

Ministry of Grace Church

Exodus 5- Speaker Notes

Moses has just encountered God at the burning bush on Mt. Sinai and has had a discussion with Him about what Moses is supposed to do for God. He and Aaron then had a meeting with the leaders of Israel revealing to them that God has heard their pleas and is going to lead them out of their Egyptian bondage.

However, before we talk about the next actions by Moses and Aaron, I think it's time that we had a little discussion about monotheism versus polytheism. This will help us understand some of the nuances of Moses's negotiations with Pharaoh.

Polytheism, also called Paganism, is a system where the gods (Hebrew *el* = possessor of power) each exert their power and authority only in their own special realm and they are constantly challenging and being challenged by other gods for control. Sometimes the rain waters the crops and at other times the sun parches them. According to paganists, this is because the gods are battling with each other. In a polytheistic universe, you would see lots of power, but very little control. No one can predict which one will have control at any given point in time.

Paganism began in the dawn of history. Its logic is pretty straightforward. It's based on fear. Man finds himself at the mercy of the forces of nature, be it wind, rain, heat, snow, or the lack of any one or all of these. Throw in earthquakes, killer storms, wild beasts and pestilence and the fact that man has little, if anything that he can do to prevent or predict these. What you now have is a readymade environment for fear.

To the pagans, there are powerful forces behind each of these gods and they give the appearance of being at most, indifferent to mankind. On some occasions, they might even give the appearance of intentionally making life more difficult for mankind, but typically these powers have no great concern for anything but their own cosmic wars. So, what is man to do? To the pagan mind, an offering of some value just might cause one of their gods to ease up on man, at least for a little while. But, in spite of the effort and personal cost of the offerings, man has no way of knowing if it has had, or will have, any effect on the decisions of the god to whom the offering is made. The alternative, doing nothing, seems like futility. It gives the gods free reign to do as they please. That sounds like a no-win situation to me.

Enter monotheism, the notion that there is one all-powerful God. A creator God, if you will. An intelligent being who is neither capricious nor arbitrary. Everything He does is in accordance with His eternal master plan. The very presence of mankind was His idea and, far from being indifferent to man, He actually wants to have a personal relationship with His created beings.

Consider this: if the universe as we know it just suddenly happened, if it was just the chance result of a big explosion some 13.8 billion years ago, then nothing around us is the product of any intention. Man's responsibility, then, is to survive the best that he can in an uncertain universe, and he can make up his own rules as he goes along. He certainly is not expected to have a relationship with the big bang itself. If, on the other hand, we are not here as the result of mere chance, then everything that exists is as it is because the creator-God intended it to be just as it is – including you and me. The fact that we are aware of our existence is His real gift, called life, and we quite literally owe Him everything. Add to all of this the fact that this creator-God has revealed Himself to his created beings and seeks a personal relationship with us. This changes everything!

Here's how Rabbi David Fohrman expressed the uniqueness of monotheism:

The idea that a human being ought to actually feel love toward the Divine is perhaps the great innovation of monotheism. Take a look at the Shema—the basic credo of the faith of Israel. First come the words: “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” That sentence appeals to the mind; it expresses acceptance of an idea—belief in the One God. Now look at the very next words, and you will find that they address not the mind but the heart: “And you shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your might, and with all your soul.” The Torah is clear about this. The most direct corollary of monotheism is love.

As we have said before, the battle between Moses and Pharaoh is not so much about releasing some slaves as it is about determining which is the true belief system, polytheism or monotheism. We're about to see how Pharaoh reacted when confronted with the idea of a creator-God. From this point on, until the end of chapter 14, we will witness the battle between Pharaoh and Moses, between polytheism and monotheism. Eventually Pharaoh will realize that his paganism is a lie and that there really *is* one all-powerful creator-God. But false religious beliefs are hard to abandon. Even after Pharaoh sees the truth about our God, he will hold on tenaciously to his false gods and his own self-image as one of those gods.

In the previous chapter, Moses and Aaron went to the leaders of Israel and shared with them the instructions that God gave to Moses. The Israelites were delighted that God was aware of their situation and that He was going to rescue them from the life of slavery that they were currently trapped in.

Once Moses and Aaron convinced the children of Israel that they have, indeed, been sent by God to lead them out of Egypt, their next step was to obtain an audience with Pharaoh. We will see them deliver two speeches to Pharaoh, trying to convince him to let the Israelites go.

Exodus 5:1

Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.’”

This is the first of two speeches that Moses delivers to Pharaoh. It is clear-cut and succinct. He uses God's personal name (YHVH, Yahweh, or Jehovah), the self-existent one. This is the name that Moses was instructed to use with the Israelites. This is who He is. Moses then informs Pharaoh that this is the God of Israel (the Elohim of Israel, the “putter forth of power” of Israel.) Pharaoh knew the names of many gods and now he has heard the name of the God of Israel. Incidentally, this is the first time in the Bible that He is referred to as the God of Israel.

