

Studies in Exodus No. 7

Exodus 5:1-23

April 10, 2005

The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Review

Moses and Aaron have returned to Egypt with a commission from God. We know what they are to say and we know, in a very general way, what is going to happen because in 3:19-20 the Lord has already told Moses that Pharaoh is going to be initially unwilling to let Israel go and will have to be compelled to change his mind. This the Lord will do through a series of demonstrations of divine power.

Text Comment

- v.1 Moses apparently gains an audience with Pharaoh quite easily. Whether this is because he was once adopted by an Egyptian princess is not said and is hard to know. Moses' proposal is carefully phrased. Egyptian laborers were also granted time off for the performance of religious duties.

In any case, notice that Moses makes clear, as he was told to, that he was speaking not for himself but for Yahweh. We fully expect that Moses, brimming with confidence after his acceptance by the Israelite leadership, and easily forgetting what the Lord had said about what it would take to get Pharaoh to agree, was confident that Pharaoh would acquiesce to his demands.

- v.2 For Pharaoh, of course, the demand was absurd and he had no intention of submitting to it. He may never have heard of Yahweh, but, even if he had, remember, Pharaoh himself is regarded as a god by the Egyptians. He would have thought it preposterous that he should bow to the deity of one of his subject peoples. "I do not know the Lord" means "I don't recognize the authority of your god." [Alter, 334] He was proud and confident as the leader of a great nation. This proposal got nowhere with him.
- v.3 Three days would not get them to Horeb, but it would get them clear of Egyptian control. Here the tone is more pleading and it is as if Moses and Aaron are asking for themselves, not speaking for the Lord. Pharaoh, with all of his confidence, no-nonsense approach has cowed them.

The argument that Moses and Aaron make is that if the Israelites don't obey Yahweh and go to worship him in the desert, he will punish them for their disobedience. If that occurred Pharaoh would be disadvantaged anyway by the loss of Israelite labor. Dead slaves are of no use to him.

- v.5 A typical type of response from a despot. Had Marx been living at the time, Pharaoh may have made some crack about religion being the opiate of the people.

In Pharaoh's mind the needs of the state took precedence over the whim of some god outside the official Egyptian pantheon. His situation was not unlike that of East Germany that caused them to build the Berlin Wall to stop the outward flow of human beings from East Germany or the Soviet Union in the 60s and 70s who prevented the emigration of the Jews among their population. [Ellison, 30] Pharaoh says that the Israelites are numerous, that is, they can do a lot of work. He doesn't want them idle. The loss of so much labor would cripple the economy.

He refers to the Israelites as "the people of the land," almost certainly a slur. He is patronizing them as peasants, working people who should remember their proper place.

- v.6 As will become clear as we proceed, the first group were Egyptian bosses, the second Israelite foremen.

- v.8 The idea is that they must have time on their hands if they are thinking about planning a religious pilgrimage. Tyrants have often accused their subject peoples of idleness. The Nazi's used that same accusation and applied similar punishments in their concentration camps and so did the administrators of the Soviet Gulag. Solzhenitsyn was once incarcerated in a work camp where on the wall of the cafeteria was painted the words from 2 Thessalonians 3: "If a man shall not work, he shall not eat." [Scammell, 194]

- v.9 The great stone monuments of ancient Egypt exist to this day in almost undiminished splendor. They were, however, largely confined, with the exception of statues of kings and gods, to temples and tombs. More ordinary dwellings, even palaces, were built of sun-dried bricks. Unlike in Mesopotamia, these bricks were not kiln-dried until a much later period. Straw was not, in fact, necessary; better bricks could be made without it in a kiln, but either nobody in Egypt realized this at the time or the abundance of free labor made a better technology unnecessary.

The draconian requirements that were imposed on the Israelites were intended to separate them from the propaganda they were hearing from Moses. And, as we will see, the punishment had its intended effect.

- v.12 This is the typical Hebrew extravagance. All over that part of Egypt where they lived is all that is meant. The straw that had been provided before them up to now was cut from the fields, was of even length and easy to use. Now they used whatever they could find lying on the ground.

