

Sermon 13, The Death of the Firstborn, Pt. 1, Exodus 4:18-26

Proposition: These quick-moving verses show that obedience to God and deliverance from death are intimately wrapped up with the death of the firstborn son.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, God's interview with Moses is over. We have spent several weeks camped at the burning bush, listening to Moses dialogue with God. We have repeatedly been amazed by the patience of God and the intractability of Moses. But as we saw last time, God is indeed the Lord of the human condition, and He insists on being honored. When He says "You will go," the conversation ends. Literarily speaking, the last part of Exodus 4 portrays that truth with this blizzard of very short scenes, each one communicating a different aspect of Moses' obedience. The emphasis is clear: for as long as Moses spent arguing with God about whether to go, in the event, when he started to obey, things started to happen. Yet at the heart of these verses lies a deeply troubling theological claim. I'm not talking about God's promise to harden Pharaoh's heart. That's troublesome enough. But far more problematic is that the possession and death of the firstborn son is clearly at the heart of this text. In other words, forget the scandal of predestination. Plenty of people hate the idea of predestination. But everyone hates the idea of killing firstborn sons. Yet somehow the world's biggest religion ended up with the death of the firstborn at its heart and soul. The theme is overwhelmingly present throughout Exodus, the Pentateuch, indeed, the whole Bible. I'm talking ultimately about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Plenty of Christians reject predestination and the idea that God actually did harden Pharaoh's heart. But no Christian can reject the death of Jesus Christ and remain a Christian.

So we're going to look at this complicated, many-layered theme as it appears here. Israel is God's firstborn son. Pharaoh's firstborn son has to die. And Moses' life, too, is forfeit without the covenant blood of the son. And you thought the burning bush was a harrowing passage. Brothers and sisters, obedience to God and deliverance from death are intimately wrapped up with the death of the firstborn son.

I. Looking on His Brothers, v. 18

Well, Moses returns to Midian, getting the flock back home and checking in with Jethro, his father-in-law. He has been working for Jethro for a long time — forty years, Acts tells us, since he came to Midian. Remember, Midian is in the southern part of what is now Jordan, along the shores of the Gulf of Aqaba. Mount Sinai is in the Sinai Peninsula, that little hook-like part of Egypt that lies between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba. So Mount Sinai is roughly halfway back to Egypt. Moses, though, can't take his in-laws' flock with him to Egypt, nor, of course, can he just light out for Egypt without telling anyone. So he trudges the weary miles home with the flock and officially asks his father-in-law for permission to depart. There has been much discussion over the centuries of why he says "I want to look on my brothers" (the same wording as in ch. 2), not "God has commissioned me to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt." Let's just say that probably few of us would want to openly announce that we have a special mission from God. Anyway, regardless of whether this is all that Moses said to Jethro (obviously it isn't, because you can't leave the home of someone you've lived with forty years with two sentences of conversation), the key point is that Moses has permission on the human level from his wife's family to go back to Egypt to visit his own family. The same inner urge that drove him out to look on their burdens decades before drives him out to look on their burdens a second time. This time, though, knowing their burdens, he wonders whether they are even still alive.

There are all kinds of psychological speculations we could indulge at this juncture. How did Moses feel, etc? But the text is not interested in that kind of thing. It's interested in showing us that Moses obeyed God, but did so with respect for his other human relationships as well.

II. Divine Reassurance, v. 19

Well, Moses has gotten permission to leave. Jethro has found new help to take care of the flock. Things are set for Moses, Zipporah, and the kids to head out for Egypt. Again, can you even imagine taking your wife to meet your family for the first time — after years and years away? Well, it would appear that Moses was not the quickest at leaving. In fact, he procrastinated so much that God actually spoke to him while he lingered in Midian. God called to him from the sky and said "Go, Moses." And apparently, being God, He touched the nub of Moses' feelings. We like to emphasize the tough love aspect of God in our circles. He says "Do it" and you do it and that's it. God doesn't care how you feel! And of course, that's really true. I've preached it from this pulpit, and I hope you all believe that God is not a therapeutic deity whose primary purpose in life is to keep your feelings happy. But — at the same time, He is a merciful and even tender Father, and He came to Moses, even after all of that tough conversation at the burning bush, and said "By the way, you can go back. They might want to enslave you, but the murder of that Egyptian was long ago shuffled into the file with a hieroglyph for 'cold case' marked on it. You need have no fear for your life."

