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Return to Egypt: Off to a Shaky Start

Exodus 4:18-5:23

Part One - 4:18-31

Introduction

Having exhausted his objections and the patience of God, Moses accepts God's offer to have Aaron as his spokesman. Proof that this was an unnecessary objection is the fact that Moses did most of his own speech making to Pharaoh as well as to the people. Stephen underscores the emptiness of Moses' claim when he says that Moses was "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in word and deeds," Acts 7:22. Moses' reluctance to accept this assignment may have contributed to the shaky start that follows in 4:14-6:1.

Moses Prepares for His Return to Egypt, 4:18-23 - Who Was on the Throne?

Verse 18. Moses returned from his encounter with God on the backside of the desert and met with Jethro, his father-in-law. He doubtless shared with him all that God showed him and all God told him to do. To his credit, Moses did not make any demands but entreated Jethro to be allowed to leave the clan and return to Egypt and fulfill his God-given assignment. His entreaty was in the form of polite request, "please," and it is clear that he is asking for Jethro's blessing. Moses' entreaty pays off as Jethro told him, "Go in peace," a blessing on not only Moses but his family as well.

That Moses sought the blessing of Jethro is significant. He fled for his life as a fugitive from justice forty years before. Due to an impetuous act of violence, he sought to take into his own hands the matter of the redress of injustice being done to a fellow Hebrew. He did so without God's direction or blessing. In so doing, he also clearly signaled that he was taking sides with the Hebrews against the Egyptians concerning the treatment of Hebrews. Now, forty years later, Moses clearly wants to stay under both his heavenly and earthly authorities. By seeking the blessing of Jethro, his father-in-law, Moses is showing the wisdom of getting counsel and approval before making any moves. Had he done so forty years before, the time in the wilderness possibly could have been avoided. In doing so at this time, Moses demonstrates that he has reached a new level of maturity.

Moses' Adversaries Are Dead, 4:19.

Verse 19. God spoke again to Moses and told him that all those who "sought your life are dead." Who would be those that sought to execute Moses? He had fled

Egypt forty years earlier because when he killed the Egyptian, Pharaoh sought to put him to death, see 2:15. Who was the Pharaoh that sought to kill Moses? Recall that Moses was born about 1530 BC under the administration of Ahmose I. Moses was rescued and would still have been only five years old when Ahmose I died in 1525. Ahmose was followed by his son, Amenhotep I (1525-1504), his grandson Thutmose I (1504-1492 BC), and his great grandson Thutmose II (1492-1479 BC). Thutmose II had sought to kill Moses for his crime against Egypt, and in 1490, at age forty, Moses had to flee to Midian. Thutmose II died in 1479 BC and was followed by Thutmose III (1479-1425 BC). Moses remained in Midian forty years until 1450 BC. Concerns about Moses that surfaced early in the reign of Thutmose II were gone. But the wife of Thutmose II, who was Hatshepsut, remained co-regent until 1458 BC, and would have remained a threat to the safety and accountability of Moses until her death in 1458 BC. Now, eight years after her death, God reassured Moses that there was no one alive that sought retribution against him. So, the Pharaoh on the throne at the time of the Exodus was Thutmose III. He established a base in the land of Israel at Beit Shan, which he mentions first in his list of conquests during the 15th century BC, see *Beit Shan*, article in Wikipedia.org, p. 1.

God Reveals His Plan - 4:20-23

Verse 20. Moses took his wife, Zipporah, and his two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, (Exod 18:4) and departed Midian for Egypt. He also took the rod that God had used to enable him to perform miracles.

Verse 21. God told Moses to use the rod to perform all the miracles and wonders before Pharaoh and in so doing to solicit the Pharaoh for the release of the Hebrews. But God warned, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, so that he will not let you go." This statement raises several questions. If God did the hardening, was Pharaoh responsible? Later we are told that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Which was it? God or Pharaoh?

Who Hardened Pharaoh's Heart?

Ten verses state that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, see 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17. There are an additional five verses that say Pharaoh hardened his own heart, see 8:15, 32; 7:14, 22; 9:34. There are three verses that state Pharaoh's heart "grew hard," 7:13, 22; 8:19. There are six verses that simply state Pharaoh's heart was hardened without reference to who was responsible, 7:14; 9:7, 35; 8:15-32; 9:34. Each one of these nineteen verses suggests a slightly different perspective on the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, but leaves unanswered fully the question, "Who hardened Pharaoh's heart?" To add to the complexity of the issue, there are three different Hebrew words used to describe the process of

the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Then there is the matter of the meaning of the word "heart" that needs to be considered.

