

Sermon on Exodus 5:1-23 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

This week I have been thinking about the difference between what we enjoy in our entertainment versus what we prefer to happen in our own lives. The best stories to hear and to watch are those where the situations go from bad to worse before there is resolution. The predicament getting stickier captivates us and makes the eventual victory all the more sweet. The heroes that escape death at the hands of three goons by seconds only to find themselves surrounded by 20. The tension builds, the drama increases... and we munch on the popcorn in anticipation of what comes next. When the star gets out of a pinch and into a pickle.

But bring the drama of things going from bad to worse in our own lives, however glamorous they are, and we can't take it. For good reason. It is not fun. We can't see value in it. It is suffering.

The reason though that these situations are so central to what makes for entertaining drama is that they are truthfully communicating what real life feels like. Life is painful. It is full of difficulty and more often than not it seems that things are going from bad to worse. We live with real struggle.

Inject faith into the equation and our perspectives can get all the more cloudy. Hearing of promise yet waiting on it. Embracing what we understand as a gift of resolution and having a sense that things are not getting easier.

This is exactly what we have going on in Egypt in our text for today. It is a reality that not only wears on the thinking of the people but that can be felt in the sweat of their brow.

The struggle is real and God is still good.

Exodus 5:1-23 “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.’” [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.” [3] 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.” [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.”

[10] 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. [11] Go and get your straw yourselves wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced in the least.’” [12] So the people were scattered throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. [13] The taskmasters were urgent, saying, “Complete your work, your daily task each day, as when there was straw.” [14] 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?”

[15] Then the foremen of the people of Israel came and cried to Pharaoh, “Why do you treat your servants like this? [16] 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.” [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.” [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.”

[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.” (ESV)

The covenant-making and covenant-remembering God has come to save his people. For his glory he has called Moses, imperfect and unprepared as he is, to deliver his people out of slavery and into the land they have been promised.

At the announcement of this deliverance there is celebration and worship. Generations of slavery, oppression and hardship were coming to an end! This is the story of their “exodus,” the exit from Egypt... back your bags!

Not so fast...

As we think through this burden of mud and straw, the **difficulty**, in the response we can recognize **danger and devotion** as two options and hopefully set ourselves up for **determination**, given the mighty hand of God and his promise to us in Christ.

The struggle is real and God is still good.

1) Difficulty

The mission had been accepted, Aaron met Moses in the wilderness and now they have come back to Egypt to inform the elders and the people of God's undertaking of redemption. They respond in the appropriate way, with worship. And then the Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh. To communicate the word of God and bring the people out.

Yahweh says "Let my people go!" But instead of acknowledgment and submission to that command, there is denial and more demand over the people.

Pharaoh has only what can be described as rebellious unbelief. "I don't know this Yahweh, and moreover I will not let the people go..." His professed ignorance of God's identity did not prevent him from resisting God's authority. Even when there is warning of danger, it is the work that Pharaoh is worried about... "Get back to your burdens..."

Where there should be a recognition and humbling before Yahweh, there is resistance and the opposite is done from what is commanded. Rejection and punishment for even asking. The innocent are the ones who suffer most. The children of promise given heavier work.

There is increased pressure on Israel... very real struggle. This is the bad to worse moment... Bricks without straw. The quota is the same but the materials, or lack of them, make it impossible to meet the Pharaoh's requirement.

Whiplash for the people. From worship to a crushing burden. Searching for stubble to form the bricks... the foreman beaten for not finishing the work. Freedom expected, the crack of the whip experienced.

The promise still remains. The goodness of God will be realized...

This is life. We have heard the promise. Prepared for it. And WHAM. Pain. The progression doesn't happen fast enough, the coming out of something seems more a coming through it.

We each have the mud and straw moment of our own. If it is yet to come, it will...

This exodus meant to glorify God and instead pain. This life, meant to glorify God and instead struggle... Promised salvation... release from captivity, freedom from bondage, and deliverance from oppression. Then we embrace the promise and it seems the bars gets thicker, the chains heavier, the burden unbearable.

