

The God Who Hears – Exodus 1-6 (Part 6 of 7)

“Why Did You Ever Send Me?”

Exodus 4:27-5:23

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Today we resume our chapter-by-chapter study of the great book of Exodus, a study we paused for three weeks to focus our hearts on the importance of global missions. From the very beginning we have seen how the entire book of Exodus is not really about Israel; it is actually about God. God’s deliverance of Israel is not only to rescue them from slavery; it is to show the world what God is like. And we’ve also seen how foundational this book is to the rest of the Bible, especially our understanding of the gospel.

The title of our series through chapter six is “The God Who Hears,” and Moses’ aim is to establish God’s heart for his people, that He heard their groaning, and His plan to deliver them. So far we have seen the plight of the Israelites in Egypt, Moses’ birth, his adoption, his failure, his 40-year flight to Midian, and God’s call to him through the burning bush.

The last time we were in Exodus we watched as Moses was taught to trust and obey God. He was given a call to return to Pharaoh and signs that would affirm his credibility to the people. God was sending him back to Egypt to deliver a message to Pharaoh that Israel must be set free.

Our text this morning records the first steps Moses takes in following God’s plan. And we see something very important and, I would guess, very familiar: following God’s plan is not usually smooth sailing. Chapter five gives us an honest view of what often happens in life when it comes to God’s call on our lives. The lesson I want to show you from this text and also from parts of the New Testament is this: **faithful followers need to take the long view.**

Moses needed to learn this lesson, and I think we probably do as well. So let’s walk through the text, see how this lesson is laid out, and then connect it to our lives as New Testament believers.

The Stages of Moses’ First Ministry

Remember that we believe it was Moses who wrote the book of Exodus, and that is important as you consider the various stages of his first ministry opportunity. Chapter five is not flattering to Moses, and it seems clear to me that he wants us to see an early lesson which he needed to learn.

Excitement

We pick the story line up in Exodus 4:27 as Moses was making his way from Midian toward Egypt. While Moses was making this journey, God issued a call on Aaron’s life: “Go into the wilderness to meet Moses.” Therefore, Aaron began to make the journey into the wilderness and met Moses at the mountain of God. Verse 28 tells us what happened next: *“And Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD with which he had sent him to speak, and all the signs that he had commanded him to do.”*

This must have been quite a moment. Moses told Aaron about the burning bush, the name Yahweh, God's promise to deliver His people, and he showed him the signs – the staff to snake, the hand of leprosy, and the water into blood. Further, they must have compared notes about God's calling on Aaron, and they must have reflected on the significance of meeting at the Mountain of God. It must have been very clear that God was up to something and that they were being called to a very special task. There must have been a great deal of excitement as they witnessed the merging of their lives for this divinely appointed opportunity. God was up to something, and they were part of it!

It got even better when they arrived in Egypt and gathered the elders of the people of Israel. According to verse 30, Aaron told them, *"all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses and did the signs in the sight of the people."* In other words, He told them about this promise:

⁷ Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...¹⁰ Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:7-8,10).

Further, Aaron must have told them about the name of God which distinguished Him from all the other so-called gods in Egypt. It must have been unbelievable news! In fact, verse 31 records the response of the people: belief and worship.

³¹ And the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped (Exodus 4:31).

This was what some people might call "the ministry honeymoon." Moses and Aaron have delivered amazingly good news, and the people have responded very positively. They not only believed Moses and Aaron's word, but they worshipped the Lord. Moses and Aaron must have been thrilled. None of Moses' fears had materialized. The elders and the people believed them and in the God who had sent them. God was on the move, people were on board, and things were exciting!

Have you ever been in this situation? It is a very common early stage of Christianity on a personal or ministry level. Maybe you've experienced this in your own walk with the Lord after you came to Christ, maybe when you saw this as you led a person to Christ, maybe you watched this in the first few counseling sessions or the first six months of leading a small group. Maybe you saw this when you took some early steps in giving spiritual direction to your kids or in a 1-on-1 discipleship relationship. In the initial moments, you sense the favor of God as you see His hand at work. You dream of what could be accomplished, and the first few steps are so glorious, exciting, fun, and rewarding. You have strong faith, and it feels that, with God helping you, the world could be taken by storm. There is something wonderful about those early, exciting days. However, it is only a matter of time until challenges come.

