike anyone else's." And so we say "No" to God and "No" to His Word, even when that Word seeks to lift our heads from our sorrows to turn our eyes to focus on another world to come where the Lamb Himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Oh how careful we need to be not to let our sufferings become reasons not to listen, to become excuses for disobedience. Let's keep a close watch on our hearts in 2015, brothers and sisters, lest discouragement slowly rise quietly, imperceptivity like a slow leak flooding our hearts, drowning hope, and killing our capacity to embrace the

promises of God.

So here first, we see the discouraged people of God who even as the promises of God come to them, find justification in their sufferings for rebuffing the promises of grace. It's a warning to us, calling us to handle our sufferings with wisdom lest we allow them to generate in us resentment and resistance to the kindness and mercy of God. So the first group are the discouraged people of God.

II. Moses: A Fearful Servant of God

But then notice in verses 10 through 30 of chapter 6 how Moses himself responds to the Word of God. If the first group are the discouraged people of God, here now is a fearful servant of God. A fearful servant of God. The people have rejected Moses' encouragements, shunned his every attempt at comfort, but God nevertheless presses Moses to follow through on his mission and to go in to Pharaoh. Verse 11, "Go in, tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the people of Israel go out of his land." And Moses, true to form, at least as we've seen so far, begins to argue with God. Now Moses isn't like the Israelites here; he isn't wallowing in his misery, he isn't denying God's sovereignty, he isn't giving in to fatalism, but look at what he is doing. Verse 12 - "Moses said to the LORD, 'Behold, the people of Israel have not listened to me. How then shall Pharaoh listen to me, for I am of uncircumcised lips?'" And the same complaint is repeated in verses 28 to 30. God sends Moses with a message to Pharaoh and Moses responds, "Behold, I am of uncircumcised lips. How will Pharaoh listen to me?" If someone is uncircumcised it means they were not prepared, they're not fit for the Lord's service. Moses himself found that out the hard way back in chapter 4 verses 24 and following when, on his return journey to Egypt, he had left his son uncircumcised and the Lord almost took his life in judgment upon him. To be uncircumcised is to be unfit and unprepared for service in the hands of God. And that is what Moses is saying here about his lips. He's saying they're not fit for service. And he appeals to the response of the people of God to his ministry as evidence of his uselessness as he is now called to go in to Pharaoh. "If the people of God won't listen to me, what chance do I have with pagan Pharaoh?"

The Paralysis of a Misunderstood Mission

Now you see what is happening, of course. Moses is complaining to God about other people not listening when the truth is, he isn't listening himself. He has totally misconstrued and misunderstood God's call on his life. He seems to think, doesn't he, that it is his task to make Pharaoh agree with God or to make Israel agree with God. No wonder he feels incapable and ill qualified for the task. He labors under the impression that it is his responsibility to secure the right outcome for his mission. But Moses' work is not to make other people embrace God's message any more than that's our work. It's not to make other people

embrace the message; it is simply to be faithful in heralding the message. The response is God's business; it's not our business. It is God's work to open blind eyes and unstop dead ears. It is our work to proclaim the Word of the Lord. And so Moses is reluctant to obey because Moses thinks God is asking him to do what only God can do. And no wonder he is reluctant. Wouldn't you be? To be called to do something you believe only God can do - no wonder he argues with God.

"But," says Paul, 2 Corinthians 4:7, "we have this treasure in jars of clay, that the surpassing power may be seen to belong to God and not to us." The power belongs to God. The light of the knowledge of the glory of God that shines in the face of Jesus Christ penetrates the darkness by the degree and will of God. It is God who said, "Let light shine in the darkness," who has caused the light of the knowledge of the glory of God to shine on us in the face of Jesus Christ. Our task is to preach Christ crucified. It is God's work to unstop deaf ears and open blind eyes and take away hearts of stone and give hearts of flesh, to soften hard hearts or perhaps as we'll see to harden them. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5, "To the one we are a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life." That's what our preaching does. For some it's a word of judgment and others a word of mercy. It is God's business which we are, when. Our business is the same as Paul's - "to implore you on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God."

You know, if we think it is our task - and here I'm speaking particularly to those of us charged with the ministry of the Word of God but it is relevant to us all as we seek to be faithful witnesses - if we think it is our task to make other people believe, we are building into the very foundations of our thinking the beginning of burnout and the paralyzing insecurity that inevitably follows that conviction. It is a call you can never fulfill because it is not your call in the first place. It is the work of God. Moses will have to learn, as must we all, that God will do God's work in God's way and in God's time. Our task is not to act instead of God; our task is to be a willing instrument in the hand of God. And so first, the people of God refuse to listen to Him because of their discouragements and now secondly, God's servant refuses to listen because of insecurity and fear. He has misunderstood his mission and it paralyzes him.