Some of us are here today. Feeling the crack of the whip. The sting of promise delayed.

We are not left to ourselves. There is help... but how do we face it? How does Israel, the covenant people, respond?

2) Danger & Devotion

There are two reactions to the difficulty... and they tell of danger and devotion.

In the story clearly Pharaoh is the bad guy. Israel has not been disobedient. They have not in broad strokes deserved the punishment, the impossible burden. But it seems that they place the blame higher than who is actually responsible for the pain...

Beaten, it is where the foreman of the people go that leads to danger. They came and cried to Pharaoh. They had heard of God's redemption coming, they had even worshiped him for it... but they do not cry out to him. They go instead to the source of their pain hoping for a different outcome. They run back to what keeps them captive.

"Why are you treating us like this?" They hear why, because the request had been made to release the people to worship... Then they turn on Moses and Aaron, the Hebrew here essentially says they assaulted them as they came out from petitioning Pharaoh... Cursing what is promised. "It's all your fault! Because of you Egypt hates us..." They don't blame the one actually responsible... but the messenger of the promise.

I look at this and think, well that makes sense. I can see negotiating, and trying to resolve the problem... But this pain should have not been a surprise. They have heard all that Yahweh had said - how Pharaoh would resist and it would be by the mighty hand of God that they come out. But the moment it gets tense they are back to their taskmaster...

I am struck that I walk this dangerous road, just like the people of Israel... things get hard and I turn to the things things I am promised freedom from for comfort. Over and over, doing the same thing and expecting a different outcome. And each time the burden is increased...

The sin we are enslaved to - its familiarity feels like home.

"Consider a few examples: The angry man is mastered by his anger. When something makes him mad, he cannot control his temper. He always has to lash out. The lustful man is mastered by his lust. When temptation comes, he helplessly gives in to his craving for pleasure. The selfish woman is mastered by her selfishness. She spends all her time thinking of her own desires, and then pitying herself when they go unmet. She has no love left to give to anyone else. The gossip is mastered by her tongue. She cannot resist the urge to go tell somebody the latest news."

We keep running to the little lords that attempt to keep us captive as if they will make it all better... "Until we surrender to Jesus, our entire orientation is sinful..." and we will keep embracing the hand that swings the whip.

As sinners we get so used to sinning that we scarcely recognize our bondage. Exodus, this old, old, story, gives us a powerful picture of what it really means to be enslaved. And what it really means to be set free... Through the struggle.

And it is not found in retreat back to our captors... there is another response. Because Moses does something, that at first I saw as troublesome, but realized it is exactly the model for 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? [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.” (ESV)

In my house lately I have been trying to reform my children from complainers to calm and steady, obedient little minions! And to that end I have been using the British phrase “mustn't grumble!” This is exactly how I want to approach Moses here. The “church lady” in me says, take the licks, keep a stiff upper lip, play it cool like everything is okay...

My gut said here is Moses complaining to God again... despising his call. But the Spirit said, look to whom he turned. This is actually a bad situation - it hurts, the people are breaking under the burden - Moses is rightly troubled... He could have joined the Foremen of the people and ran to Pharaoh, pleading for a return to the old way of things.

Instead he goes to the promise giver. He laments, “why God? Where is deliverance?” This is his devotion... to the One who has called him, to the I AM, positioning himself to hear from God by turning to him.

God it hurts! What are you up to? This is the appropriate response here. Because it is before God. To the One that has decreed all of life. And this is the biblical model for us. The psalmists will cry out in this way. Feeling the weight of life, of oppression, of struggle, and turning to God. It is the declaration that the struggle is real.

And I have come to cherish these laments, and Moses' here, not only because it gives permission to be honest, but because they are to God. It is not merely poetry of pain but communicating to the One that has given the promise, who holds us and hears our cries.

Positioning us to hear his answer.

Exodus 6:1 “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.” (ESV)

Exodus 6:6-8 “ Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. [7] I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. [8] I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.’” (ESV)

The story isn't over yet Moses... I am working, and this will show my glory, my power, and my promise.