Confrontation

The second stage is the collision of confrontation that is a part of the Christian life and any task orchestrated by God. God's message and ministry to a sinful world are light in the midst of darkness and are usually opposed. That is why I'm describing this stage as "confrontation." I don't mean that it is always confrontational in the negative sense that we often have in mind. However, there is a fundamental fact that we have to understand about the Christian life and ministry: God's message to the world is counter-culture. Whether it is your own heart, your kids, someone you are discipling, your small group, counseling, or leading a ministry, God's plan meets opposition.

We see this in chapter five as Moses, Aaron, and Pharaoh meet for the first time. In 5:1 we hear the message from God as mediated through Moses and Aaron: *"Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.'"* (Exodus 5:1). Don't miss the significance of the following:

- **"Thus says the LORD..."** – Throughout the rest of the Bible this will be a familiar way for the prophets to speak to human beings as they deliver God's message.
- **"The LORD"** – The name that Moses was given, the meaning of which sets God apart from the so-called gods of Egypt.
- **"My people"** – Part of the conflict between Pharaoh and God will center on who has the real authority over the Israelites.
- **"...that they may hold a feast to me"** – This was a modest way of asking for a full and permanent departure.¹

Pharaoh's response was equally telling, and it was loaded and defiant: *"Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go"* (Exodus 5:2). Notice that Pharaoh summarily rejected the request with a mocking tone – "Who does this god think he is? He is nothing; I don't know him. I'm not going to obey him!" This would be the first of many refusals on Pharaoh's part.

Moses and Aaron then respond with another request stated a little differently with a tone of judgment. There is a clear warning here: "If you do not let us go, there will be judgment." In other words, this is not optional. "Let us go, or judgment will come."

Now take a step back with me and realize the importance of what just happened here, because it is very instructive. Moses and Aaron just delivered the message from God which was the truth. However, the truth was not received or embraced by Pharaoh. Why? Because Pharaoh did not want to submit to God and obey Him. Pharaoh wanted to live in a world where he is not constrained or limited by the requirements and demands of someone greater than himself. You see one of the major lessons from this book is the supremacy of God over Pharaoh and over his people. In fact, what does God give to His people just after He delivers them? The Law. Why? Because the people need to know that He is God, and His law establishes His authority over their lives.

¹ Doug Stuart, *Exodus – The New American Commentary*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006), 161.

God's ability to be God and to set the boundaries of life is part of the central message of the Bible. God establishes right from wrong because He is God. And it should not surprise us if that is not well received by human beings. We should not be surprised if people are not pleased with the message that God is holy, we have violated his law, and we stand guilty. Parents, it shouldn't surprise you when your children do not like the boundaries that you establish in your home. Don't be surprised when the message from God to mankind is not enthusiastically embraced. God's message to the world is fundamentally offensive.

At the same time, be sure that people are not put off because of your actions, attitudes, and presentation. Don't be surprised if there is some level of confrontation, but be sure that it is the *message* that creates the confrontation – not you or your demeanor.

Cost

The next stage of ministry is when the calling of God becomes increasingly difficult. This is when the confrontation connected to God's plan is no longer theoretical and when there are real costs or effects.

In Exodus 5 we see that Pharaoh, like any tyrant, concludes that a show of force or group punishment will be the best way to end this request and put pressure on Moses and Aaron. Pharaoh believed that the people were being distracted by this idea of deliverance. Some commentators suggest that the people may have gathered somewhere in order to wait to hear from Moses and the request. Pharaoh's solution was to make their work even more difficult, and this would cause them to reconsider this nonsense.

⁴ But the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens."⁵ And Pharaoh said, "Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens!"⁶ The same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their foremen,⁷ "You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as in the past; let them go and gather straw for themselves."⁸ But the number of bricks that they made in the past you shall impose on them, you shall by no means reduce it, for they are idle. Therefore they cry, 'Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.'⁹ Let heavier work be laid on the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words" (Exodus 5:4–9).

The order made its way from the Egyptian taskmasters to the Israelite foremen. They would be required to produce the same number of bricks, but they would now have to gather their own straw (5:10-13). This order affected everyone, and when they were unable to find straw, they began to use stubble, the left over pieces of straw produced during the harvesting process.² The effect was that bricks were hard to make and involved a much longer process.