The three words used for "harden" are *chabod*, *chazaq*, and *qshah*. The word for heart is the Hebrew *lev* or *leb*, which describes the "will" or seat of volitional choice. The most frequently used word is *chazaq*, used twelve times; it means "to hold fast," or "to make obstinate," suggesting a stubborn and unyielding state of mind. A second word is *chabod*, used six times; it means "to be heavy," "to be difficult," or "to be hard," and suggests moral and spiritual insensitivity. The third word is *qashah*, used only once; it means "to be severe," "to be hard," or "to stiffen," and suggests a stubborn, self-willed, and unyielding attitude. All of these combined show us a stubborn, unyielding, hardened heart and mind that was deeply resistant to the will of God.

Having said all this, the question remains, "Did God harden Pharaoh's heart?" Or did Pharaoh harden his own heart? The answer is YES! The answer lies in understanding the balance between God's sovereign will and human freedom to make choices of our own. It was Yahweh, the God of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who sent His self-revelation to Moses and to Pharaoh through Moses. The same light of truth that caused Moses to yield and obey, caused Pharaoh to stiffen and become all the more unyielding. The same miracles that convinced the Hebrews of Moses' authority and leadership ability made Pharaoh all the more obstinate and convinced that he alone was the authority in control. Is it not amazing that the same light of the sun that hardens a ball of damp clay will melt a ball of firm wax? It is the basic nature of the material that makes the response different for each substance. So it is with people. The same light of truth from the Word of God will convict and cause the will of one person to yield, will also cause another to stiffen, rebel, and refuse to yield to the will of God. Each responds to God's truth in ways consistent with their own will and nature.

Lessons:

There are some vitally important lessons to be learned from Pharaoh's stubborn and willful resistance to God.

1. It is dangerous for a person to know the truth and then to continue deliberately to sin against that knowledge. In Romans 1:18-32, the Word of God warns us against ignoring the truth in favor of our own self-willed disobedience to God. Romans 2:1-7 follows with at least seven principles of judgment to which all people will be held accountable.
2. It is dangerous to scoff at the truth and the demands God makes on our lives. His commands always are in our best interest. To reject and ignore them is to invite the chastening judgment of God for believers and to harden one's heart and will against repentance for unbelievers. Galatians 6:7 says,

"Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap."

3. God allows people to make choices about the direction of their lives, their spiritual growth or lack of it, and the ultimate choice of their final destination, heaven or hell. A stubborn, resistant to truth, self-willed attitude perpetuates and alienates a person from God. It keeps on producing more of the same rebellion to an ever-increasing degree in the heart of a person who rejects God. This process is called "hardening," and it can happen to believers who get out of the will of God in their lives. It also can happen to unbelievers who become more and more adamant against the truth, the Gospel, and the conviction of the Holy Spirit. These hardening processes can continue to a point of no return, see Heb 6:1-8; 10:26-39.
4. The mercy and grace of God may be seen in His willingness to withhold or limit judgment for a time so that the unbeliever may have every opportunity to repent, or the believer every opportunity to return to faithfulness. Finally, judgment will come for which there will be no excuse, Rom 1:18-20.

Verses 22-23. Moses was instructed to give this message to Pharaoh. "Thus says Yahweh, Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I say to you, let my son go that he may serve Me. But if you refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn," vv. 22-23. This is the first revelation of the plan of God to secure the release of the Hebrew people by the catastrophic death of all firstborn of families, cattle, and all living in Egypt. God plans at the same time to provide deliverance for His people through the elements of the Passover, as we shall see.

God Sought to Kill Moses; Zipporah Saves the Day, 4:24-31.

Verse 24. This verse raises many questions about the most enigmatic event in the life of Moses. Why was God so angry with Moses? Why did God want to kill him? Why did Zipporah perform a circumcision on her son? Whose feet were touched with the foreskin of her son? Which son was circumcised? What is meant by the term, "a husband of blood"? Why was this incident so significant that it is reported here? It seems clear that Moses had offended God, but the reason is not clearly stated in the text. Any answer gleaned from inferences in the context is at best a guess. Hence, there are many suggestions, but no definitive answers. It is most reasonable to assume in light of the verses that follow that the matter had something to do with circumcision, which was a sign of the Abrahamic covenant, see Gen 17:1-27.

