

## The Foremen Grumble Against Moses

Exodus 5:15–6:1

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

*January 14, 2001*

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus, chapter 5. Last week we looked at Exodus 4:27 through 5:14, and we noted several themes there. In God's approaching Aaron, before Moses ever had to go find Aaron, and tell him that God was sending him on into Egypt, God provided tremendous providential encouragement to Moses. He showed Moses again that He would be with him, He would provide for him, every step of the way. So before Moses began this difficult calling that he was going to become involved in, God provides him an encouragement at the outset in verses 27 and 28 of chapter 4.

We also noted in verses 29 through 31 that as the people heard Moses' word and heard of God's compassion to Israel, they responded in two excellent ways. They believed, and they worshipped. And that's always the proper order of evangelical worship. To believe in the Lord's word and to worship Him. But we also noted, even as we read those words, knowing what's coming up that we said that the great challenge that the children of Israel had was not Pharaoh. It wasn't necessarily their bondage. It was to believe, to believe in God's Word, to believe in God's promises. We're going to begin to see even tonight what a challenge that was.

We also said as we looked at chapter 5, verses 1 through 5, as we saw this audience between Aaron and Moses and Pharaoh, that the story of the Exodus is about God manifesting His own glory. In the story of the Exodus, though, God is going to redeem His people out of captivity, and do great good to them, but above all, He is going to make sure that Egypt knows that He is the Lord. Now, He is going to cause Egypt to know that He is the Lord in a different way than He causes Israel to know that He is the Lord. He's going to cause Egypt to know that He is the Lord in His sovereign judgment. He's going to cause Israel to know that He is the Lord in His merciful redemption. But no matter what, everyone is going to know that He is the Lord.

Now Pharaoh's response we saw in verses 6 through 14. He immediately begins a plan to discredit Moses and Aaron in the eyes of the children of Israel. It's a brilliant plan, and it comes very close to working, at least at the human level. But God has other plans. We need to see in Pharaoh the factor of Satan at work against the people of God. And even as we see him at work there, we need to

factor that in our own lives as well. That brings us to the passage that we are looking at tonight. That's Exodus 5, beginning in verse 15. This is God's Word for you. Hear it expectantly.

Then the foreman of the Sons of Israel came and cried out to Pharaoh, saying, "Why do you deal this way with your servants? There is no straw given to your servants, yet they keep saying to us make bricks, and behold your servants are being beaten; but it is the fault of your own people." But he said, "You are lazy, very lazy. Therefore, you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.' So, go now and work, for you shall be given no straw, yet you must deliver the quota of bricks." And the foreman of the sons of Israel saw that they were in trouble because they were told you must not reduce your daily amount of bricks. When they left Pharaoh's presence, they met Moses and Aaron as they were waiting. And they said to them, may the Lord look upon you and judge you, for you have made us odious in Pharaoh's sight, and in the sight of his servants to put a sword in their hand to kill us. Then Moses returned to the Lord, and said, "Oh Lord, why hast thou brought harm to this people. Why didst Thou ever send me. Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Thy Name, he has done harm to this people. And Thou hast not delivered thy people at all."

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's Holy and Inspired Word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we ask that You would give us listening ears, quiet hearts before Your Word, to see what You would say to Your people by Your spirit. We ask, O Lord, that we would exalt You, that we would recognize Your sovereignty, and that above all, we would recognize Your wisdom and compassion as far above our own. And we pray that the result would be trusting and obedient hearts, rendered in your service, in Jesus' name we ask it, Amen.

Last week as we studied the first edition of the bricks without straw incident, we saw the people of God respond to Moses and Aaron's initial announcement of God's redemptive plan in exactly the way we would have hoped. They believed, and they worshipped. That was, however, immediately followed by their being afflicted. Have you ever experienced that in your own Christian walk, where you took a step of faith or obedience, you responded to God's clear guidance from His word, and the immediate result was bad. It seems as if your faithfulness was rewarded with a rebuke. And so also the people of Israel had believed the Word that the Lord had told them by Moses, they worshipped the Lord God of Israel, and immediately, they find themselves in hot water. It is that affliction that sets the stage for the passage we're studying tonight. Obedience is not always accompanied by immediate success. And we are never to judge the Lord's evaluation of our faithfulness by the immediate circumstances that is in that faithfulness. Sometimes, God in His grace and mercy decides immediately to reward us for that faithfulness, and to visit us with His favor. Sometimes in God's

grace and mercy, He decides not to reward us immediately for our faithfulness, and visits upon us instead trials to test our faith and grow us in trust.

The key issue throughout this passage, and we'll see it especially as we look at verses 15 through 18, is whom will Israel serve? Whom will Israel worship? Whom will Israel seek for help in time of hardship? So let's look at what God has to say to us in this passage, beginning in verses 15 through 18.

