

Exodus 4:22-23

Introduction

We saw a couple of weeks ago that Moses has now—*finally*—set out for Egypt. We also saw that even as Moses begins the journey, he is still very much hesitant, and fearful, and unsure. And so in His grace, Yahweh keeps coming to Moses with *strong* words of comfort and encouragement.

It was either right before Moses set out, or at some point on the way that the Lord said to Moses: “When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.” God had already said to Moses in chapter three verse nineteen: “But *I know* that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by [or ‘even by’] a mighty hand.” Now God encourages Moses that Pharaoh’s stubbornness is not only no surprise to Him, but it’s actually all a part of His plan. Even the sinful, frustrating, stubborn obstinacy of Pharaoh is in some way rooted and founded in God’s sovereign decree.

It’s so important for us to understand not just *the fact* that God *knows* the future, but also *why* He knows the future. God knows the future because He is *sovereign* over the future. God knows the future because in some *mysterious* way, He has Himself planned the future as the ultimate first cause of *all things* that will ever happen in this world and in our lives. This truth is not meant to be something that we stumble over, or even fight over, but something that we love and embrace in humble faith. What an awesome strength and encouragement and joy this is to us as we *trust* in this God who is “infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His... wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” (LBC) What an unconquerable strength and encouragement and joy this was meant to be for Moses as he was about to confront the voluntary, freely chosen, sinful rebellion of the most powerful man on the face of the earth. In all places and in all things, and at all times, God is actively and purposefully sovereign, even to the point that He can say to Moses, “but *I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, so that* he will not let the people go.”

Now this morning, we’ll see that God has still more to say – to encourage, and strengthen, and comfort His fearful servant.

- ✓ Exodus 4:22–23 — Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I said to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.” But you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your firstborn son.’”¹

What God does here is He transports Moses to the very end of the struggle. Moses won’t actually say any of this to Pharaoh until *after* the first *nine* plagues. So the point is this: “Moses, I’ve told you that there will be a struggle – that Pharaoh will be hard-hearted, and stubborn, and obstinate – but now, Moses, let me take you to the very *end* of the struggle – to the very last judgment that I will visit on the Egyptians before Pharaoh finally lets you go.

¹ The ESV translates: “and I *say* to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.” *If you refuse* to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.” While this is a legitimate translation grammatically, I believe the context argues for the translation adopted here, and by most other versions (cf. NASB; NIV; NRSV; HCSB; NET; ASV; NCV; NLT).

I. Exodus 4:22 — Then [in the end; after the long, drawn out struggle] you shall say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son...”

When we read things like this, do we even bat an eye? Did we wonder just now if God really said what we thought we heard Him say? Do we stop and linger in astonishment, and awe, and amazement? Or are these the things that we somehow now take for granted?

Here – as God sends Moses to confront the king of Egypt and deliver His people from slavery – here is the very *first* time in Scripture that God calls someone – anyone – His son. “Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son.” What in the world can that possibly mean? And how can it possibly be? And so we have introduced for the very first time this awesome theme that ultimately plumbs the very depths of the Gospel. This simple, unassuming little phrase is like the seed of one of those giant Redwood trees in California, which throughout the rest of Scripture will sprout and grow, revealing the height and depth, and width and breadth of our salvation.

The ESV translation is certainly legitimate, but I wonder if in this case, the context would encourage us to keep the original word order in the Hebrew: “Thus says the Lord, ‘My son, my firstborn, [is] Israel.’”² And so the full weight of the authority, and power, and glory of God’s Word falls on the tenderness, and the intimacy, and the wonder of those first two words (just *one* word in the Hebrew) – “**My son.**”

But what does it mean when the holy God of the burning bush, the Creator of the world and everything in it, claims a nation of slaves as *His son*? What does this mean, and how can it possibly *be*? We know that Israel cannot be God’s “son” by “*natural*” birth, no more than any other nation on the face of the earth. In fact, the Israelites are *essentially* no different from the Egyptians both physically and spiritually as sons of Adam in every sense of the word! (cf. Deut. 9:4-8)

So then what does it mean when the holy God of the burning bush, the Creator of the world and everything in it, claims *this particular* nation of slaves as – *His son*? It means that they are His son because He has freely and graciously **chosen** them out of all the nations of the world.