- v.13 The point was to break their spirit as well as to get bricks.

- v.15 These Israelite foremen found themselves caught in the middle. They had been given an assignment that they could not possibly fulfill – the people could not

make as many bricks as before if they had also to provide the straw – and so were being beaten for a failure they had no power to prevent. So they took their case to Pharaoh himself.

- v.16 You'll notice that "your servants" appears 3 times in vv. 15 and 16. They are trying to make Pharaoh realize their loyalty. Still, the fault, they say is the Egyptians for not providing the straw for the bricks. It is the sort of rational argument that many oppressed people have made in the expectation that self-interest would lead the tyrant to give more reasonable instructions. But they were as misguided in this hope as were the Jews almost 3500 years later who plead with the concentration camp directors that starving and freezing the workers was bound to diminish their productivity.
- v.18 Pharaoh is implacable. Tyrants rarely admit to mistakes, however foolish, however likely to create trouble even for themselves.
- v.19 The foremen were in the greatest trouble because they were the one's likely to be punished for the inevitable failure of the Israelites to meet their quota of bricks.
- v.20 We can visualize Moses and Aaron waiting nervously outside the palace to learn what response Pharaoh had made to their pleas.
- v.21 Now it is Moses and Aaron who are to blame for Israel's misery. The foremen can see the handwriting on the wall. They expect things to get worse.
- v.23 As the Israelites turned on Moses, now Moses turns on the Lord. Moses had, you remember, expressed misgivings about the Lord's plan from the beginning and now it seems all of those misgivings had been confirmed by events. By doing what the Lord had told him to do matters had become worse not better.

Now, as we have already seen and will see again, this entire history is paradigmatic. The exodus is the great paradigmatic salvation event of the ancient epoch. It establishes the pattern by which we are taught the nature of salvation. The exodus was the great salvation event of the ancient epoch and so, in it, we find a pattern, a paradigm that teaches us about the salvation of which the exodus was only an anticipation, a dramatic foreshadowing. In it we are taught about that eternal salvation that comes to those in bondage to sin and death through a mighty act of redemption performed by God himself. We are delivered from sin and death by the power and the faithfulness of God alone. That is the message of the exodus from Egypt and why this history takes on such importance in the revelation of salvation in the Bible. Once it was God's will to place the accomplishment of salvation in the middle of history, it became necessary to help those who lived before it to understand it. And the small portion of the history that we read this evening fits into that pattern and contributes its share to the whole picture.

This history is paradigmatic in other ways, of course. It depicts tyrants and those oppressed by them in the very ways that will prove characteristic in human history. It is a

picture of what powerful people do to the weak, how they treat them, how oppression is imposed, its indignity and terror. It is a picture of the overweening pride of the faithless heart whenever it gains worldly power. It is easy to see that we could plug any number of 20th century, even some 21st century regimes, into Pharaoh's place in this narrative and any number of oppressed peoples into the place of the Israelites and not much would have to be changed. They might not be making bricks but they would be doing some hard labor for the sake of an oppressive tyrant and his tyrannical system and they would feel as hopeless as these Israelites came to feel. They would plead the injustice of their treatment; they would argue that the brutality of the tyrant actually works against his best interests. And they would make those arguments in vain as the Israelites made them in vain to Pharaoh.

All of this reminds us, by the way, how accurate the biblical history is, how true to life. The history of Israel in Egypt has been repeated more times than anyone can remember in the history of this world of sin and woe. Indeed, the same oppression, the tyranny and the suffering, has been repeated countless times in the history of the Jews up to and including the modern era. What we have in Exodus 5 is a window on the real world, even our very own world in our very own time. It is only our personal distance from such oppression and so many other instances of oppression like it that make it possible for us to read this history without deep sorrow and righteous anger. But when we see well made movies about the holocaust or read Anne Frank's *Diary*, or read stories of the mistreatment of blacks in pre-civil rights America, we are touched by the horror of this inhumanity, are angered by the evil of it, and scratch our heads at the utter foolishness of the proud, contemptuous treatment of human beings by other human beings who saw themselves superior. Some of us saw recently an account of Chinese Christians in Chinese labor camps during the middle of the 20th century and felt in a more fresh and personal way the evil of such tyranny and the heartbreak of it for those who were its victims. One thing that commends the history of salvation to every honest reader of the Bible is the way in which it is embedded in the real history of humanity in the world with all of its brutality, wickedness, and woe. One thing no one can ever justly criticize the Bible for is a superficial or sentimental view of human life in the world. The Bible, in a way that is not fully true of other religions, tells it like it is.

