

Sermon 19, I Can't Breathe (or Talk), Exodus 6:9-13

Proposition: God's promises are superior to all circumstances, feelings, and defilements/lacks.

- I. Why the People Couldn't Hear God's Promises, v. 9
 - A. They Were Short of Breath, v. 9b
 - B. They Were In Cruel Bondage, v. 9c
- II. Why Moses Couldn't Utter God's Promises, v. 12
- III. Why God's Promises Endure Even When We Can't Hear or Speak Them, vv. 10-11

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the notice in our text this morning is rather bleak and definitely heartbreaking. The children of Israel did not heed Moses, because they couldn't breathe.

Now, you don't need me to relate this text to the wave of protests that swept the USA and indeed the whole world last summer. That wave of protests was triggered by George Floyd's dying words, "I can't breathe." Well, brothers and sisters, Scripture tells us that this was the harsh lot of the people of God under Pharaoh's bondage. Even worse, the people's inability to breathe is followed up in short succession by Moses' inability to speak. The man God sent to announce His deliverance wasn't able to properly express what he had been sent to say.

What a mess we are. We can't even breathe properly. Our leaders, our spokesmen who are supposed to speak truth to power, have uncircumcised lips. Yet sandwiched between these two reasons for despair comes God's demand that Pharaoh be told to let Israel go. As we will see over the next several chapters, God's word is going to prevail. Despite the people's shortness of breath, despite Moses' foul mouth, God could and did free them. Why? Because His promises are superior to all circumstances, feelings, and defilements/lacks.

I. Why the People Couldn't Hear God's Promises, v. 9

We spent a whole sermon last Sunday looking at God's amazing self-revelation in vv. 2-8. He is Yahweh! That means that He is infinitely bigger than all needs, infinitely able to keep His promises. And what promises! He does not promise pizza once a week, or fatter welfare checks. He promises a land, adoption as His people, and deliverance from Egyptian bondage. The promises are glorious. And Moses, no doubt buoyed up by hearing God address the needs of His people, came and announced it all to his brothers and sisters.

A. They Were Short of Breath, v. 9b

But was the good news good news to them? No! They were unable to listen to Moses and the announcement that God is Yahweh and therefore will act to keep His promises. Why? Because of shortness of breath. "It was the inward pressure caused by deep anguish that prevented proper breathing — like children sobbing and gasping for their breath," writes Walter Kaiser.³ They

³ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, pg. 344.

were so short of breath, and the reason for this shortness of breath, this inability to breath, was the suffocating feeling of deep heartbreak and pain.

Brothers and sisters, you and I know that pain can actually be stored in the body. I don't pretend to understand how it works, but I've done it and you all have too. When you're upset, tired, hurting, and so on, you can actually push that pain into certain regions. Whenever I sin and haven't made it right, a particular muscle in my back tightens up. When I feel that muscle straining back there, I know that I'm carrying guilt around. Well, other negative emotions can be pushed into other parts of the body, and you will then carry yourself in such a way as to avoid touching that body part. I can't explain further other than to say that you all know what I'm talking about. This is one of my favorite hobby topics, though I won't say more about it here. Just allow me to observe that we human beings can internalize pain in such a way that we can't breathe deeply. We can literally be short of breath, not because we lack air or have weak chest muscles, but because we are in such agony and sorrow about the condition of our people. As you know if you talked to your African-American friends after Floyd's death, this kind of agony that Israel experienced long ago is something that's a daily reality to them. When we flew this summer, a colored gentleman on the plane was wearing a black mask emblazoned with the words "I can't breathe." I complimented him on it, and he smiled a bit wearily.

B. They Were In Cruel Bondage, v. 9c

Well, you may feel this morning that you can't breathe. If so, you may have a hard time listening to this sermon. You may say "Someone who isn't in cruel bondage can't speak to me about the good promises of God. That happy, un-oppressed person just doesn't know where I live." To that, I can only respond with an appeal to look at the text. Did Moses spend a single day of his life in slavery? Was he ever forced into the brickyards? The text of Exodus pretty strongly implies that he was not. Yes, his people were. But he looked on the burdens of his brethren rather than carrying them himself. To that extent, you can try to tell me that an Egyptian could have even less idea of how bad the bondage was than Moses did. That may be true. But I can assure you that the one who carried the promises of God had not personally experienced the pain and rigor of enslavement, not since he was 3 months old. Yet he carried God's message anyway.

