

**“THE SERVANT OF THE LORD” – A Study of the Life of Moses****“Darkness before the Dawn” (Exodus 5:1-23)**

Since Moses had arrived in Egypt everything seemed to be going smoothly. His brother Aaron met him with the news that God had guided him to come out and co-labour with Moses. Then when he met the Israelites the leaders and the people accepted his authority and calling. Moses must have been on a spiritual high and felt somewhat invincible. Hope is surging in his heart. But then things started to go wrong.

Sometimes the Lord allows things to get worse before He will make them better. The more faithful you are the more the trials worsen. Just before the Lord delivers you the devil often increases his efforts to destroy you. This temptation from the devil is also a trial from the Lord to test and strengthen our faith. But as in all the work of God, the devil's opposition will ultimately be used for the glory of God.

*And afterward Moses and Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness. And Pharaoh said, Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go. (v1-2)*

The first confrontation is between Pharaoh and the two aged brothers. They simply deliver to Pharaoh the word of God, “*Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness.*” This is exactly what Moses and Aaron were told to say in Exodus 3:18, “*thou shalt come, thou and the elders of Israel, unto the king of Egypt, and ye shall say unto him, The Lord God of the Hebrews hath met with us: and now let us go, we beseech thee, three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.*” Both Moses and Aaron were faithfully walking in God's perfect revealed will. The reaction of Pharaoh is not a consequence of a sin on their part. We need to learn that obedience is not always accompanied by immediate success in our outward circumstances.

If Moses expected a quick capitulation by Pharaoh he was in for a rude awakening. Pharaoh was not going to give in without a fight. He immediately dismissed the authority of Jehovah, “*Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go.*” God says Israel is His people but Pharaoh refuses to cede sovereignty, as he believes Pharaoh owns everybody in Egypt. In the Egyptian culture, Pharaoh was regarded as a god and received worship as such. The king of Egypt gave divine commands – he did not receive them. Pharaoh answered to no one. Life and death were in his hands.

Now a mere man has issued the challenge to the Almighty God. The battle is thus joined for the people of God. The Lord will now demonstrate emphatically that He alone is the one and true God. No power on earth or heaven can resist His will. By the end of this demonstration, Pharaoh and his army in their last words will acknowledge who Jehovah is, “*Let us flee from the face of Israel; for the LORD fighteth for them against the Egyptians.*” (Exod. 14:25).

The deliverance of Israel is a settled fact in God's unchangeable calendar for the future. But it will not occur in five minutes. That was not part of God's sovereign plan. Now it is important to note that the Lord had already told Moses that Pharaoh would initially resist the command of God. So the stubborn rejection of God's authority by the proud monarch should not have come as a surprise.

*And they said, The God of the Hebrews hath met with us: let us go, we pray thee, three days' journey into the desert, and sacrifice unto the LORD our God; lest He fall upon us with pestilence, or with the sword. And the king of Egypt said unto them, Wherefore do ye, Moses and Aaron, let the people from their works? get you unto your burdens. And Pharaoh said, Behold, the people of the land now are many, and ye make them rest from their burdens. And Pharaoh commanded the same day the taskmasters of the people, and their officers, saying, Ye shall no more give the people straw to make brick, as heretofore: let them go and gather straw for themselves. And the tale of the bricks, which they did make heretofore, ye shall lay upon them; ye shall not diminish ought thereof: for they be idle; therefore they cry, saying, Let us go and sacrifice to our God. Let there more work be laid upon the men, that they may labour therein; and let them not regard vain words. (v3-9)*

Moses and Aaron decided to try again with a modified proposal seeking only three days leave. But they got no further. These two old men and the authority of their God did not impress Pharaoh. If their humiliating rejection wasn't bad enough, things were about to go downhill rapidly. A bad day at the office was about to get much worse.

Instead of simply rejecting their request, Pharaoh now retaliates by making the condition of the Israelites even more intolerable. In addition to their usual tasks of making the bricks, they would now have to search for the very straw to make the bricks by themselves. No longer would it be provided. Yet they were not permitted to reduce their production levels of bricks. This was an impossible task. There was no gradual build up to this change of conditions but Pharaoh implemented it “*the same day.*” It is a very clever act by Pharaoh as it will serve to discredit Moses before his people.