Moses had outlived those who sought his life. Again, God assures us that good will outlast evil! Do you know the God who meets you and addresses your fears, not because He has to, but because He cares for you? We are torn between our therapeutic culture on one hand and

our tough attitudes on the other. We aren't sure whether to like this. But whether we like it or not, God cares for us, loves us, and even reassures us when we need it.

III. Stepping Out in Faith (and Poverty), v. 20

So Moses steps out in faith. He's leaving Midian, where he had a safe, stable, peaceful existence. He didn't get rich there — far from it. The whole family traveled with one donkey. This is a family of four driving a '98 Corolla. They don't have a lot of extra capital to play with. But they stepped out in faith and went. The Pentateuch never mentions what kind of salary Moses earned as leader of the congregation of Israel. But at this point, he certainly wasn't in it for the money.

Do you let financial considerations drive your decision-making? Of course it's foolish to ignore them completely. But are they in the driver's seat of your life? Is money the biggest factor in your decision-making? Because at least Moses was making enough to live on in Midian. In Egypt, he might very well become an unpaid slave.

But what did Moses have? He had the rod of God in his hand. He had the power of God. "Oh," you might say, "if only I had that power too!" Brothers and sisters, you do. You may not even own a donkey. But you have access to the same divine power that Moses did for his mission. I'm not saying that you'll be able to turn your stick into a snake. But you have the power of forgiveness, the power of love, joy, and peace, the power of God's providential care for you and your family. Proverbs is clear that it is God who provides for you, God who straightens and smooths your path through life. If you are relying on something else — money, status, family, skill, intellect, strength — stop it. You have what you need: the power of God for salvation, the power of the God who takes care of you.

IV. Divine Warning: Pharaoh Won't Cooperate, v. 21

Well, the Lord had reassured him regarding his status as a wanted criminal. But then the Lord comes to him and repeats in clearer language what He had already hinted at in 3:19-20. Pharaoh is not going to say yes! In fact, he is going to point-blank refuse to let the people go. God already said at the bush that Pharaoh would need some persuasion. In fact, he would require some mighty plagues to get him to relent.

But in one particular sense, God raises the stakes here. We already know that Pharaoh pursues genocide with an unruffled heart, just like his predecessor did. Israel has been groaning under Egyptian bondage for four hundred years/four generations. But now God says "I, even I, will harden his heart." God uses the first-person pronoun as well as the first-person verb to make it crystal clear that Pharaoh is simply not going to cooperate, and that it is God who will harden his heart so that he doesn't.

This statement has troubled people for a long time. If God is hardening Pharaoh's heart, then why does God hold his hard heart against him and punish him for it with all the plagues and, indeed, with the death of his son? There are a number of ridiculous ways of getting around this question in the commentaries, most of them involving some way of saying "Pharaoh hardened his own heart." Actually, the text tells us about Pharaoh's hard heart 20 times. Ten of those times, it says that God hardened the heart; the other ten, it says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart or that his heart was hardened. There are twice as many hardenings as plagues.

Is hard-heartedness a sin? Its consequences certainly are. It is a sin to reject God, disobey His word, mock His messenger, oppress His people — and these are the deeds of a hard heart, such as Pharaoh's. Yes, brothers and sisters, we need to bite the bullet here and just admit that it is a sin to have a hard heart and that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. God did not sin. Nor did God force Pharaoh to sin. But God did punish Pharaoh by handing him over to sin. God gave Pharaoh a naturally strong will, reinforced by long training as an autocrat. God created Pharaoh with the ability to be more hard-hearted than the average Joe. And then, God challenged Pharaoh for primacy. God forced the issue with Pharaoh, insisting that He was right and Pharaoh wrong. It doesn't take a psychology degree to know that when you force the issue with someone who has a naturally strong will and has been used to his own way for decades, you are going to get a hardened heart. But true as that is, the text goes beyond that.