III. Pharaoh: The Rebellious Enemy of God

But then in the third place, notice Pharaoh himself. Look at chapter 7 with me. In verses 1 to 7, God gave Moses and Aaron their brief and in 8 to 13 we begin to see the action play out. They're to go and repeat the call of God to Pharaoh to release the people of Israel from bondage. But verse 3 - "God will harden Pharaoh's heart and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you." God will do it in order to execute judgment on Pharaoh and on Egypt and display His power and His glory to the world. When they do go back to Pharaoh with that message they are required, just as God

anticipates they would be, to perform an authenticating miracle. So they cast Aaron's staff on the ground, it turns into a serpent - this was the sign that God had given them back in chapter 4 that had been so impressive to the elders of Israel - but in verses 11 and 12, look at them, verses 11 and 12, it's quite clear that Pharaoh is not at all impressed, is he? Why, his wise men and magicians can perform precisely the same miracle many times over and soon the ground is covered with serpents. The serpent, you may remember, is the emblem of the rule of Pharaoh. And you can see the sly grin spread across Pharaoh's face, the mocking sneer. "So Yahweh can turn a staff into a snake? Wait until you see what the gods of Egypt can do."

A Sober Warning

But then, watch what happens. Verse 12, Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. It's a dramatic, crystal clear picture of the victory of the power of God over all and every counterfeit; the claim of every false god. The Lord reigns and those who stand against Him will face His judgment. His victory is assured. That's the message to Pharaoh. If he will contest with the Lord, he will lose. And yet, verse 13, though the message is crystal clear, "Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he would not listen to them as the Lord has said." If the people of God don't listen because of discouragements and the servant of God doesn't listen because of insecurity and fear, Pharaoh, the enemy of God, won't listen because his rebellious heart has been hardened. His rebellious heart has been hardened. And to be clear, it is not that Pharaoh has hardened his own heart, but rather God hardens his heart. It's not that Pharaoh didn't believe and therefore he hardened his heart; it is rather that God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would not believe. It's an act of judicial wrath upon this wicked man. It is an act that serves the wider designs of God's saving purpose. As Paul puts it in Romans 9:17, the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "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. So then he has mercy on whomever he wills and on whomever he wills he hardens."

God isn't simply in the business - brothers and sisters, listen; friends and visitors, listen - God is not simply in the business of taking away hard, stony hearts and giving hearts of flesh. He isn't simply in the business of plucking from destruction sinners and bringing them into His saving mercy. He is also in the business of judicially hardening rebel sinners' hearts that they may be handed over to their own rebellion to face His wrath and curse forever. It is the most solemn moment in this passage. You see God hardening Pharaoh's heart. Here is a sober warning for you today if you are not a Christian. Those who willfully deny the Gospel may yet come to that point where they are rendered in the judgment of God, they are rendered incapable of responding to the Gospel even though they continue to hear it. God is going to get glory by you, whether by your judgment or by your deliverance. He will be exalted; He will be exalted in the judgment of Egypt and in Pharaoh as well as in the deliverance of Israel. But those who

persistently resist Him may well find themselves hardened and incapable of responding to the offers of mercy when next they hear it. It is never safe to say, "Not yet," to the call of the Gospel. It is never safe to say, "Not yet," to the call of the Gospel. God may yet harden your heart if you walk from here refusing the claims of Jesus Christ. It is not yet too late, however; there may yet be time for you. The wrath and curse of God, you know, has already fallen on another that it need not fall on you. God made His Son a perfect sin-bearer in your place if you would but trust Him. So don't expose your heart a moment longer than you need to the possibility of judicial hardening. Let Pharaoh's example chill and warn you to flee the wrath to come.

A Glorious Encouragement

So there's a sober warning here, but there's also I think rather, perhaps strangely, real encouragement for the other two groups that we've already mentioned - for the people of God and for the Gospel servants, in this same event - the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Remember the causes of Israel's rejection of God and His Word? They allowed their sufferings to breed in them resentment and resistance to God's kindness. When Moses spoke to them about what God is going to do, they took one look at Pharaoh and they saw an unmoving tyrant who seemed to wield absolute dominion over their lives and they were cynical about all possibility of salvation. But now here at last we learn the truth. The heart of Pharaoh is held in the hand of God and God has been at work all along, even in their trials, to dispose of Pharaoh and of Israel and of Moses and Aaron for His glory and for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Here we are reminded that the hearts of men and women, the hearts of everyone in this room, are held in the hand of a sovereign God. And so every trial, every affliction, every difficulty that comes our way is not outside of His purpose, beyond the reach of His arm. No, here we learn it is all deployed in His wisdom and in His kindness - strange, sore kindness it may at times be, yet kindness it is for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose. Likewise, Moses' insecurities, he thinks he has to somehow convince Pharaoh. Well now he is told again, "No, no, Pharaoh's heart is My business, Moses. His heart is in My hand. Your task is to preach the words; My task is to deal with His heart." Here's the antidote to insecurity, to fear about what others will think of you - be faithful to God's call in your life. Other people are God's business and He will get the glory no matter what. You be faithful to the task that has been given to you.

So three reasons not to listen - discouragement among the people of God, insecurity and fear among the servants of God, and a rebellious hard heart among the enemies of God. But behind and over them all do you see stands the perfect sovereignty of God Himself who works in all things to give us peace and dispel our fears and to get glory for His name in the salvation and in the judgment of us all. May the Lord bless to us the ministry of His Word. Shall we pray together?

Father, thank You for Your Word, Your warnings to us. Help us to listen lest Titanic-like we cruise onward in ignorance into catastrophe. Please would You work on every heart here that none might be hardened but that all might be softened and drawn to bend the knee anew to Jesus. Would You do this for Your own great glory? In Jesus' name, amen.

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