As an outgrowth of polytheism, the common belief at the time of these events was that the strength of a god was indicated by the power and prosperity of the people worshipping him. Therefore, Pharaoh would have perceived the God of Israel as a weak God, since the Israelites were the lowliest of all the people in Egypt.

Moses informed Pharaoh that the God of Israel wants his people to go into the wilderness and celebrate, that is, they were to have a feast with him. This would have been hard for Pharaoh to understand, because his gods did not seek fellowship with their followers. There was no personal interaction between the gods of Egypt and the Egyptians. Pharaoh, being a god himself, would naturally consider the request of Moses and Aaron to be absurd. Thus, his indignant reaction is understandable.

Exodus 5:2

But Pharaoh said, “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.”

Pharaoh’s response to Moses’s demand was, “Who is this YHVH?” Apparently, Pharaoh had never heard of Yahweh, the God of Israel, or if he had, he did not consider Him to be a god on the same level as the gods of Egypt (including Pharaoh). As a result, Pharaoh believed himself to personally be stronger than the weak god of the Israelite slaves.

I like the way Matthew Henry explains Pharaoh’s thinking in his *Commentary on the Whole Bible*:

How proudly he speaks of himself: “*That I should obey his voice; I, the king of Egypt, a great people, obey the God of Israel, a poor enslaved people? Shall I, that rule the Israel of God, obey the God of Israel? No, it is below me; I scorn to answer his summons.*”

Pharaoh has just rejected the command that God instructed Moses to deliver. What is Moses supposed to do now? He could go back to God and ask for further instructions. Or, he could up the ante with an even stronger demand, indicating the magnitude of the wrath of God if he refused. But, he did neither of these. In fact, on the surface, what he said next doesn’t make any sense at all. Moses appeared to be arguing from weakness rather than from power. Here’s what he and Aaron said to Pharaoh.

Exodus 5:3-5

Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God, lest he fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword.” 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.” And Pharaoh said, “Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens!”

Moses and Aaron said that their God (not YHVH, but the Elohim of the Hebrews) had met with them. The particular nuance of the word translated “met” seems to indicate that it was simply a “chance” encounter, nothing planned and certainly nothing of particular significance. Then the two emissaries of the all-powerful God of the universe seemed to plead with Pharaoh to let them go because of their fear that their God would kill them if they didn’t. Did they really believe that this pleading and sniveling was going to convince Pharaoh to let them go after his refusal of the first demand.

In this second speech, Moses and Aaron said they wanted to take a three-day journey into the wilderness so that they could offer a sacrifice” Wait a minute! Did they just lie to Pharaoh? Were they really planning on only going three days into the wilderness and then returning to Egypt? Is this what YHVH instructed them to say? We will never know. If Pharaoh summarily rejected their first demand, what made them think that he would acquiesce to a couple of whiners pleading like children? As it turns out, this request proved to be more effective than the original demand. Pharaoh still didn’t let the Israelites leave, but neither did he reject it out of hand as he had the first demand.

Why was this request more effective? Probably because Pharaoh had no understanding of the kind of God the Hebrews served. So, the second request was expressed in a manner consistent with how a polytheist would understand his gods. It didn’t result in the Israelites being released from slavery, but it did begin an education process whereby Pharaoh would eventually believe in the God of the Hebrews.

Notice the humility of the request (let us go sacrifice to our God in order to avoid a plague). And, notice the arrogance of the response (you people are being idle, so get back to work). The implication in Pharaoh’s response is that the only people who should be worshipping God are those who have nothing else to do. To Pharaoh, any worship of any god was a luxury, not a matter of necessity.

Exodus 5:6-12

The same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their foremen, “You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as in the past; let them go and gather straw for themselves. 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.’ Let heavier work be laid on the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words.” So the taskmasters and the foremen of the people went out and said to the people, “Thus says Pharaoh, ‘I will not give you straw. Go and get your straw yourselves wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced in the least.’” So the people were scattered throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw.

Many of the ancient buildings in Egypt were made of brick. These bricks were not fired in a kiln as bricks are today. Instead, they were composed of mud clay mixed with chopped straw and were then left in the hot sun to dry. The straw served to hold the mud together and it enabled the dried brick to more easily release from the form it was made in.

Pharaoh, either out of spite or from the reputation of the Israelites as lazy workers, determined to make them work harder. They were no longer provided with all the materials necessary to make the bricks, but were required to gather the straw for themselves. Normally, the straw was provided from the threshing houses where the grain was separated from the straw and the straw was then used for brick making. It appears from verse twelve that the Israelites were forced to go out into the fields and gather the stubble which had been left when the grain stalks were harvested. As a result, not only were they required to gather their own materials, but they were forced to get that which was more difficult and time consuming to acquire and to use. And they were required to make just as many bricks as previously required of them.

The foremen of the Israelites were more than just supervisors. The word “foremen” is translated from the Hebrew word *shotare*, meaning “a writer.” These were Hebrew scribes who were responsible for accounting for the number of bricks that were manufactured and delivered to the Egyptians.

