

FROM BAD TO WORSE

SERIES: EXODUS - JOURNEY TO FREEDOM



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Exodus 5:1-23
Fifth Message
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Exodus 5:1-23

Exodus is a personally meaningful book.

First, I identify with Moses. Moses left his home in Egypt, spent forty years in the wilderness, then returned. I grew up on the Peninsula, then moved to Santa Cruz County, then to Redding, then to the East Bay, and finally to Boise, Idaho. I, like Moses, returned.

Also, in returning to Egypt, Moses had to confront his fears. When I first studied and taught the book of Exodus, identifying with Moses helped me confront my fears.

Second, Exodus is the first book I taught in its entirety at PBC. I did so in two ministries in 1995-97. Some of you who were part of the Friday Fellowship or the Young Adults Fellowship back then may remember. Exodus became a foundational book for me, especially as an interpreter and teacher of the Scriptures.

So, I have come full circle in two ways, returning both to the Peninsula and to the book of Exodus.

Excruciating circumstances

The poet Christian Wiman, who dealt with a severe form of cancer in his thirties, writes:

I have been in and out of treatment, in and out of the hospital. I have had bones die and bowels fail; joints lock in my face and arms and legs, so that I could not eat, could not walk. I have filled my body with mingled mouse and human antibodies, cutting-edge small molecules, old-school chemotherapies eating into me like animate acids. I have passed through pain I could never have imagined, pain that seemed to incinerate all my thoughts of God and to leave me sitting there in ashes, alone.¹

Excruciating circumstances seemed to “incinerate” all Wiman’s thoughts about God. Difficult circumstances can do that, can’t they? They can make you think that the word of God is invalid. In Exodus 5, things go from bad to worse for the people of Israel.

But in Exodus 4, things were looking up. In the wilderness, the Lord called Moses, who had fled Egypt forty years earlier, to return to Egypt to participate in the Lord’s deliverance of Israel. Moses, though at first reluctant, made his way back to Egypt. His brother Aaron went out to meet him; then the two of them gathered the elders and people of Israel, who believed and worshiped.

Moses and Aaron approach Pharaoh

Exodus 5:1-3:

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.”

Moses and Aaron, encouraged by their reception before the elders and people of Israel, now approach Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. However, they apparently disregard the Lord’s instructions to them first by not bringing with them the elders and second by not employing the words the Lord gave them (Exodus 3:18).

We must be careful not to get too high on our experience of what the Lord has done that we think we can handle things without him.

Not surprisingly, Pharaoh denies their request. Pharaoh, who has his own gods and even sees himself as a god, sees no reason why he should submit to the God of a people he rules over. What matters to Pharaoh—and all tyrants—is power, and he will consider no challenge to his rule.

He seeks no answer to his rhetorical—and dismissive—question, “Who is the Lord . . . ?” He

will nevertheless get an answer in the not-too-distant future. True human freedom, by the way, is dependent on knowledge of the Lord, and Pharaoh acknowledges that he does not know the Lord, which comes off as something like a boast.

Moses and Aaron respond by finally employing the words the Lord gave them, though they amend those words, likely based on Moses' own experience, by claiming that the Lord may strike them down if Pharaoh denies their request, thus appealing to Pharaoh's desire for a large, ongoing slave labor force.²

The word translated "fall upon" (*paga'*) was also used in Exodus 4:24, where it was reported that the Lord "met" (*paga'*) Moses and sought to put him to death for his failure to circumcise his son. Moses knew of the consequences for not serving the Lord. In the end, refusing to obey the Lord meant death for Pharaoh and the Egyptians. It was they, not the Israelites, whom the Lord met with pestilence and the sword. Indeed, the consequences for not serving the Lord are dire.

We don't need to amend the words of the Lord to make them more palatable. However, we can feel free to improvise based on the words the Lord has given us.

How does Pharaoh respond to Moses and Aaron's "take two"?

An impossible demand

Exodus 5:4-9:

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."

Mostly sticking to the Lord's words doesn't get Moses and Aaron anywhere. In fact, Pharaoh accuses Moses and Aaron of filling the heads of their people with starry-eyed ideas and thereby distracting them from their work. On the one hand, the "many" people are an asset to Pharaoh, but on the other hand, they pose a threat to him if not kept in check.

Pharaoh shows the people who's boss. Moses had conveyed to Pharaoh that the Lord says, "Let my people go"; Pharaoh cracks down and says "let them go"—but only to gather straw for themselves. Without straw, the clay bricks would shrink, develop cracks, and lose their shape. In requiring the Israelites to gather their own straw, Pharaoh also requires them to meet the same quota—an impossible demand.

Pharaoh claims to see through the request to leave Egypt. He accuses the people wanting to leave Egypt not to sacrifice to their God but because they are "idle" and don't want to work. He hopes the heavier workload will dissuade them from listening to Moses and Aaron, whom he accuses of speaking "lying words"—or false words.

The deceiver of the whole world

Evil opposes us: Satan, sin, and death. According to the New Testament, God has delivered us, is delivering us, and will deliver us from evil so that we may serve him today, tomorrow, and forever. Our prayer, "deliver us from evil," will be answered (Matthew 6:13). Moreover, it is being answered, even now, as the Lord moves things into place in unseen ways.

