

Title: God, what on earth are you doing in heaven?

Text: Exodus 5

Theme: Trusting God, even when it doesn't "work"

Series: Exodus #7

Prop Stmt. God takes us through deep waters as part of our learning and part of his plan.

Read Text:

Our lives are so full of disappointments that we often assume that we are experts in predicting failure. "I don't even know why I bother to study, I know I am going to fail." I don't even know why I should try to be nice, they are only going to do it again." And of our course for the Lions faithful – Why do we even begin to think that a draft choice is going to make any difference at all?!

One of the reasons why Exodus 5 resonates so deeply within us, is because we live there. At times, life, as a follower of God is portrayed as a cruise ship, where every situation turns out wonderful, every problem is resolved, every challenge is overcome, and everyone is happy, happy, happy. When that picture is painted for us, and when our lives do not match it, then we either assume that there is something fundamentally wrong with us (that we usually don't want to admit) or there is something fundamentally flawed with Christianity. The happy, no-problem view of Christianity is wrong.

There are enormous challenges that God takes us through. They are gut-wrenching, heart-breaking, idol-destroying, soul-refining, self-humbling, experiences. Just like you I want to run away from them. I don't like going through times of being disappointed, and being misunderstood and being let down by God.

But, in those valleys, I learn. In those valleys, I am stripped of all self-reliance. In those valleys I am shocked to see how weak and frail my faith can be. Oh, I hate to see that about myself. I need this text. You need this text. This chapter and the truths of this text, are needed for your soul. I believe that this text is a text that you will return to again and again, until you graduate from the school of sanctification and enter His presence.

The story that is related in this chapter focuses upon two encounters with Pharaoh. **(slide)** Each meeting brings about two results. The first meeting is described in verses 1-5, with the results of that described in verses 6-9, and even more so in verses 10-14. Meeting #2 takes place in verses 15-18, with two subsequent results that finish out the chapter. Analyzing the organization of the text is good so we can see the big idea that is being presented, but this is not a text that is to be studied only by grammatical analysis. This is a chapter that we put into the mouths of our souls. We chew this. We taste this. We swallow this. We let this chapter settle into the digestive system of our being, because we live in these truths. And if you are not in this chapter today, you probably will be tomorrow or this week.

You know that there is a drama-like quality to the narrative portions of the Bible. The drama in this chapter is high drama. It is deeply emotional because the pendulum swings

from one end to the other. And the ends are so far apart, and the swing goes so far, that it looks like it is going to rip us apart. The chapter begins with dreams, that are beautiful dreams, dreams in living color, dreams with rich greens and brilliant blues, and exploding yellows, God-given dreams of freedom, dreams of farms, of safety, of our own home, our own place, dreams, like sails that for a bit of time are filled with the air of anticipation and sail over the harsh reality that has defined life for these Israelites for several hundred years. But these dreams are shattered into thousands of pieces that fall back to the earth and are crushed and ground into the reality of the ground where the cold, harsh and biting wind of life scatters the shards and fragments of idealism away. There is no poetry in this chapter. There is no singing at the end of the day. There is no comfort found even in at least having the dream, for even the act of dreaming is severely punished. The brightness of God's promises is often blocked by the dark clouds of circumstances. "Hope deferred makes the heart sick." (Prov.13.12)

1. Following God does not guarantee things going your way. (1-14)

Chapter 4 ends with promise, hope, gratefulness and worship but chapter 5 ends with a guttural bitterness that rips relationships apart. Circumstantially, we can see why. The response of the people to Moses' news and the signs he performs at the end of chapter 4 is like a terminally ill patient who has been given a glimmer of hope. You hold on to that news with incredible tenacity because it is all that you have. For hundreds of years the Israelites had been occupying and living in and growing in a land that was not theirs. They were prisoners in someone else's country, living for someone else, working for someone else, all without any real hope of change. It was on their backs, that Egypt had been able to make itself a powerful empire. Slave labor has built many an empire. But, where could they go? What could they do? Pharaoh was too powerful. And now, in the midst of their bondage, in the midst of what seems to be permanent bondage comes this good news that is accompanied by signs and miracles. Only a miracle is going to set them free from slavery. (4.29-31) Now, a sign is what they are given.