✓ **Deuteronomy 14:1–2** — You are the **sons** of the LORD your God... the LORD has **chosen** you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

It’s as though when God first called Abraham back in Genesis 12 and all the children of promise through Isaac and Jacob – when God set His love on Abraham and His children – this gracious call created something that had never existed before. By the *power* of God’s electing love; by the awesome *power* of God’s call, there was brought into existence a *relationship* – a relationship of sonship between Israel and God. Just like the creation of the physical universe, this was the creation of something *out of nothing*. (Compare Psalm 90:2 [NASB] and Deut. 32:18) So Moses asks in Deuteronomy:

² Cf. Durham. The NASB, NET, ASV, and NKJV all translate, “Israel is My son, my firstborn.”

- ✓ Deuteronomy 32:6 (cf. Mal. 2:10) — Is [the LORD] not... your *father*, who *created* you, who *made* you?

And Isaiah says:

- ✓ Isaiah 64:8 — But now, O LORD, you are our *Father*... we are all the *work of your hand*.

What does it mean when the holy God of the burning bush, the Creator of the world and everything in it, claims a nation of slaves as *His son*? It means that they are now the object of His fatherly affection, and tender *compassions*. It means that they are now engraved on the palm of His hand (Isa. 49:15-16) and the very apple of His eye. (cf. Zech. 2:8; Deut. 32:10) Listen to how God speaks in Hosea, and then in Jeremiah:

- ✓ Hosea 11:1-4 — When Israel was a child, I *loved* him, and out of Egypt I called my *son*... It was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms... I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them.
- ✓ Jeremiah 31:20 [NIV] — Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him,” declares the LORD.

What does it mean when the holy God of the burning bush, the Creator of the world and everything in it, claims a nation of slaves as *His son* – “*My son*”? It means that God has created this relationship out of nothing by the power of His electing love – by the irresistible power of His gracious word and call. As one commentator says, it means that “Israel is here ‘*brought into the closest and dearest relation to God.*’” (Driver; quoted in Stuart)

How often do we underestimate the tenderness of God’s love for His people – the intimacy that the Father pursues with His son? To what extent are we unable to wrap our minds around words like these:

- ✓ Zephaniah 3:17 — The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

That *God* should ever be willing or able to speak this word, “*My son*,” is a miracle beyond all comprehending. And yet this is not all He says.

“Thus says the Lord, ‘*My son, my firstborn*, [is] Israel.’” Calvin and the KJV give the sense like this: “Thus says the Lord, ‘*My son, even My firstborn*, [is] Israel.’” This may not mean much to us today in our culture, but in those days it was the firstborn son who received the double portion of his father’s inheritance. (cf. Deut. 21:17) As one commentator says: “The *status* of the firstborn... was one of great privilege... It was a position of *prominence* and *pre-eminence*.” (Currid)

But once again, we have to ask: “How can this be?” We already know that Israel can’t even be God’s “*son*” by any kind of “*natural*” birth. How much less should it be possible for God to call Israel His “firstborn” son?!? And yet once again we’re brought face to face with the magnitude of God’s *free, unmerited, undeserved grace* that *creates* and brings into *being* a relationship between God and His people as that between a Father and His firstborn son. It’s staggering, and bewildering, and wonderful, and beautiful.

The irony, of course, is that Israel is the name that God gave to Jacob, and Jacob himself was not the firstborn, but the second-born – who received all the rights and privileges of the firstborn only because of God’s electing love and grace. (cf. Gen. 25:23; Rom. 9:10-13; VanGemen) As God’s *firstborn son*, the people of Israel were made the *heirs* of *God*. And as the heirs of God, their inheritance included the land of promise, a land flowing with milk and honey, along with every other imaginable blessing that could ever flow from the enjoyment of God’s presence in their midst. (cf. Stuart) Listen to what God says in Jeremiah thirty-one:

- ✓ Jeremiah 31:9 — I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble, for I am a *father* to Israel, and Ephraim is *my firstborn*.