### **I. God's call to us to serve Him only is not always easy, but He demands our loyalty and devotion.**

Here, the foreman of the sons of Israel, having been given an impossible task to not only gather straw for the making of bricks, but to make bricks with inferior stubble, and to make as many as they were making before, having first to gather straw which was inferior, and having to endure many bricks breaking, and still having to make the same number of bricks as previously. In that situation they come to Pharaoh for help. This is a very important thing, because in this passage, God sets up a grand tension that is going to feature largely in this story: The Lord or Pharaoh. Whom will Israel serve? God's call to us is not always easy. His call to us to serve Him is not always easy. But He demands loyalty and devotion.

Interestingly, in Exodus 2, and I'd invite you to turn there, verse 23, Israel had cried to God for help. Exodus 2:23. "It came about in the course of many days that the king of Egypt died, and the sons of Israel sighed because of their bondage and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God. In this passage, the same language is used, but now the foreman of the sons of Israel cry out not the Lord, but to Pharaoh. You say, ah, you're reading a little bit too much into that. Well, turn forward to Exodus 14, chapter 10. The only other time in the entire book of Exodus that the language of the children of Israel crying out is used is found in Exodus 14:10 as the army of Egypt is approaching the children of Israel at the Red Sea, and we read this: "As Pharaoh drew near, the sons of Israel looked, and behold the Egyptians were marching after them and they became frightened and so the sons of Israel cried out to the Lord. The Lord wanted them to cry out to Him, not to Pharaoh. Originally, they cried out to the Lord. In their hardship they cried out to Pharaoh. After learning their lesson at the Red Sea, they cried out to the Lord in hardship. The Lord answered, Pharaoh didn't. What's Moses telling you? God wants your devotion, your loyalty, your trust in the time of hardship.

Notice also, in verses 15 and 16 of Exodus 5, that the foreman of the sons of Israel repeatedly refer to themselves speaking to Pharaoh, as your servants. Three times in Exodus 5:15, your servants; twice in Exodus 5:16, your servants. This is significant, though it was certainly civic protocol to refer to yourself in a subservient sort of way to the great king of Egypt. It adds to the sense that Israel

is conflicted in the matter of whom to serve. No man can serve two masters, as Jesus said. The foremen are emphasizing their devotion, their loyalty to Pharaoh. "We are your servants, we are your servants," they say. Notice also in verse 16 the basic complaint of the foreman to Pharaoh is that the system is unfair. But of course the problem is that's the way Pharaoh wanted it to be. He had designed it to be unfair precisely so that they, the people of Israel would reject the leadership of Moses and Aaron. And so, though the children of Israel or the foreman of the children of Israel cry out to Pharaoh, note that Pharaoh does not hear their cry, he does not answer them, he does not aid them. In fact, he scorns them and demeans them and accuses them of being lazy and accuses their laziness as being their motive for wanting to go out and worship. The only reason you want to go out and worship, he says, is because you're lazy. You don't want to do any work. False gods, my friends, are unforgiving taskmasters. They may have a certain appeal at first, but they will always exact a heavy toll. The children of Israel are learning that lesson right now.

Notice also, Pharaoh's command. After he hears them, he says something very interesting. "Now," he says, "go serve." Let me ask you something. Keep those two words in mind. Go serve. Of course, his point here in verse 17 is go serve me. "Go work, go back to work," he is saying. This again is highlighting the main issue in the Exodus account. Who is it that the Hebrews are to serve? Pharaoh or the Lord. And this is what is before us again.

In fact, the language of serve is used several times in reference to precisely this. Turn with me to Exodus 4, verse 22 and 23. Notice there as God tells Moses what He is to say to Pharaoh. He says this, "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord. Israel is My Son, My first born. So I said to you, "Let My Son go that He may serve Me."' This is the Lord saying He wants Israel let go so that they can serve Him. Now Pharaoh is saying to Israel here in Exodus 5, "Go serve me." Now look again in Exodus 8, verse 1. "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh and say to him, "Thus says the Lord. Let My people go that they may serve Me."' There's a lordship battle going on in Exodus. We might even say there's a lordship controversy going on in Exodus. Who will be the Lord? Pharaoh or God? God is calling on His people to serve Him. The Lord God demands the complete and allegiance of His people, and He calls upon them to look to them for help. And this, by the way, is the repeated story in the history of Israel, as Israel looks to other nations for help against their enemies instead of looking to the Lord God. As that esteemed theologian, Bob Dylan, once said, "You may serve the devil, or you may serve the Lord, but you all got to serve somebody." Exodus is about calling the people of God to serve Him, for we all have to serve somebody. The Israelite foremen here are showing their true colors as they cry out to Pharaoh for help. It's the Egyptian monarch who is the recipient of their plea, not the Lord, the God of Israel. They are not properly recognizing the authority and the power and the sovereignty of the Lord.