*And the taskmasters of the people went out, and their officers, and they spake to the people, saying, Thus saith Pharaoh, I will not give you straw. Go ye, get you straw where ye can find it: yet not ought of your work shall be diminished. So the people were scattered abroad throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble instead of straw. And the taskmasters hasted them, saying, Fulfil your works, your daily tasks, as when there was straw. And the officers of the children of Israel, which Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten, and demanded, Wherefore have ye not fulfilled your task in making brick both yesterday and to day, as heretofore? Then the officers of the children of Israel came and cried unto Pharaoh, saying, Wherefore dealest thou thus with thy servants? There is no straw given unto thy servants, and they say to us, Make brick: and, behold, thy servants are beaten; but the fault is in thine own people. But he said, Ye are idle, ye are idle: therefore ye say, Let us go and do sacrifice to the LORD. Go therefore now, and work; for there shall no straw be given you, yet shall ye deliver the tale of bricks. And the officers of the children of Israel did see that they were in evil case, after it was said, Ye shall not minish ought from your bricks of your daily task. (10-19)*

The Egyptian taskmasters sought to implement Pharaoh's command. This brought the expected response from the confused Israelite leaders. These people were already in bitter bondage before from their exhausting labours. This further request brought them to the very edge of endurance. Moses' plans seem to have backfired badly. Instead of delivering the people he had made their lives worse. It seems that deliverance is an even more remote possibility.

The great mistake these Israelites made was crying out to Pharaoh when they should have cried out to God. That is very typical of many believers. When trouble comes, they seek the help of anyone but the Lord. As they hymn writer notes, “Oh what Peace we often forfeit oh what needless pain we bear all because we do not carry everything to God in Prayer.”

*And they met Moses and Aaron, who stood in the way, as they came forth from Pharaoh: And they said unto them, The LORD look upon you, and judge; because ye have made our savour to be abhorred in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to slay us. (v20- 21)*

First the people blame Pharaoh and then they blame Moses and Aaron. In fact they are calling upon the Lord to judge him. Although the Lord had forewarned Moses about the rejection of Pharaoh, he had not been warned of the rejection of Israel. Indeed, God had assured him, “*And they shall hearken to thy voice*” (Exod. 3:18a). Instead of respect, Moses is now rejected and despised by the very people he came all that way to save. This would not be how he envisaged events to unfold. It appeared Moses’ public ministry was over no sooner than it had begun.

For the second time in forty years, his own people reject Moses. It is hard enough to take the rejection of the unbelieving world but to be misunderstood and rejected by your brethren is doubly painful. Moses is walking in the steps of his beloved Master, “*He came unto his own, and His own received Him not*” (John 1:11). The Apostle Paul wrote at the end of his life of this loneliness in the heat of the battle, “*At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me*” (2 Tim. 4:16; cf. 1:15). A W Tozer once noted,

Most of the world’s greatest souls have been lonely. Loneliness seems to be the price a saint must pay for his saintliness. The leader must be a person who, while welcoming the friendship and support of all who offer it, has sufficient inner resources to stand alone - even in the face of stiff opposition to have “no one but God.”

Misunderstood and misrepresented, Moses’ confidence would have taken a great dent. He would have started to doubt whether people would ever trust him again. His credibility seemed in tatters. Doubtless, the devil was hurling fiery darts of unbelief and fear into his troubled mind and telling him that he is a failure again.

It is in such crisis that the Lord moulds a man. For now Moses will learn something about leadership and the nature of public popularity in this incident. He will learn how to stand alone and depend upon the Lord in trying circumstances. This reality will be repeated in the life of Moses over the next forty years as the leader of Israel.

*And Moses returned unto the LORD, and said, LORD, wherefore hast thou so evil entreated this people? why is it that thou hast sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in thy name, he hath done evil to this people; neither hast thou delivered thy people at all. (v22-23)*

Moses is discouraged and confused by the sudden turn of events. His family is in Midian, Aaron clearly is clueless, and he has no one to turn to for comfort and advice. Moses did the right thing in this situation and passionately poured out his troubles to the Lord, “*LORD, wherefore hast thou so evil entreated this people? why is it that thou hast sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in thy name, he hath done evil to this people; neither hast thou delivered thy people at all.*”