This history is also paradigmatic in its honest revelation of our tendency to miss the larger point of life and to fix blame for our troubles in the wrong place. Christians are as apt as were the ancient Israelites and even Moses himself to fix blame for their problems in the wrong place. Israel's problems had more to do with the unchristian system in which they lived or the plan of God for the church in their historical moment. Moses had done nothing but what he should have done. He uttered the words that God had told him to speak. Pharaoh was protecting his "system." He needed that slave labor. He needed the population to live in fear of him and to be abjectly subject to his rule. It was impossible for him to visualize Egypt's prosperity without the slave labor that Israel represented.

It was easy for the Israelite foremen to blame Moses for their troubles because he seemed to have made them worse. In fact, as we will see as we move on, Moses was not the

cause of these troubles. The contest was not between Moses and Pharaoh but between Pharaoh and the Lord and events fell out as they did precisely for that reason. Christians should be very clear-headed about why things happen in this world and should be always sharply aware of the contest that is underway between the living God and spiritual systems of humanity that are in rebellion against him. It can be very tough on individuals caught up in that contest (think of Job, for example) but it is very often not the individuals but the cosmic battle that churns up the difficulties and trials of life that individuals must face.

But, I want us to consider this history as paradigmatic, as illustrating a pattern, in another way. Pharaoh is presented here as a king against whom no one could stand. Certainly Moses and Aaron and then the Israelite foremen were no match for him. They said their piece and things got worse instead of better. They demanded that he accede to their request and he laughed at them and tightened his noose.

But, dismayed as Moses was by Pharaoh's response to his deliverance of the Lord's demand, he should have been neither dismayed nor surprised. In fact, had he paid more careful attention to what the Lord had said to him at the bush, he would have expected precisely the reply Pharaoh gave him. The Lord had said, as we read in 3:19-20:

“But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him. So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go.”

Moses, like us, forgot *that* part of the Lord's Word, or if he didn't forget it, he didn't pay careful attention to it. If he had he would have known that it was not going to be so simple a thing as telling Pharaoh that Israel had to leave and have the king slap him on the back and wish him and his people a pleasant journey.

Now, it is true that the Lord did not tell Moses precisely what to expect. He didn't say, “Now, the first time you tell him to let my people go, he's going to make conditions harder for the Israelites. But, not to worry, that is all part of my plan.” The Lord will tell Moses virtually that, but not until later. Still, he gave Moses a very clear indication that Pharaoh would not willingly let Israel go. He would have to be forced to do so by great demonstrations of God's power. Pharaoh's intransigence, therefore, *was* part of the divine plan. It was the background against which God would reveal his saving love and power to his people and to the world. Without an unwilling Pharaoh, there would have been no atoning blood sparing the Israelite families from the angel of God's wrath, no exodus, and no crossing of the sea.

In Ephesians 3:8-13 we read Paul say:

“Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the

manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In other words, in the ordinary course of our lives, in the fulfilling of our calling as Christians, in serving the Lord in this world, in bearing witness to his saving grace in Christ, in living a godly life, *we are demonstrating divine reality to the unseen world*. We are proving God’s wisdom and goodness to his enemies, both those we can see and those we cannot.

But, you see, so much of God’s wisdom cannot be demonstrated in a fair day. An easy world and a trouble free life do not make for the demonstration of God’s grace and his power. There must be darkness if the light of God’s glory is to be revealed in its brilliance to minds and hearts. There must be bondage for there to be the demonstration of God’s redeeming love and power. There must be misery and trouble if the peace that passes all understanding is to be revealed in its wonder. There must be a proud, vainglorious, intransigent Pharaoh, if there is to be a Passover Lamb and an exodus.