Is that something that you struggle with? Do you run to Christ last of all? Is He your last resort when you're in a fix. You finally say, "Well, nothing else has worked, I guess I'll go to Him." This is still a struggle for the people of God, as it was in this day. That's the first thing that we see. God in this great passage. In this contest with Pharaoh is calling on his people to serve only to show him loyalty and devotion, and to look to Him in their time of need.

## **II. God's call to His people to serve Him only is not always easy for the leaders of His church.**

Secondly, in verses 19 through 21, we see the response of the foreman of the sons of Israel to being totally stymied in this meeting with Pharaoh. And here again, we see that God's call to His people to serve is not always easy for the leaders of the church. It's not only hard on the people when they face immediate affliction in response to their faithfulness, or in the context of their faithfulness, it's also hard on the leaders of God's people who called them to faithfulness.

Remember the foremen were something like middlemen. They were Hebrews themselves, but they had apparently been handpicked by the Egyptians to serve as sub-taskmasters over their own people. And so they had a vested interest in the system working as it did. They got certain rewards as certain quotas were met. And so having realized that that little neat and tidy system was now wrecked because of Moses and Aaron's audience with Pharaoh, now they encounter Moses and Aaron, and they hurl verbal abuse at them.

In verse 21, you can see that they basically blame Moses and Aaron for all their problems. In verse 19, they recognize that they are in trouble, but in verse 21, they say, "And you know who the source of this trouble is?" Not the taskmasters, it's not Pharaoh, it's Moses, Aaron. Then they're the problem. Can you hear the words of the King of Israel? Who are you? You troubler of Israel. And here again the foremen are accusing Moses and Aaron of being the troublers of Israel. They do it with a very hard word, because the prayer or the words that they use actually reflect the language of the traditional prayer of an innocent suffer. You will find language like this in the Psalms where David, having been wrongly dealt with, prays that God would judge those who had wrongly dealt with him. And now here is Moses, who has given up much for his people, being told that he has wronged the people of God, and hearing his own people say, "We call for God to judge you for what you've done." That must have hurt.

It's also interesting, isn't it, that the foremen say that Moses and Aaron have caused them literally to stink in the eyes of Pharaoh. Isn't it interesting that in just a few verses, Moses will cause the Nile to stink before the Lord. Once again we see God sovereignly responding to the strategies of Satan and trumping it. For the Nile was divine, and God by His servant Moses will cause it to be odorous in the eyes of the Egyptians and before Him, showing again that He is the Almighty One, the powerful One. Moses and Aaron are faithful, and yet they meet with the

immediate rejection and with the opposition of the people of God. Does that refrain sound familiar to you?

Now that the attempt at liberation had failed the Israelite leaders complained to Moses and Aaron that they had only provided Pharaoh with a sword to kill them, it appeared that the prophet Moses was not going to be honored in his own land. And that's how it often goes with the prophets. Think of Jeremiah. Think of the Lord Jesus Christ, who was rejected by His own people. This, among other things, will remind us that Israel has no room for boasting when the Exodus is accomplished. Israel resists the Exodus almost as much as Egypt resists the Exodus. So when the Exodus is accomplished, it is clear that it's been done by God, not by Israel. Israel hasn't even cooperated very well with the Exodus. And so God's glory will be highlighted even in the stubbornness of His people, but it's hard on Moses and Aaron. And it often is for faithful servants of the Lord.

### **III. God is growing Moses into a man with His own heart for His people.**

Finally, look at verse 22 to the end of the chapter, and then the first verse of chapter 6. Moses' response, and you can imagine how devastated he would have been after this encounter, is to retreat into solitude with the Lord. But in that solitude and in that encounter with the Lord, Moses, and I choose this word carefully, Moses accuses the Lord. That's exactly what he does. He doesn't even complain to the Lord, he accuses the Lord. And yet, and I want you see how carefully and gently the Lord deals with His servant, and how the Lord patiently and kindly replies to Him.

Moses resorts to the Lord Himself. In that, He did right, and Israel did wrong. When Israel was in the midst of hardship, she had gone to Pharaoh. When Moses faces hardship, he now flees to the Lord. He is angry with the Lord, but at least he flees to the Lord. The protest of Moses is one of the most amazing passages in all of the Bible. In this passage, Moses says three things to God.

Look at verse 23. First, he says, "Lord, You are responsible for this evil." Now I know that you are looking for those words. But he says it in a question. He says, "Oh Lord, why have you brought harm to this people, but don't be fooled by the form of the question. You see what Moses is saying. "Lord, you are responsible for this." The very question assumes that God must answer for having done something wrong. Why have You done evil to this people, Moses says.