Do you realize that? If you believe in Christ, you will be delivered from whatever is oppressing you and you are being delivered from whatever is oppressing you even now. The same goes for all those who have placed their faith in Christ.

The biblical promises of deliverance are true words. However, Satan wants us to believe that they are false words, and he wants us to "pay no regard" to them.

So, what does he do? He tries to persuade us that difficult circumstances—for us, for our loved ones, for the world—invalidate the biblical promises of deliverance. For many, the demands of the workplace, and life in general, in our area can blind us to the truth of the Scriptures. By use of difficult circumstances, Satan attempts to convince us that what's true is false.

Satan is “a liar and the father of lies” and “the deceiver of the whole world” (John 8:44, Revelation 12:9). By means of deceit, Satan wants to lead us away from “a sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3).

If he is successful, he destroys hope. If he destroys hope, he keeps us serving his purposes, not the Lord’s.

Difficult circumstances, as in the case of the poet Christian Wiman, can incinerate thoughts about God.

During difficult circumstances

Yes, Satan attempts to use difficult circumstances to dissuade us from believing promises of deliverance, but do difficult circumstances make those words any less true? No, they do not. As we sing, “Your promise still stands / Great is Your faithfulness, faithfulness.”

During my sabbatical, I returned to the church where I first met Jesus.

Forty-nine years ago, some friends brought me to a youth group meeting. Thirty or so teenagers crammed into a small room at the church and sat cross-legged on the floor. The youth pastor, also sitting cross-legged on the floor, said, “Open to Ephesians.”

I didn’t know what Ephesians was. The girl sitting to my left, noticing my ignorance, put a Bible in my hand and opened it to Ephesians. Thus, I was introduced to the Scriptures, to spiritual community, and to Jesus.

When I returned to the church during my sabbatical to worship on a Sunday morning, we sang “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” and I thought, “Yes, Lord, you have been faithful, not only to bring me to this church forty-nine years ago but in all the days since then.”

Only one person remains at the church from the days when I was involved: a woman named Carol. After the worship service, she gave me a tour of the church. Together, Carol and I stepped into the small room where I attended my first Bible study.

As I stood in the room and looked about, I remembered where I first sat, cross-legged on the floor. I could picture the youth pastor telling us to open to Ephesians. I could picture the girl next to me reaching over and putting a Bible in my hand.

I didn’t have to picture what she looks like today, however. All I had to do was turn to my left. She was standing, not sitting, next to me this time. Carol is the one who handed me the Bible forty-nine years ago.

Your promise still stands. Great is your faithfulness.

During difficult circumstances, God is working, often in unseen ways. In fact, he is working *through* difficult circumstances. As we sing, “Even when I don’t see it, you’re working.”

Absorb the word

If the evil one wants you to pay no regard to the word, do the opposite: absorb it. Absorb the word. During difficult circumstances, absorb the word, especially biblical words of deliverance. The Spirit breathed out those words, and as you give them your attention, the Spirit will help you assimilate them. Consider:

—“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13-14).

—“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery (Hebrews 2:14-15).

—“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever” (Galatians 1:3-5).

—“For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

—“He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again” (2 Corinthians 1:10).

Do not let difficult circumstances rob you of hope.

When people meet with me to discuss a troublesome personal issue, my normal practice is simply to listen and ask questions for at least thirty minutes. While

I'm listening, I'm also trying to listen to the Spirit to understand how I can encourage them from the Scriptures. Before they leave, I usually give them a biblical passage or two or three.

"Read this over and over again," I tell them. "Meditate on it. Pray through it. Get it into your system."

What happens to the Israelite foremen when they implement Pharaoh's edict?

Beaten and berated

Exodus 5:10-14:

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?"

The Egyptian taskmasters and the Israelite foremen convey Pharaoh's new demands to the people, but the people are unable to meet the same quota while having to scavenge for their own straw. The Israelite foreman pay the price: their Egyptian overlords beat and berate them.

When Moses and Aaron had returned from the wilderness, the people believed that the Lord was concerned for them and they worshiped him. Things were looking up. There was hope for deliverance. Immediately thereafter, however, things get worse—a lot worse.

Sometimes, just when things are looking up, they fall apart.

Foreman blame Moses and Aaron

Exodus 5:15-21:

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."

Earlier, the people of Israel "cried out" because of their slavery, and the Lord heard their cry (Exodus 2:23-25). Now, the foremen of Israel cry out—this time not to the Lord but to Pharaoh. The foremen blame Pharaoh's people for making unrealistic demands.

Pharaoh responds by repeating his earlier accusation and intensifying it: "You are idle, you are idle." He not only accuses them of being lazy but also of being very lazy. And no, Pharaoh won't change his demands.

Pharaoh tells the foremen, "Go now and work." The Lord used the words translated "go" (*halak*) and "work" (*obed*) in Exodus 4:23 when speaking of his son, Israel: "Let my son go [*halak*] that he may serve [*obed*] me." Through Moses and Aaron, the Lord will speak often to Pharaoh with the same refrain (Exodus 7:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3).