Can you just hear the Israelites talking? This is the day that Moses and Aaron are going to talk to Pharaoh. You should have seen the miracles that Moses did in front of the elders. If anyone can get us out of here, it is these two. I wonder if Pharaoh will beg forgiveness, I wonder if he will order his army to give us protection and an escort? I would give anything to see the look on his face when he sees those miracles. The anticipation grows. The people go to work that day with lighter hearts and a bounce in their step; after all this could be the last day that they have to work for Pharaoh.

The scene that is unfolding for us carries with it another theme. It had been a long time since Moses had been back here in Egypt and in the palace. Have you ever gone back to where you grew up?

Here the scene is heightened by the fact that these two men are over 80 years of age and they are standing before what is probably the greatest king of the ANE at that time. That is pretty heady or intimidating - however you look at it. Moses remembered this impressive red granite and massive limestone columns engraved with the hieroglyphics in

which as a boy he was trained to read. He could not help but wonder as he and Aaron made their way to stand before Pharaoh, was everything from the past 80 years for this moment? If it was - it all made sense now. So, with the expectations of a nation, with the memories of his childhood being reignited by all of the smells, sounds and sights and with the weight of the world resting upon his shoulders, Moses along with his brother Aaron, go boldly before Pharaoh. And verse 1 is bold. (read) All of the excuses that Moses gave to God, all of the hesitation as to why he was not the man for the job now seem to be gone.

Now, back in 3.19, God had told Moses, that this was not going to be a 4-game sweep by any means. Pharaoh is not going to roll over and play dead. He will not let my people go "unless a mighty hand compels him." Sometimes, in the euphoria of a short-term success we forget the nature of the battle and we forget the warnings that God gives us that all those who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. We forget that we are the scorned of the world, the refuse of society, and that our king was crowned with thorns and our leader was nailed to a cross. We forget that following the Savior demands that we go to him outside the camp, where it can be lonely and hard. It is pretty obvious that this is exactly what happened to Moses.

Pharaoh responds exactly as you would expect him to, which all seems like an enormous surprise to Moses and Aaron. (v.2) I believe that in many ways verse 2 is the key verse to this entire section if not to the entire book. In fact, I think that the rest of the book of Exodus is spent answering this question. The question that Pharaoh asks has two interrelated parts. 1. Who is the LORD, 2. Why should I obey Him. Since Pharaoh did not know who God really was, he saw no need to obey Him. In the Egyptian culture, the Pharaoh was a god. He was certainly above ordinary mortals. In official Egyptian writing the Pharaoh was called the "perfect god" and one courtier even described him as the "great god." When Pharaoh said what he said in verse 2, he was refusing to recognize the name of God as a legitimate God. In refusing to recognize the name of God as a legitimate God, he did not recognize the demand – at all!

Besides, the demand came from the God of slaves. Who pays any attention to the God of the weak, helpless, and inferior? We recognize power! We are impressed with empires, armies and wealth. If the people are weak, then the God must be weak. Think of it, what kind of a God would appeal to the Pharaoh to "let my people go?" That's absurd. If this God was so powerful, why wouldn't He just do it Himself?

The change of tone and approach is extremely abrupt. Like a bug on a windshield, Moses and Aaron are smashed. (v.3) They are outmatched and overwhelmed by Pharaoh. They now ask apologetically if they can go for a little Pilgrimage for three days. The reason given is that if they do not do that, then Yahweh will be upset with them. Do you see the change? They are no longer commanding. Their confidence has been stripped. They stand, almost naked in the court, they are outclassed by this Pharaoh, and these two men are reduced to begging favors from this powerful superior. We feel pity on them. We are embarrassed for them. Humiliated they are reduced to scrambling for words and stammering for something to say. They came in on the offense, and are demoralized in

every way. But the downward spiral continues. It is like a boxer who charges his opponent, only to be crushed with a stunning blow. Pharaoh, having taken the initiative back responds with a verbal flurry that puts Moses and Aaron on the mat.