Secondly, he says, "Lord, You shouldn't have sent me." Again, he does it in the form of a question. "Why did you ever send me?" But behind that question is actually a charge. "Lord, You should never have sent me in the first place." And then it gets worse.

Thirdly, he says, "Lord, You failed on the promise that You made, and you've made things worse than they were. And again, he forms that charge with a question, but here is the language. "Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he has done harm to this people, and You have not delivered Your People at all."

Now this is a fascinating exchange. But I want you see two things that are happening simultaneously. One bad and one good. First, Moses is wrong to accuse the Lord. And in accusing the Lord wrongly, Moses is revealing what we often do when we don't like God's providence. Moses accuses God here of being unconcerned for His people. Wait a minute, time out. Who had had to convince Moses to go to Egypt to help his people? Had Moses done so willingly? I heard Your word. Send whomever You want. Not me. Now wait a second. Moses is acting as if he is the one with the heart of compassion. So often, when we face trials or worse, when we see those that we love with all our hearts face trials, our first reaction is to think, Lord God, how could You do this. Because for a moment Satan blinds us to the deviousness and the wickedness of our own hearts, and lets us believe that we are more compassionate than God. And that's precisely what Moses is doing here. "Lord, if I were God, I wouldn't do this. And yet only a few days before, Moses had to be coached to come to the aid of his people. Who cared more about the people of God? God or Moses? There's no comparison. There's no question. God had the heart for His People, and yet Moses thinks he's more loving. Beware when you think that you are more loving than God.

I remember talking to a high school student, one of the most intelligent young people that I ever had the privilege to work with in a youth group, and we were studying the doctrine of hell together during Wednesday night Bible studies. Nancy said to me, "You've got to be kidding. You can't really believe that God sends people to Hell." "Well, Nancy, it's an unpleasant thought but the Bible says that is the case." "It can't be wrong. God is too loving, He just couldn't do that." "Well, the Bible is very clear about this. Let's just go back and study it again." We talked about it for a long time, and finally, I said, "Let me get this straight. You're a sinner, right?" "Sure, I'm a sinner." "And God has shown His mercy to you and Christ can save you?" "Absolutely." "And has God ever done anything wrong to you?" "Absolutely not." "And do you do things wrong, day by day?" "Oh yes, I do, I'm disobedient to my parents, I fail in promises that I have made, I sin in thought and word and deed, many times a day." "Okay, let me get this straight. You're worried that God will do something wrong?" Long pause. "Well, I guess you're right." You see, that's the way it always is with us. We're worried that God will do something wrong. And that's precisely what Moses is doing here. He's playing the 'more compassionate than thou' card with God. And my friend, that card always gets aced by God, because you can't even comprehend the compassion of God. That's one thing that's happening here.

But there's something else here that just boggles my mind. It's happening at the same time. Do you realize that even though Moses lashes out against God, do

you realize that God, even in that, is building His heart in Moses? I mean, Moses just a few weeks before, had had to be coaxed into going to the children of Egypt. Now his heart is genuinely broken when he sees his people being treated in the way they are being treated. You see, it's not that Moses is more compassionate than God. It's that Moses is being brought up to speed, with the pre-existent, with the eternal compassion of God for His People. Moses is being molded into the image, into the heart of His God in compassion for His people; to the point that over and over in the book of Exodus, Moses, at crucial points, because of his heart for God's people, worked in him by God's Grace, will intercede for the people of God, and call on God to show them favor even though they don't deserve it. Though Moses doesn't know it here, as his heart is breaking for his people, he is merely emulating the eternal love and compassion of God for the children of Israel.

The Lord responds mercifully. In mercy, he tell Moses, and you'll see it in verse 1 of Exodus 6, then the Lord said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh, for under compulsion he shall let them go. And under compulsion, he shall drive them out of this land." The Lord in His mercy tells Moses that Pharaoh will not only let Israel go, he'll drive them out of the land. He will be delighted to be rid of them when the Lord is finished. God is in control, not Pharaoh.

Now let's go back to a word that Pharaoh said in the passage. You remember when Pharaoh said, "Go serve." Do you know that Pharaoh is going to use that phrase again, go serve, but the next time that Pharaoh says those words, it will mean go serve the Lord. It is by God's sovereignty that His People will be delivered, and He will cause the wrath of man to praise Him. He is awesome in His works and in all His ways, and we never, ever have as caring a heart for broken people as God does. But God wants us to have more and more His heart, and to acknowledge more and more His Heart, and to recognize that He is the One who is coming to the rescue of His People. It is simply our privilege to tell that story. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we honor You, You are awesome, You are beautiful, You are lovely. Help us to love You above all else, and by Your Grace to trust in You in every circumstance, in Jesus' name, Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

*This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.*

*Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with*

*the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.*

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

### **Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine***

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).