So this order was not only a new responsibility; it was tedious and difficult. What's more, the failure to produce the same number of bricks brought a beating (5:14). There is clearly a sense in the text that there was growing pressure and injustice in the land. Pharaoh was punishing the people with this order. He was sending a message.

² Stuart, 164.

The task that Pharaoh had given the people of Israel was virtually impossible, and therefore the Israelite foremen made a desperate appeal directly to him. Verses 15-19 serve as a great summary of the situation facing Israel, and there is a clear sense of hopelessness.

*¹⁷ But he said, "You are idle, you are idle; that is why you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD.' ¹⁸ Go now and work. No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number of bricks."
¹⁹ The foremen of the people of Israel saw that they were in trouble when they said, "You shall by no means reduce your number of bricks, your daily task each day" (Exodus 5:17–19).*

Since Pharaoh was the highest authority in the land, the failure of the appeal meant the situation was hopeless and unchangeable. Pharaoh was unyielding and ruthless. And the effect was the foremen knew that "they were in trouble" (v 19).

How fast things can change! How quickly hope can evaporate under the weight of costly consequences that do not seem to fit with our original hopes and dreams. It was only 19 verses earlier that the people believed in God and bowed in worship. Now they are weary and depressed. And who can blame them? Life had become very, very hard.

Opposition

After the unsuccessful appeal to Pharaoh, the situation turned personal. Moses and Aaron receive the blame for the miserable effects of Pharaoh's orders. According to verse 20, Moses and Aaron were waiting for the foremen after their meeting with Pharaoh, and their words are filled with anger, fear, and personal accusations. This is the first of many fearful responses on the part of the Israelite people. It will be a familiar pattern.

²⁰ They met Moses and Aaron, who were waiting for them, as they came out from Pharaoh; ²¹ and they said to them, "The LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us" (Exodus 5:20–21).

Notice the depth of the accusations: 1) God was going to judge them because Moses and Aaron were obviously mistaken about what God had said; 2) Moses and Aaron were to blame for Pharaoh's disposition; and 3) They had created a scenario that was going to lead to even worse circumstances. "You are wrong," "This is your fault," and "This is going to get worse."

Fear and disappointment in the face of unfavorable early effects often sounds like this. Further, these emotions are so strong that they are typically directed toward people, especially leaders, because of our desire to blame someone. Our fears often need a focal point, even if it isn't rational or fair. The fact of the matter is that the problem in Exodus 5 is Pharaoh. He's the issue. But if the foremen cannot take their frustration out on him because he's too powerful, then the next objects are Moses and Aaron.

There is something here to note for moments when you get involved in the lives of people for the sake of the kingdom. While you should always be humble and evaluate what areas of improvement and growth you need, just be aware that when things get difficult, people are very quick to want to find someone to blame, and it is usually very personal. So just be prepared for

these moments; don't completely disregard what people say, but, at the same time, do not take it overly personal.

Discouragement

Our text ends with what I believe to be the main point of this passage. It seems to me that Moses includes this early struggle in order to make a much larger point about God's deliverance and His plans. Remember that the main point of this message today is the following: faithful followers need to take the long view. However, we see a failure in Moses' life to live with this philosophy in mind.

Moses' pours out his heart to the Lord in a prayer of complaint. He is brutally honest:

²² Then Moses turned to the LORD and said, "O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me?" ²³ For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all" (Exodus 5:22-23).

Now some of you might struggle with Moses' prayer because this kind of gut-level prayer is not a part of your spiritual conversation with God. However, the Bible often records these conversations with God for a reason (e.g., Psalm 13, Jeremiah 20:7-18). There is an appropriate place for talking with God about our confusion, our frustration, and our pain. This is different than an angry, sinful cursing of God which was advocated on the part of Job's wife (Job 2:9). This seems to be the honest wrestling with God over what is happening.

Moses is clearly discouraged. He struggles with four things: 1) God is allowing evil things to happen to His people; 2) Moses' call seems pointless and fruitless; 3) The charge to Pharaoh has made everything worse; and 4) There is no promised deliverance. Can you relate? How many times have you said things like: "God, why won't you stop this?", or "Nothing is working!", or "Every time I try to do what is right, it gets worse!", or "Your promises are not working!" I can think of times when I've said this in my marriage, in the raising of my kids, in counseling someone, in the leading a church ministry, and in preaching.