In two sentences, the foremen call the people of Israel "servants" of Pharaoh three times. The deeper truth, though, is that they are servants of the Lord.

Whomever we serve, no matter how oppressive the circumstances, the deeper truth is that we are servants of the Lord. The apostle Paul told slaves in his day, even after the coming of Christ and the Spirit, "You are serving the Lord Christ" (Colossians 3:24).

The foremen, having blamed the Egyptians for their problems, now find two other people to blame: Moses and Aaron. From their perspective, Moses and Aaron, by approaching Pharaoh, caused the Egyptians to crack down on the Israelites.

Moses and Aaron earlier expressed concern that the Lord could kill some of the Israelites with a “sword” if Pharaoh didn’t meet their demands; now the foremen of Israel accuse Moses and Aaron of putting a “sword” in the hands of the Egyptians, whom they perceive to be on the verge of killing the people.

Common human response

Sometimes, when you participate in the purposes of God, life gets harder, not easier. Because we have a spiritual enemy who opposes the purposes of God, we can expect life to get harder at times.

A common human response, though, is to find someone to blame. The foremen found multiple people to blame. Many politicians win the support they crave by telling us who to blame. Blame the Republicans. Blame the Democrats. Blame the immigrants. Blame the elites.

In C.S. Lewis’ fanciful depiction of hell in *The Great Divorce*, you can live anywhere you want. Turns out that no one wants to live near anyone. In fact, people live millions of miles away from each other because they can’t stand each other. Two people set out to see Napoleon, but it took them 15,000 years to reach his house. Napoleon had built himself a huge and beautiful house.

The two visitors peered into the window and saw him walking back and forth. They watched him for an entire year, and he never rested. He was muttering to himself all the time: “It was Soult’s fault. It was Ney’s fault. It was Josephine’s fault. It was the fault of the Russians. It was the fault of the English.” The two onlookers reported that Napoleon looked tired but didn’t seem able to stop walking or complaining.³

How does Moses react to all this?

Where are your wonders?

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.”

The foremen of Israel blamed the Egyptians and then blamed Moses and Aaron. Moses, in turn, questions the Lord for sending him to Pharaoh in the first place.

Pharaoh has “done evil” to the people by increasing their burdens, but Moses feels that the Lord has “done evil” through Pharaoh.

The Lord had promised that he would use Moses to deliver the people of Israel from Egypt, but Moses observes that the Lord has not delivered them even a little bit (Exodus 3:7-10, 16-17).⁴

Yes, the Lord had informed Moses that Pharaoh would be resistant, but he also promised that Pharaoh would relent after he struck Egypt with all his wonders (Exodus 3:19-20). Well, Moses must be thinking, “Where are the wonders?”

Moses was worried that he didn’t have the speaking ability to persuade Pharaoh, and sure enough, he came to Pharaoh to “speak” in the name of the Lord, and Pharaoh hasn’t listened (Exodus 4:10). In fact, Pharaoh has made things worse. Moses fears that his reluctance to return to Egypt was justified.

After I left journalism for pastoral ministry, there were more than a few occasions when I felt like Moses. Not only did I ask, “Why did you ever send me?” I also asked, “Did I hear you right?”

However, Moses doesn’t run, as he did when he faltered forty years earlier. Yes, Moses questions the Lord, but he doesn’t ask to be excused, as he did when the Lord met with him in the wilderness. He stays present with the Lord.

Stay present with the Lord

Instead of blaming people, do what Moses did: turn to the Lord. If you please, question the Lord. If you participate in the purposes of God and life gets harder, not easier, go ahead and ask him, “Where are your wonders?” If you feel that you lack what’s needed to participate in God’s purposes, go ahead and ask him, “Why did you ever send me?”

Don’t run. Don’t ask to be excused. Stay present with the Lord.

Somehow, Christian Wiman, despite the excruciating circumstances he endured, was able to write this: “I have come back, for now, even hungrier for God, for Christ, for all the difficult bliss of this life I have been given.” It’s possible.

However, Wiman also adds, “But there is great weariness too. And fear. And fury.”⁵ You can have all that and stay present with the Lord.

In good time

During difficult circumstances, absorb the word and stay present with the Lord. In fact, absorbing the word will help you stay present with the Lord.

The answers to your questions will come, if answers there be, in good time. First, your faith needs to be stretched. The Lord doesn’t exactly answer Moses’ questions, but in the very next verse, he speaks to Moses in a way that renders Moses’ questions all but irrelevant. So, what does the Lord say? Read it for yourself. And come back next week!

Endnotes

1 Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013), 30.

2 Although the Lord has plans to liberate the Israelites from Egypt, he may have instructed Moses to request a three-day journey to show that Pharaoh was not even willing to grant this small request.

3 C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: The McMillan Co, 1946), 20-21.

4 Literally, Moses says that “you have not delivered, delivered” your people, echoing Pharaoh’s contention that the people are “idle . . . idle.”

5 Wiman, 30.