(Read 4-5) Dripping with sarcasm, Pharaoh observes, that if these people have enough time and energy to plan trips into the desert to worship, then they have enough time and energy to work a little harder. He will ensure that there is no energy left in these slaves to even think about leaving. You can see why this guy is Pharaoh. There is no negotiating, no board room diplomacy, no discussions and compromises. The severity of his “take no prisoners” approach is seen with the immediate implementation of his command. He makes no idle threats. You do not mess with his time, or with his source of free labor. This empire has been built on the backs of these people and he has no intention of stopping that now. (read 6-9)

The consequences are immediate and severe. Straw was an important ingredient in the brick making process. The straw was chopped and mixed with the clay gathered from the banks of the Nile. The straw would help hold the clay together in the brick making process, and then when the straw decayed, it released “a humic acid similar to glutamic or galloanic acid”¹ that acted as a binding agent. The pyramids (**slide**) stand to this day as a testimony to their durability. The straw that had been provided for them was no longer given. Apparently, this straw was grown in other parts of the country, so the people in addition to making the same number of bricks as before, were now given the additional burden of finding and gathering the straw. Guess what? Pharaoh was not kidding!

I am sure that Moses and Aaron could not believe what they were hearing. The meeting could not have gone worse. Verses 10-14 are painful to read. The impact of this new directive was devastating.

Dads, we are warned in Ephesians 6, not to exasperate our children. When you give them a job to do that they cannot do because you have not trained them to do it, and then you punish them for not doing it right, you might as well just wring them out like a sponge, until every drop of hope has been squeezed out. And when their hope is gone, they just fill up with an angry despair.

Notice the organizational model presented in these verses. The slave drivers are Egyptian, but the foremen are Hebrew. (**slide**) Ancient Egyptian artifacts illustrate this scene. It is a twisted form of representative control. And it is very effective. If the workers do not perform, then their leaders are punished. They are beaten and interrogated (v.14). There is a lot of evil in this text. If a leader is killed, then a worker is selected to take his place. You are forced to work under threat of your friend being punished. The demands are so unreasonable that they cannot possibly be true. So, the foremen make an appeal to Pharaoh.

¹ C.F. Nims, “Bricks without Straw?” Biblical Archaeologist 13 [1950]: 22-28, cited in Walter Kaiser, Exodus, Expositors Bible Commentary, Vol. 2, p. 337.

The scene is pathetic. Moses and Aaron are not even in view now. It has not gone well. Following God does not guarantee things will go your way, now. You want to say to them, “hang in there.” But it gets even worse. There is another meeting with the Pharaoh and the result only confirms the bitterness, all of which illustrates that

2. **Following God does not guarantee that people will support you.** (15-23)

In the second meeting, the foremen blame the slave drivers, although they probably know that it was Pharaoh’s order. In turn, he accuses them of being lazy. You keep saying that you want to go and to service to your God. If you have energy to do that, then you have energy to do more service for me. Pharaoh, instead of trembling before the miracles of Moses, comes out stronger than ever. This man appears to be impervious. Instead of bringing deliverance, Moses only succeeds in bringing more hardship. It is an awful weight to try to carry. The foremen do not hide their contempt for Moses and Aaron. They did not ask for Moses and Aaron to do this, just as Moses did not ask to do this either. You have to admit that Pharaoh has done a masterful job of dividing loyalties. There’s no way, the Hebrews would ever dare to listen to Moses and Aaron again.