Pharaoh, you see, had already become guilty. He was guilty of enslaving, oppressing, and committing genocide against God's people. And if there is one thing we know about God's character, it is that He punishes sin with sin. God does not force homosexuals to be homosexuals. But He does give them over to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. God doesn't do what ought not to be done; God does not burn with lust for another dude. But He does hand people over to their sin. Some sins are sins of weakness. But others are sins of hard-heartedness. And just as God can with perfect justice make you a weak, naturally fearful person who will easily fall prey to sins of weakness, so He can with perfect justice make you a naturally tough, cold-hearted person who will easily fall prey to sins of open rebellion.

God punished Pharaoh's sin by stuffing more of the same down his throat. God didn't force Pharaoh to sin, but He did punish Him with sin. He gave him up in a way that Pharaoh himself did not want to resist nor could resist. Had Pharaoh wanted to resist it, maybe he could have — but of course, had he wanted to resist it, then his heart would not have been hard.

Brothers and sisters, God will later in this book reveal Himself to Moses as a fearsome and terrifying God. Are you getting that picture? God can and will hand you over if you ask Him to. If you make it clear that you want your sin and you are determined to have it, God will give it to you — or better, give you to it, for at that point, you will not be in the driver's seat anymore. The sin will. You know what I'm talking about. You know that feeling of "I hate this sin that I'm sinning but I'm going to keep doing it, even though the pleasure is long gone." It's almost like some mechanism takes over so that you keep doing it even though the pain is actually greater than the pleasure. It is bizarre, until you understand that that feeling is part of God's just punishment on you for going after sin.

God is going to harden Pharaoh's heart and have an epic battle with him. Don't make the mistake of feeling sorry for Pharaoh, or thinking that he is some kind of victim of God's irrational anger. Not in the slightest. Pharaoh is the victim only of the consequences of his own willful and deliberate sin. He challenged God, and he will spend the next ten chapters tasting the consequences.

V. **Divine Reassurance, 22-23**

Moses, if he is anything like us, is probably saying at this point, “Why on earth do you have to force the issue, Lord? Can’t you soften Pharaoh’s heart so that he’ll let us go without all the drama?” What is God’s answer? “No way.” The drama is part of the point. This book is about the knowledge of God. Israel can only come to know God if He reveals Himself. And part of His revelation is the showdown with Pharaoh.

Let me share something with you. Get this straight: God is emphatically not a non-confrontational deity.

Did you get that? He is not non-confrontational. Put in simpler terms, He is completely confrontational! Ultimately, the reason God had the showdown with Pharaoh is the same reason that He allows evil in His creation at all. That reason is this: God wants to show us more about Himself. We learn more about God when we see Him fighting evil than when we simply see Him basking in goodness. He does a lot of basking in goodness. That’s what Heaven is. But here on Earth, He has ordained and allowed evil so that we can see exactly what He thinks of it and how He handles it.

Without the knowledge of God, there is no worship. Religion within the limits of reason alone does not sing the Hallelujah Chorus, does not proclaim “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain.” Without God’s confrontation of Pharaoh and the showdown over whether the people could go, there would have been no point in the second half of Exodus — the building of the tabernacle and all of the regulations for worship and dwelling with God. That is the nugget of truth in the woke manure pile. A God who would just say “Oh, you slaved for four hundred years. But now Pharaoh feels bad about that and he’s going to let you go” — that God is not the God of the exodus, not the God of the Bible. The God who says, “Pharaoh made you slave for four hundred years and now I am going to hurt him so badly that even his iron will is shattered like a sledgehammer shatters ice” — that’s the God of the exodus. That’s the God we serve. He is a confrontational deity who will not strike a peace accord with evil.

A. Israel Is God’s Firstborn Son, v. 22

Why not? Why the showdown with Pharaoh? Because Israel is God’s firstborn son. In the context of Pharaoh’s hard-hearted refusal to let Israel leave, God announces the astonishing truth that Israel is His Son, His firstborn. There are certain important positions in the family. “Son” is an important one. “Firstborn” is an important one. And “firstborn son” is the most important of all. In some countries, including England, for many years the law stated that land and titles of nobility were passed directly to the firstborn son, with not an acre for anyone else.

Israel is God’s firstborn son! This is the first time that the Bible hints at the revelation of God as Father. Already, though, His Fatherhood is applied to all of His people. Israel is special in God’s sight. Why does He claim the right to bring them out of Egypt? Because they are His. God is confronting Pharaoh’s evil, and He is specifically confronting it on behalf of His firstborn son Israel.