The Israelites were under cruel bondage that they couldn't breathe. And not the least cruel consequence of that was that they couldn't rouse themselves to listen to the promises of God.

Again, maybe you're there today. If so, I urge you not to write off the messenger. I urge you to breathe. Let yourself feel the pain of your situation so that you can hear God's promise spoken into your situation.

II. Why Moses Couldn't Utter God's Promises, v. 12

But as bad as the condition of breathlessness among the people was, it was matched or surpassed by Moses' wretchedness. He was a man of uncircumcised lips. Now, after all Moses' objections, it's tempting to regard this as so much hot air. Maybe it is; we don't really know whether Moses is accurately understanding his own condition. But let's give him the benefit of the doubt, especially since he repeats it both here and down in v. 30. What does it mean to have

uncircumcised lips? Well, when other organs are called “uncircumcised,” it means “not dedicated to the service of God.” Thus, when Steven exclaimed “You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you” (Acts 7:51 NKJ), he was not suggesting that the Israelites of his day had some kind of physical disability. Rather, he was saying that neither their hearts nor their ears were set apart to God’s purposes. They used those organs for unholy purposes! And in the same way, when Moses says that his lips are uncircumcised, he is saying that his lips are not sufficiently dedicated to God’s service. They are, as we would say, unbaptized. The filth of sin hasn’t been washed from them; they are not sufficiently set apart for His service.

What does that mean for us? It means that we have to be sure that our limbs and organs exist for God, that’s what it means. Moses was not able to adequately speak the words of God to the people of God or to Pharaoh because his lips were not dedicated enough to God’s service. Effectively, he seems to be saying “I can’t speak with spiritual power. I can’t actually communicate God’s truth to Pharaoh in a compelling way because I sometimes say inappropriate and weak, unworthy things. My mouth doesn’t convey spiritual power because I do not uniformly use it to say what God wants.”

Does that feel familiar? I daresay it does. We all know people who are such reprobates in their daily life that when they start to moralize, we tune them out. They may be moralizing accurately. They may be correct about what God wants. But it’s impossible to give them the time of day because you happen to know about their drug-dealing habit or how they stabbed their business partner or you name it. Moses is a man wanted for a cold-case murder. Moses is a man who can’t speak well at the best of times. Moses is a man who has pushed the Almighty too far and made God’s anger flare against him. And now he suddenly realizes that own moral failings, particularly around the untamable tongue, are such that Pharaoh has no chance of listening to him.

Pharaoh won’t listen to a murderer! Moses’ own people wouldn’t listen to him. Pharaoh, of course, is not dealing with an inability to breathe or suffering cruel bondage. But Moses concludes (too quickly, as we shall see) that Pharaoh won’t listen to him either.

III. Why God’s Promises Endure Even When We Can’t Hear or Speak Them, vv. 10-11
Yet though we can acknowledge that just like ours, Moses’ lips were uncircumcised, we dare not forget that they were still the lips through which God communicated His promise. You may not be able to hear the words of God. You may not be able to speak the words of God. But you can definitely recognize that God’s promises are for people like you and can even be communicated through people like you.

Of course it’s not a good thing that you can’t breathe. But it is not the kind of thing that can stop God. His promises endure even when we can’t hear them, even when we can’t speak them, even when we are worn down and have a hard time wanting to believe. No defilement or personal lack can prevent Him from saving, whether by many or by few. Even when you can’t heed the promise, God renews the promise. That’s what the transition from v. 9 to v. 10 tells us. Even when you can’t speak the promise out loud because your lips are so given over to sin, God

still makes the promise. And the promise is that your pain will end, that you will be delivered, that you will not suffer this breath-taking bondage forever.

So don't put your hope in your own holiness, or in your charismatic leader's ability to talk his way out of anything. Instead, you need to put your hope in the God who continues to demand that the wicked stop, turn around, and release His people. However worn down you are this morning, however much pain is stored up inside your body in areas you don't dare touch, know this: God is for you. That's why He demanded that Pharaoh let His people go, and why He demands that the Devil let you go. His Son came to free you from the Kingdom of Darkness and bring you into His own Kingdom of Light. Hear that truth. Believe it. I may have unclean lips, I may not understand your suffering and your shortness of breath, but the message is still true. It's God's promise. Believe it. Amen.