So, what does Moses do? (vs. 22-23) He blames God. Two questions are followed by two accusations. God, I did not ask for this! God, I don’t need this. God, I fail to see how this benefits me at all. You know what Moses is thinking. “This is exactly what I was afraid was going to happen. I could have predicted this, but no, I listened to you. I trusted you. I did what you asked me to do and now what? Look at this mess! God, I don’t get it – at all!!

Your job is getting squeezed. Your parents say “no”. Your health is questionable, your car is making some disgusting noises, just go down the line of situations that from your perspective are not doing you any favors at all, and what are you tempted to do? Blame God! God, what on earth are you doing in heaven anyway? I though you loved me! I thought I was one of your kids! Is this how you treat your kids? What is this stuff about “Israel my firstborn son”? If this is how you treat your firstborn son, then what kind of a demented God are you?

Sometimes we think that, don’t we? What are the assumptions that lie underneath those statements? We assume that we know better. We also base our opinion on how life is going for us, right now. Following God does not guarantee that things will go your way now and what is even harder to handle is that following God does not guarantee that your own people will support you.

In this book and in life you see this scene unfold again and again. It is part of the price that you pay when you seek to follow God. It is certainly the price that you pay when you seek to follow the call of God. I do not want you to be disillusioned. The way of the cross, is a narrow way. Don’t follow Christ because you think you will be affirmed and embraced by your world. There are tough days that God uses to refine us. But, the story does not end in chapter 5. Don’t go to bed at the end of chapter 5. Don’t base your theology just on chapter 5. Look at the opening verse of chapter 6. “Now you will see.”

I don't think Moses believes Him, do you? It's like God is saying, "I've got him right where I want him." The truth is, the LORD has Moses and the Hebrews right where He wants them too. Who is the LORD? They are about to learn. No one can deliver you, but God. Moses can't deliver you. Pharaoh won't deliver you and you cannot deliver yourself.

3. **Following God puts the glory of God on display.** – (6.1)

Following God does not mean that you use God to get a comfortable life. It means that you follow Him. You do what He calls you to do, even if at the moment it does not seem to make any sense, you follow His Word. It is not easy to consider His promises more precious than anything else. We like to think that we do. We enjoy singing about it, but sometimes it is a painful process to see how much we still to cling to our idols. Is God worthy of your following?

As you know, there are two questions that I like to ask at the end of the message. They are: What does this have to do with Christ and what does this have to do with you.

The word, "exodus" means the way out. God and only God was the way out of slavery and God and only God is the way to live free. Slavery, as we popularly think of it, is bad. But, as bad as it is, there is a slavery that is worse; and that is the bondage of the heart. It is dehumanizing to have your feet bound, it is infinitely worse to be in bondage to sin. But that is how you are, naturally. You may not be owned by a human master, but apart from Christ you are under the dominion of sin, and you cannot get out. You cannot get out through religious observances and ceremonies. You cannot get out through moral deeds and by being better than others. You cannot get out by making promises. You are chained by your own desires. Only Christ can save you. Only Christ can deliver you. There is only one way out of your bondage to sin, and that is through the gospel. God created this world and gave people his law. We rebelled against Him because we wanted to be our own king. God could have been perfectly just to judge us, but He provided a way for us to be restored. That way is through Christ. Christ lived the life that we could not live and then died on the cross in order to satisfy the wrath of God intended for us, so that God could be free to pour out His mercy upon us. That issue is the most important issue that you can ever come to grips with. We are here to help you understand that and come to grips with the implications of what God has done for you through Christ.

What else does this chapter have to do with Christ? What is going here? The mighty Egyptian empire is about to be leveled. The Bible is the story of God preparing a kingdom for His Son. Egypt, like every kingdom of man before it and every kingdom of man after it, is a temporary kingdom. They all fall down. Have you ever realized that we, right now are part of a crumbling kingdom? You may know that in theory. But are you willing to seek first His kingdom, even if it means that the kingdom that you are in right now, crumbles to the ground? How do you handle that?

How did Moses handle it? (Heb 11.27) He continued to see Him who was invisible. He did not believe perfectly, but over the long haul, he believed.