Do you know yourself to be sons of the heavenly Father? The New Testament fills out this picture by telling us that God has a natural Son, who came to earth as Jesus Christ. We are

God's sons by adoption in Him. What is true of the Son of God becomes true of His people. Already, though, long before Jesus came, His status has been granted to God's people. You may be a philanthropist who will give a lot and do a lot for some stranger. But virtually everyone is willing to give everything they have to their son. When God calls you "son," you know that He will care for you.

B. God Will Kill Pharaoh's Firstborn just as Pharaoh Killed Israel's Sons, v. 23

But this message to Pharaoh signals both a promise and challenge. God cares for Israel as His firstborn — and similarly, He threatens to kill Pharaoh's firstborn just as Pharaoh killed Israel's sons. Again, this is not God venting His spleen or being unjust in any way. Rather, this is how God does justice in this world. Already is foreshadowed the gospel message that life for God's people can come only by the death of the son. God is not demanding of Pharaoh anything He Himself is unwilling to give.

Think about that for a minute.

God would not let us go from His wrath. We deserved His just punishment of death, and He knew it. But He gave His own Son over to death so that we could live.

God took the life of Pharaoh's son so that Israel could go free and worship Him, in a foreshadowing of the greater Exodus, when He would accept the life of His own Son so Israel could go free and worship Him.

If your religion is about human beings, this is very troubling. Is God some kind of child abuser? No. Rather, He is a God who is heaven-bent on having a showdown with evil and conquering it. He conquered it by the death of His own son, signalled in all kinds of ways throughout the OT, but most especially at the Passover, when the firstborn son would die unless God's people put the blood of the Lamb on their doors.

VI. Divine Warning: Circumcise Your Son, or be Cut Off, vv. 24-26

Well, how does the narrator follow up on the theological tour-de-force he has just taken us on, looking at the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and then connecting Israel's deliverance to the death of the son? Well, naturally, he piles on two more lessons. We've literally just seen an engagement with election and the problem of evil, along with the truth of adoption. Now the narrator teaches lessons about the sacraments and the character of God with this enigmatic little story. What on earth is it about? Simply that God demands that you circumcise your sons/baptize your children. Moses, won with so much difficulty to the cause of rescuing Israel from Egypt, is expendable if he won't obey God. Yes, you heard that right. Moses is expendable if he won't obey God. That's why God sought to put him to death. Pharaoh sought his life before; now God seeks his life. Zipporah quickly circumcises her son and touches the blood to somebody — Moses, or perhaps her son. Then she calls Moses a bridegroom of blood. Some take that comment positively, some negatively; we really don't know what it means, except that it was in reference to the circumcision. Brothers and sisters, God just threatened the life of Pharaoh's son. Now He threatens Moses' life too. You see, God is not mocked. Sin is sin, in Egyptians, Hebrews, Christians, and everyone else. Sin deserves death, and it's as simple as that. I said a moment ago that God demonstrates His readiness to combat evil through having a showdown with Pharaoh.

Well, this little story shows us that it's not just Pharaoh. God will have a showdown with you and me too if we refuse to.

Circumcision signifies belonging to God. God commanded His people not only to be circumcised, but to circumcise their sons too. The one who was not circumcised was cut off from the people, and was not allowed to eat the Passover meal. In other words, the uncircumcised were in danger of death from God.

The point here is that God's opposition to evil doesn't somehow stop at the borders of the covenant community, or in the household of leaders in the church. God is just as willing to have a showdown with Moses as with Pharaoh, just as ruthlessly clear that you will submit or you will be beaten into submission.

Have you baptized your children? Do you applaud God's active war against evil in the world? And if so, do you too actively war against evil? Or are you complicit with it — say, by neglecting the sacraments? Brothers and sisters, Moses decided to obey God. That was good. But once he made the decision, he had to stop being half-hearted and start being whole-hearted in service to God.

Will you serve the Lord? Will you give yourself to Him in baptism, and do the same with your children? And will you embrace Jesus' death for you? If you do, you will be delivered from slavery to sin and freed to worship God. Amen.