This principle is, of course, writ large over every part of human life. I just read a few days back John Keegan’s scintillating short biography of Winston Churchill. And one of the things that a reader cannot help but noticing about the life of that 20th century titan, is that trouble and disaster made that man. They made his fame and his greatness. Were it not for England’s desperate hours during the first and second world wars, you and I would not know who Winston Churchill was. It may even be true to say, variegated as Churchill’s accomplishments were and brilliant a man as he was in several ways, had there been no Adolf Hitler, there would have been no Winston Churchill, at least not the great man of modern history.

And, of course, this simple fact is an axiom of biblical revelation. Were there no Pharaoh, there would have been no Moses, at least no Moses such as we have come to know, no Moses who still strides across the map of world history after these 3500 years. And, in the same way, had there been no Jericho there would have been no Joshua; had there been no Goliath and no Saul there would have been no David; had there been no Ahab and Jezebel there would have been no Elijah; had there been no Sennacherib there would have been no Hezekiah; and, much more importantly, had there been no rebellious Jewish church there would have been no Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

It is a bottom fact of biblical revelation that the rebellion and the opposition of this world, sinful and wicked as it is, coming as it does out of the rebellious hearts of men; aided as it is by the subtle craft of the Devil, is, also and nevertheless, the stage upon which God directs the drama of redemption. None of this rebellion comes as a surprise to him. None of it frustrates his purpose and plan. It is precisely the backdrop chosen by him against which to display the glory of his saving love and power.

And since the only thing that matters is that a man or woman in this world come to believe in God and confess Christ as Lord and Savior, no wonder it is essential that we

see very clearly the display of God's love and glory. Whether we speaking of the oppression and persecution of the church in some place, the systematic opposition to God's message, or whether we are thinking of the individual circumstances of a Christian's life, always this: they are backdrops against which is being displayed the glory of God in the redemption of the world.

It is entirely proper for Christians to wonder at and to mourn over the terrible evil that is done in this world and the suffering that is caused by that evil. It is even proper for them to wonder aloud what God is doing and why when they see such suffering and are made to feel the woe of it as we so often are if our hearts have not become hard. We see such anguished questions being raised often enough in the prayers of the Psalms and those prayers, by God's appointment, became hymns to be used in the worship of God. There is another side to this story, to be sure.

But, here we are reminded that we will be more confused that we ought to be, that we will take false steps that will make life and faith more difficult, if we forget, as Moses did, as the Israelites did, *that God has other purposes in the events of this world than we realize, that the demonstration of God's grace, love, truth, and power to this world and to the spiritual world* requires Pharaohs who make our lives more difficult, much more difficult, before God makes them wonderfully better.

The Israelites' fundamental mistake, a mistake that Moses shared for a short time, was supposing that God's first and great interest was in relieving them of their pain. It was not so. His first and great interest is revealing himself to the world and to his people, demonstrating his power and his grace, the wonder of his love and salvation. That revelation, upon which the salvation of the world depends, upon which the eternal happiness of vast multitudes of human beings absolutely depends, requires the troubles of our lives, the difficulties we must endure, the temptations we must face.

This is a summons for us to look up and out. We view our lives in too narrow a compass. We see them only in terms of our own circumstances. We must rather, if we would think rightly about our lives in this world, and about our trials, think of our lives as part of the great drama of world history, of the demonstration of God's nature and character to his rebellious creation. Think of your private life in those cosmic terms and it will nerve you, steel you to live more courageously, with a greater determination to prove the Lord's wisdom and grace to the principalities and powers, and to live more defiantly in the face of the opposition, even the oppression of the world. The Lord is with us *and we shall prevail*. Let us live so as to be able to enjoy the victory when it comes, feeling that we had a small share in it because we demonstrated in this way and that that faith in Christ is the victory that overcomes the world.