However, his words reveal that he was walking by sight and not by faith. It is less of a prayer and more of a complaint. Moses’ old fears resurrect again in his heart. It is as if Moses is telling the Lord, “I told you I was not the right man but you persuaded me to leave Midian and now look what has happened.” Moses makes wrong assumptions as to God’s purposes and

promises in his accusatory words to the Lord. He had forgotten that the Lord had told him twice previously that Pharaoh will initially harden his heart to the will of God,

And I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, no, not by a mighty hand. And I will stretch out my hand, and smite Egypt with all my wonders which I will do in the midst thereof: and after that he will let you go. (Exod. 3:19-20)

And the LORD said unto Moses, When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand: but I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go. (Exod. 4:21)

Moses' reaction is typical of many believers. We tend to focus on the positive promises of God's word and quickly forget the promises that we will face trials and difficulties. Salvation does not insulate a believer from huge problems. Indeed, the Lord promised us "*In the world ye shall have tribulation*" (John 16:33). The Bible is replete with examples of the sufferings of the saints, yet so many believers have a crisis of faith when they face the slightest of turbulence in their lives.

The Lord had a purpose in allowing the burden to increase on Israel. He would teach both Israel and Moses a lesson on faith. Often when God is about to bring a great deliverance in our lives, He allows it be preceded by a very discouraging setback. No doubt the Lord was also ensuring that the Israelites would lose all affection that was binding them to Egypt. We also know that the Lord was preparing the stage by allowing Pharaoh to harden his own heart to demonstrate His great sovereign power over the gods of Egypt, "*And in very deed for this cause have I raised thee up, for to shew in thee My power; and that My name may be declared throughout all the earth*" (Exod. 9:16).

Moses' reaction reveals that he was not willing to allow God to be God. Things don't always go the way we expect them to. When we acknowledge God is sovereign then we have to let Him sovereignly chose to do things His way and in His time. Most of us have our own list of unexpected events that have happened in our lives. Ligon Duncan points out an irony in Moses' words,

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.

When things go contrary to our expectations we either get bitter or we get better. In the story of Job, we see this sharply contrasted in the reaction of Job and his wife who contemplated the same set of circumstances. She got bitter with God and urged her husband, “*curse God, and die*” (Job 2:9b), but Job rebuked her, “*Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?*” (Job 2:10).

Often our pain speaks louder than the promises of God in the midst of great trials. Our faith wavers as the going gets tougher. Then fear leads to doubt and bitterness. We forget that God is sovereign over all the affairs of life and that He is working all things together for good. If this were not true, the Bible would not be true. There is no other alternative.

Israel and Moses will discover that the Lord is not confused or caught out by the sudden change of circumstances. As far as God is concerned, everything is moving according to His sovereign plan. From the pain of another apparent defeat, Moses will finally emerge as a better man for such a trial. FB Meyer observes,

The agony of soul through which Moses passed must have been as death to him. He died to his self-esteem, to his castle-building, to pride in his miracles, to the enthusiasm of his people, to everything that a popular leader loves. As he lay there on the ground alone before God, wishing himself back in Midian, and thinking himself hardly used, he was falling as a grain of wheat into the ground to die, no longer to abide alone, but to bear much fruit.

Moses will learn in the next chapter that God has made no mistakes in this situation. He will see that this trial was all part of God purposes for Israel. There will be bad days when we have to endure pain but there will be good days when we see the Lord’s mighty deliverance in power, “*weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning*” (Psa. 30:5). Pharaoh is about to discover just who Jehovah is and who controls Egypt.

In the unexpected seasons of life we need to remain patient and holding on to the rock of our faith – the promises of God’s infallible and eternal Word. We must never let circumstances determine our view of God’s promises. The Lord has never broken a promise to anyone and He never will. Amidst our tears in the painful trials of life, we can be confident He who brought us this far has promised that He will take us safely home.

*Are you discouraged and are you blue  
Are clouds obscuring the sun from view?  
Keep trusting Jesus, though storms assail  
You have His promise He will not fail*

*He knows your heartache, He understands,  
Just put your problems in His great hands,  
No trouble meets you but in His will,  
He's not forgotten, He loves you still.*

*It's always darkest before the dawn,  
Don't be discouraged but carry on,  
He'll not forsake you, the sun will break through  
It's always darkest before the dawn.*

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Why did God allow the situation of the Israelites to get worse?

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2. What do we learn about sinners in Pharaoh's response?

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3. What did Moses learn in this incident?

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4. What have you learned from this chapter?

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