Pharaoh obviously believed the request made by Moses and Aaron to be subterfuge, because he said, “pay no regard to lying words.” Instead of simply going out into the wilderness to celebrate a festival to Yahweh, as Moses and Aaron initially told Pharaoh, he believed that they were trying to lead a revolt among the people.

Exodus 5:13-16

The taskmasters were urgent, saying, “Complete your work, your daily task each day, as when there was straw.” And the foremen of the people of Israel, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten and were asked, “Why have you not done all your task of making bricks today and yesterday, as in the past?” Then the foremen of the people of Israel came and cried to Pharaoh, “Why do you treat your servants like this? No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, ‘Make bricks!’ And behold, your servants are beaten; but the fault is in your own people.”

When the Israelites were unable to deliver their daily quota, the foremen (scribes) were beaten. This indicates that their responsibility was more than just keeping records of quantities delivered. They were also expected to motivate the people to deliver their quota. When the numbers were below expectation, it was the foremen (scribes), not the workers, who were beaten. These foremen, believing that it was the arbitrary decision of the task masters to make bricks without straw, went to Pharaoh himself.

Blame/Buck-passing #1 – The children of Israel were quick to blame the Egyptian taskmasters for being unfair and brutal.

Exodus 5:17-18

But he said, “You are idle, you are idle; that is why you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD.’ Go now and work. No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number of bricks.”

To their surprise, the foremen learned from Pharaoh himself that he was the one requiring the Hebrews to gather their own straw because he believed them to be lazy. Pharaoh then demonstrated why he thought them to be lazy, “That is why you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD.’” He interpreted their desire to celebrate with their God as an excuse for not doing their work.

Blame/Buck-passing #2 – Pharaoh is the next to blame others for his action. He claims that he has to take this action because the Hebrew slaves are lazy.

Exodus 5:19-21

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.” They met Moses and Aaron, who were waiting for them, as they came out from Pharaoh; 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.”

When the foremen realized they were being treated unfairly because of what Moses and Aaron had said to Pharaoh, they confronted Moses and Aaron.

Blame/Buck-passing #3 – The foremen now blame Moses and Aaron for the way they are being treated by Pharaoh. They even proclaim a curse on Moses and Aaron (The LORD look on you and judge) They even go so far as to accuse them of wrongdoing (You ... have put a sword in their hand to kill us.)

Exodus 5:22-23

Then Moses turned to the LORD and said, “O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? 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.”

“Moses turned to the LORD” – As a result of the complaints of the foremen, Moses turned to God through prayer. I don’t think that Moses was complaining. Rather, it appears that he was seeking an explanation from God as to why things were not going as Moses had expected them to go.

We will discover in the beginning of the next chapter how gracious God is to Moses. Instead of reprimanding Moses for blaming God, He simply tells Moses “I am God and I will do what I said I would do!” This is something that we all need to keep in mind as we go through difficult times. God will do what He promised He would do. Remember:

... for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” (Hebrews 13:5b-6)

So What?

Sometimes the most grievous events in our lives are part of God’s plan and are the precursors to His blessing. When difficult times come, we are prone to complain and we often find someone else to blame. Passing the blame on to others is as old as mankind. In the Garden of Eden, when God confronted Adam about having eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he blamed Eve. She, in turn, blamed the serpent.

But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” (Genesis 3:9-13)

Sometimes difficult times are the result of the Lord’s chastening. Sometimes they are trials that He allows to test and strengthen our faith. Sometimes they are simply there as part of the path we must take for His glory. Whatever the reason, instead of blaming others we should be on our knees before God. If it is chastening, then we need to deal with the cause and confess our sins to God. Otherwise, we need to humbly accept the circumstances and ask God for wisdom to know how to deal with them. In either case, we should be thankful that He is with us and will not forsake us. No matter what the reason for difficulties in our lives, we should see them as opportunities for us to grow stronger in our faith.

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. (James 1:2-6) [NKJV]

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6-7)

In the midst of difficult times, our attitude determines our outlook. Let me say that again. In the midst of difficult times, our attitude determines our outlook. If we see these times as grievous and unfair, then we focus on ourselves instead of on God. If we see them as opportunities, then we are drawn closer to God as we get on our knees and work through the issue with Him. Keep in mind what it says in Proverbs:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. (Proverbs 3:5-6)

The Hebrew word translated “**acknowledge**” means “to be intimately familiar with.” In all your ways, that is, whatever the path in life may bring your way, stay in an intimate relationship with God. Make Him a part of your joys and your sorrows, humbly acknowledging the fact that He is our loving Heavenly Father and we are His faithful children.

Are you undergoing difficulties right now? Do you see them as grievous or do you see them as God’s strengthening of your faith and your relationship with Him? Are you going through these times in your own strength, fighting your own battles, or are you resting in the loving arms of your Father as you gather stubble to make your bricks.

Just because it is hard, doesn’t mean it can’t be joyful!

Let’s Pray!