And here again, we have the reminder that Ephraim’s privileged status as God’s firstborn is just the awesome creation of His free, and unmerited, and undeserved grace. Ephraim was a representative name for all Israel, and Ephraim—just like Jacob—was not the firstborn, but the second-born. (cf. Gen. 48:8-20)

So as Moses sets out for Egypt, still hesitant, and fearful, and unsure, God comes to him yet again, and transports him to the very end of the struggle. Skipping over all of the first nine plagues, God tells Moses exactly what he must say to Pharaoh before the tenth and final plague. “*Then* you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, *my son, my firstborn*, is Israel.’” Now why does God do this? The point here is certainly not Pharaoh, but Moses. God is still graciously working to replace Moses’ doubt, and uncertainty and fearfulness with a strong, unshakable assurance – founded not just in the sovereignty of God, but also in the sheer, incomprehensible magnitude of His love.

“Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, My son, my firstborn, is Israel...’”

II. Exodus 4:23a — ...and I said to you, “Let my son go that he may serve me.”

Maybe when we hear these words, the one word we hear louder than all the others is the word “serve.” “Let My son go that he may *serve* me.” And so maybe now we say to ourselves, “I knew there was a catch.” But if that’s the one word we hear, I wonder what this says about *our* hearts – about our deep down view of God. Because, in fact, the word that Moses and all the Israelites were *meant* to hear louder than all the others was the word “*Me*.” In Exodus chapter fourteen, Pharaoh and all his servants are going to say: “What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from *serving us*?” (14:5) For how many long years had Israel been serving the Egyptians? And their service was an oppressive bondage, so that they sighed, and groaned, and cried out for help. (cf. Exod. 2:23) It’s in this light that we should hear God giving Moses this message for Pharaoh: “Let *My son* go that he may *serve ME*” – not you, Pharaoh, with your cruel

taskmasters and slave drivers, but **ME**, the one who loves Israel as a firstborn son. Yes, it's still "service," which still requires full obedience and full submission (cf. Mal. 1:6), but for all those who've experienced the love of a father, how could this service ever be a bondage? It could *not*. It could *only, ever be* a happiness and a joy. I'm not saying we don't experience hardship and trial, and sorrow and grief. But even the hardships, and trials, and sorrows, and griefs are not ultimately a bondage when they're caught up into the glad service of a loving Father. It's *this* truth that God was so often at pains to teach Israel. In Deuteronomy twenty-eight, Moses envisions a future day of sin and unfaithfulness, and so he warns the people ahead of time:

- ✓ Deuteronomy 28:47–48 — Because you did not *serve* the LORD your God ***with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things***, therefore you shall *serve* your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, ***in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck.***

Compare this with the words of Jesus, who said:

- ✓ Matthew 11:28–30 — Come ***to me***, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take ***my yoke*** upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ***For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.***

The point is not that life is easy, but that service ***to Him*** is joy. The point is not that there is no *yoke*, but that *His yoke* is the yoke of one who has loved us. When Judah repents of wickedness and idolatry during the reign of King Rehoboam, the Lord sent this message through the prophet Shemaiah:

- ✓ 2 Chronicles 12:7–8 (NASB) — They have humbled themselves so I will not destroy them, but I will grant them some measure of deliverance, and My wrath shall not be poured out on Jerusalem by means of Shishak. "But they will become his slaves ***so that they may learn the difference between My service and the service of the kingdoms of the countries.***"

Now maybe we're in a better position to hear the heart of God in the message that He gives to Moses: "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, My son, My firstborn, is Israel, and I said to you, ***Let My son go that he may serve ME.***'"

III. Exodus 4:23b — But you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your firstborn."

One commentator writes: "Pharaoh had better know that to YHWH Israel is not *just his own people*, they are also *dear* to him [as His firstborn son], ***and therefore he will go to bat for them all the way.***" (Houtman; quoted in Enns) And once again I would only add that the point here is not Pharaoh, but Moses. God would have Moses and ultimately all Israel know what they are to Him. They are not just His *own* people, they are also *dear* to Him. They are His firstborn son, and *therefore* they can know that He *will* go to bat for them all the way. There can be nothing more certain in all the world than this. I like how one commentator puts it: "In this *intense earnestness* of the divine command, Moses had a *strong support to his faith*. If Israel was Yahweh's first-born son, Yahweh could not [possibly] relinquish him, but [would most

assuredly] deliver His son from the bondage of Egypt.” (Keil) The principle here is the same as what we find 900 years later when God is restoring His people from Babylonian captivity:

- ✓ Zechariah 2:7–8 (NKJV; cf. Jer. 2:3; 12:14; 50:11-12) — “Up, Zion! Escape, you who dwell with the daughter of Babylon.” For thus says the LORD of hosts: “He sent Me [for His] glory to the nations which plunder you; *for he who touches you touches the apple of His eye.*”

Conclusion

So this is Israel. What about us? Well, even from the very beginning Israel was an unfaithful son. Very soon, the Israelites will find themselves trapped between the Egyptian army and the sea, and then they will cry out to Moses:

- ✓ Exodus 14:12 — Is this not what we said to you in Egypt: “Leave us alone that we may *serve* the Egyptians?”

In Hosea God says:

- ✓ Hosea 11:1–2 — When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called *my son*. The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols.

So now listen to what God says when He calls David from pasturing the flocks to be king over His people Israel:

- ✓ 2 Samuel 7:14 (cf. Psalm 2:7) — I will be to him a *father*, and he shall be to me a *son*.

And later on, we read in Psalm 89:

- ✓ Psalm 89:20, 26-27 — I have found David, my servant; with my holy oil I have anointed him... He shall cry to me, ‘You are *my Father*...’ And I will make him the *firstborn*.

It was because of the constant unfaithfulness of His firstborn son that God appointed a king, whom He also called His “*firstborn son*,” so that now the life and well-being of His people would be all wrapped up in the life and well-being of their king. When Jesus was born into the line of David, Matthew tells this amazing story:

- ✓ Matthew 2:13–15 — Now when [the wise men] had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there *until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”*³

³ “Christ is the root of our calling. Therefore, what in Hosea is spoken, as here, of the whole people, Matthew limits to Christ; and justly, since upon Him alone the grace of adoption is founded.” (Calvin)

Unlike Israel, Jesus was a faithful and obedient son. (cf. Mat. 4:8-10; Heb. 5:8-9) And so, *in Him*, Israel has finally gained its inheritance. The life, and blessing, and inheritance of the people is now all wrapped up in the life, and blessing, and inheritance of their King.

- ✓ Hebrews 1:2 (cf. Rom. 4:13) — In these last days [God] has spoken to us by *his Son*, whom he appointed the *heir* of all things.
- ✓ Colossians 1:15 (cf. Heb. 1:6; Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5) — He is the image of the invisible God, the *firstborn* of all creation.

And then we read this:

- ✓ Hebrews 12:22–23 (cf. Rom. 8:29) — But *you* have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the *assembly* of the *firstborn* who are enrolled in heaven.

In Christ, *the* firstborn, there is now an entire assembly of firstborn!

So what about us? The Apostle John writes:

- ✓ John 1:12–13 (cf. Eph. 1:3-6) — But to *all* who did *receive him*, who *believed in his name*, he gave the right to become children of God, *who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God*.

And Paul says in Galatians:

- ✓ Galatians 3:27–29 — *In Christ Jesus* you are *all* sons of God, *through faith*... There is neither Jew nor Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, *heirs* according to promise.

So now, let's travel one more time all the way back to Exodus chapter four, verses 22-23. Here – as God sends Moses to deliver His people from slavery in Egypt – here is the very first time in Scripture that God calls someone *His son*(!). And so here we have introduced for the very first time in Scripture this theme that in the end will plumb the very depths of the Gospel.

- ✓ Galatians 4:4–7 (cf. Rom. 8:15-17) — When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth *his Son*, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive *adoption as sons*. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” *So you are no longer a slave, but a son*, and if a son, then an *heir* through God.

If we know this, if we *really know* this, then we will know that God is *unreservedly, unconditionally, passionately* committed to us as the apple of His eye. We will know that we are not just God's people; somehow, by His electing love and grace, we are dear to Him, and therefore He will go to bat for us all the way. If we know this, if we *really know* this, then won't we gladly spend all our lives in *His service* – always joyfully wearing *His yoke*? (cf. Rom. 6:15-23) We may experience hardships and trials, and sorrows and griefs. But when underneath it all

is the service of a firstborn son who has been chosen and loved by his Father, well then even in the hardships and trials, and sorrows and griefs, there is nothing that can ever erase our joy.

- ✓ 1 John 3:1 — See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.