Moses, like all of us, was looking at the circumstances of his life, and in the face of opposition he was drawing the conclusion that nothing was working; everything was falling apart. The burning bush, the name of God, and the promise of deliverance all seemed very far away. The belief of the people and their worship of God in the beginning of his ministry all seemed so far away. Moses has begun to doubt, and his doubt has led him to discouragement in the face of opposition and hard circumstances. He was no longer taking the long view.

But look ahead to 6:1-2. We'll study this next week:

¹ But the LORD said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand he will send them out, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land." ² God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the LORD (Exodus 6:1-2).

Moses needed to be reminded that God was still working, His promises were sure, and He is Yahweh! Moses needed to take the long view and bask in the beauty of who God is. It was dark and discouraging at the time, but it wasn't going to be that way for long.

These five stages of Moses' ministry are as helpful as they are common. And I'm so grateful the Bible records this story. It helps us to keep perspective.

How to Take the "Long View"

Let's take one final step here and connect this text to the bigger context of the Scriptures and see if we can develop some thoughts as to how we take the long view when it comes to being a follower of Jesus. In other words, what can we learn from Exodus 5 that will help us in our spiritual journey?

1. Preach the gospel to your soul

The "Good News" is a story of perceived failure turning into victory. I think it is really important to realize that the central story of the Bible – that Jesus died and was raised from the dead – is essentially a story of perceived failure turning into victory. When Jesus was being beaten, when He was hanging on the cross, when He died, and when He was in the tomb for three days, it looked as if God's plan was a terrible failure. But on the third day, everything changed! This is not just what God can do; it is central part of the entire story of the Bible. You take the long view by preaching the gospel to yourself.

2. Be wise about the "highs" and "lows"

One of the great lessons that comes with time and age is not getting overly emotional about mountain-top experiences and the valleys. I love that Paul told Timothy to "preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2). The NRSV says, "be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable. . ." I have seen the beauty of ministry that is powerful, life-changing, and viral. I've also seen seasons of opposition, dryness, and ineffectiveness. And I think it is important to not be overly addicted to the spiritual highs and not overly depressed by the lows. Allow the sovereignty of God to settle you, calm you, and stabilize you.

3. Mine the Scriptures for hope

The Bible is filled with numerous accounts of God working in ways that were unseen at the time. Hebrews 11 gives us numerous examples of men and women who lived by faith in God's promises. Abel and Enoch, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Joseph, Moses and Joshua all learned to live by faith. In fact, it was said of Moses that he "endured as seeing Him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27). Why are these stories in the Bible? To encourage us to look beyond our present challenges.

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us (Hebrews 12:1).

You take the long view by looking for hope in the stories of God's faithfulness.

4. Embrace dependency on God

One of the beautiful things about the story of Exodus 5 is the lesson of dependency. The lesson is this: "I can't do this!" This is the way a person comes to faith in Christ – trusting in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. And this is the way we follow Jesus – "I am the vine, you are the branches. . .

apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Taking the long view means that we embrace hardship, not because it is enjoyable, but because it pushes us toward the ultimate goal of dependency on God. This is how everything works out for good (Rom. 8:28). I love how Paul says it in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9:

⁸ For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. ⁹ Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead (2 Corinthians 1:8-9).

5. Live with the promised future in mind

Why does the Bible tell us what happens at the end of days? Why does the Bible record the future defeat of Satan, judgment, and the reign of Jesus? The reason is so that we connect our present circumstances to those future events and live godly lives now. In other words, if you know the end, it helps you to live differently now. Peter points us to Jesus and to future judgment as a motivator for godly living in the face of suffering:

²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly (1 Peter 2:21-23).

Faithful followers of Jesus take the long view!

I don't know where you are today. I can only guess that there are some of you who are in the middle of a very dark and challenging season. You may be wondering: "Where are the promises of God?", or "Why is my life like this right now?", or "Why am I being personally attacked?", or "How long can I endure this challenge?"

We learn from Moses' life and from numerous other places in the New Testament that faithful followers of Jesus take the long view.

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