In your devotion keep coming back... keeping coming to be reminded, know that life is unfolding that you "shall see what I will do." Trust God's strong hand.

This is for us too. In the midst of very real struggle. In the pain of the repercussions of sin, brokenness, damaged relationships. External oppression. To turn to the One who holds it all, and who has promised salvation.

To see the fullness of his story that we would run to and trust him. Determined to get to the promised land.

3) Determination

The good news of salvation means freedom for captives who thought that they would never be set free. What we need is someone like Moses to set us free from bondage...

"The Bible teaches that Jesus came to "deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" (Hebrews 2:15). Jesus is the mighty deliverer who rescues us from our captivity to Satan, the strong Savior who frees us from our bondage to death, and the great emancipator who liberates us from our slavery to sin. He does all this through the cross, which was the death of our sin, and also through the empty tomb, which is the guarantee of our release. It is through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus that we pass from slavery into freedom."

It is the captives that Jesus has come for. The hurting. The burdened. The struggling. And he doesn't just give the promise and then tell us to accomplish it. He uses his mighty hand to deliver. And he has said to expect it... "you will be hated by all for my name's sake." The sickness of sin must be put off at every opportunity... that he is our hope still in affliction. Jesus takes on the pain, the burden, the struggle...

This is part of life and all the more in the Christian life. Having been removed from the kingdom of a tyrant, he lashes out and attempts to damage what has been redeemed, but never beyond what is ultimately for God's glory and our good, just like the straw and mud of Exodus 5.

"Sometimes God permits what He hates to accomplish that which He loves!" -Joni Eareckson Tada

There is a strong temptation, when things get hard, to return to bondage. The only way to resist this temptation - and thus to remain free in Christ - is to hold on to the cross and trust in its power to save. Where we turn matters.

We go back to the promise, to Jesus. To more than a land, to an inheritance in him. To the forgiveness of sin, the gift of life, the comfort and empowerment of the Spirit. To being who Jesus says we are, chosen, redeemed, free, headed somewhere.

When it gets hard, we know we are not disciplined slaves but beloved Children.

Romans 8:14-17 “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. [15] For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” [16] The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, [17] and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” (ESV)

Willing to follow Jesus even in suffering, because he is better. And nothing can separate us from God in the love of Christ, no struggle, no pain, no burden... And it is to Jesus we cry out. “Oh Lord!” And may we all the more hear his response, “Now you shall see what I will do with my strong hand...”

Oh, that our trouble would turn to trust, and that Christ would be glorified in our exodus.

Chuck Spurgeon - speaking of Moses' faith and ours “O servants of God, be calm and confident. Go on preaching the gospel. Go on teaching in the Sunday-school. Go on giving away the tracts. Go on with steady perseverance. Be ye sure of this, ye shall not labor in vain or spend your strength for naught. Do you still stutter? Are you still slow of speech? Nevertheless, go on. Have you been rebuked and rebuffed? Have you had little else than defeat? This is the way of success... Toil on and believe on. Be steadfast in your confidence, for with a high hand and an outstretched arm the Lord will fetch out his own elect, and he will fetch some of them out by you. Only trust in the Lord and hold on the even tenor of your way.”

The struggle is real and God is still good. His promise endures. His redemption is sure, accomplished and for those that believe in Jesus.

Response:

Be held - It is okay to not be okay... but it doesn't have to be the end of your story. Turn to Jesus, believe in him. Hear his response to you, see his work, his suffering for you...

Hold on - Safe in Christ, empowered by his Spirit... Don't give up! **2 Corinthians 4:16-18** “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. [17] For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, [18] as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (ESV)

Don't be alone - Engage in gospel-reminding community. To hear of the promise, to share your burdens, to comfort one another, to look to Jesus together. To know that he is good.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, [4] who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. [5] For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.” (ESV)

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The increasing tension of the bad to worse drama in Exodus can only be sweet when we have a full vision, when we see how the story ends. The mighty hand moves, the people freed. Redemption working.

We have before us, in the word, our own story, of exodus, of redemption and how it all ends. May the Lord give us a vision for his glory and our good, in all of life.