Zipporah took a sharp stone, circumcised her son, and cast it at Moses' feet. Up to this point the only son that has been named was Gershom, Exod 2:22. We know that Eliezer was born later, but we do not know when. He is not mentioned until Exodus 18:4. It is unprecedented in Scripture that a woman would perform

the rite of circumcision. It was a rite that normally would have gone to the father, grandfather, priest, or other male. The use of the sharp stone refers to a small flint blade that was used in the rite of circumcision. There is no explanation given as to why Moses did not perform this rite on his son, probably Gershom, his firstborn. The Jewish commentary by A. Cohen gives the following explanation of 4:24:

The object is Moses. God, angry at the remissness of Moses in not circumcising his son, deemed him worthy of death. There was a tradition among the Israelites that a child should not be circumcised on the eighth day if unwell or being conveyed on a journey. Owing to the urgency of his mission, Moses did not make a halt for the circumcision to be performed. Whereupon the angel appeared and smote him [Moses] with an illness, to make him understand that the rite must not be deferred. This rendered Moses incapable of circumcising his son, and for that reason it was done by Zipporah. According to one opinion, *him*, alludes not to Moses but to his son Eleazar, A. Cohen, *The Soncino Chumash: The Five Books of Moses, in Soncino Books of the Bible*, London: Soncino Press, 1977, pp. 339-340.

This is a story from Hebrew tradition that cannot be substantiated as fact. It is an attempt to explain Moses' inability to perform the rite, but makes assumptions about his illness and the child being Eliezer, that cannot be substantiated. Another version of this story says that Moses was stricken because Gershom was several years old [his birth appears in Exodus 2:22], and that Moses had been negligent in failing to perform the rite. Still another is that the Egyptian rite of circumcision was distinctly different and therefore not acceptable, Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, in *The New American Commentary, Volume 2*, Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006, pp. 153-154. But, such explanations do not solve the puzzle and are pure speculation.

Remember, Moses wrote the Book of Exodus. He knew exactly what happened, and he chose not to say. God also chose to leave it unsaid. What we know is that Moses failed in such a primary responsibility that God was prepared to eliminate him and start over with someone else. Perhaps he did circumcise Gershom using the Egyptian method to validate the Abrahamic Covenant. This indeed would have been a serious matter where God would not make any compromise. We also know that Moses was unable, or even unwilling, to perform his role. We know that his wife had to perform his duty for him. This alone is a serious indictment. We know that God has left out the details from the story for a reason. There are some very important lessons to be learned from this event.

Lessons:

1. We have already seen Moses to be stubborn and unrelenting in the report of his excuses given regarding his inability and unwillingness to take this assignment. We all have a tendency to want to do a work for God, or even God's work in our own way, and then ask God to bless our efforts. This episode really underscores the fact that God expects us to do His work in His way, and that He is very exacting in this. Later Nadab and Abihu, the two sons of Aaron, decided that fire was fire. Even though they knew they were to get it from the altar [see Exod 30:9], they decided fire is fire and they offered fire from some other source. Consequently, fire went out from the Lord and they both perished, see Lev 10:1-7. I can hear those who would say, "I wouldn't serve such a ruthless God." But let me ask this question. How much disobedience should God allow in the lives of those who serve Him? Where would you draw the line? How much ungodliness produces an unholy life? How many sins, and how "big" a sin makes you a sinner?
2. What kind of witness can we have if we are not faithful in the big or small things required of us? The law of accountability makes us liable and responsible to God, regardless of our circumstances, see Matt 25:14-30.
3. The whole world may be unaware of our sins, but God knows and He alone is the one who will hold us accountable. We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ, Rom 14:10-11; 2 Cor 5:10-11.
4. Moses could not successfully lead the families of the Hebrews out of bondage if he had not first of all become the leader in his own home. Before we are ready to lead others, we must first be an example of faith and obedience in our own family, 1 Tim 3:5-6.
5. We all are stewards of life and accountable to God in all things, 1 Cor 4:1-5.

Moses Meets Aaron, and Finally All the People, 4:27-31.

Verses 27-28. Nothing more is ever mentioned about the bizarre incident of 4:24. This verse picks up with God's revelation to Moses in 4:14 that Aaron was already on his way to meet Moses. Moses went to Mt. Sinai, "the mountain of God," and Aaron met him there and gave him the "kiss" of brotherly love and devotion. Moses shared with Aaron all that had happened and what God had told him. He also told him about all the miraculous signs that God had shown him and commanded him to perform before Pharaoh.

God made a wonderful accommodation for Moses by bringing his brother to join him. We do not know if they had met over the forty years since Moses fled Egypt, but it is likely they did not. So, in addition to all the miraculous things that were unfolding, they doubtless shared news of family and friends. One of the struggles

that Moses endured was the isolation from the Hebrew people. How would they respond to him? Because of his failed attempt to help them, how would they receive him? The presence and influence of Aaron, who was by this time a leading elder in the family clan, would be welcome company as an advisor, spokesman, partner, and understudy. It is a wonderful footnote on the grace of God. F. B. Meyer, the great and godly nineteenth century expositor, says it so well:

He who sent forth His disciples two by two, and knows well how our human nature craves for sympathy and support, thus helped his servants by paring them for their mighty task, and through the two wrought out His eternal purpose, F. B. Meyer, *Devotional Commentary on Exodus*, Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1978, p. 86.

Verses 29-31. From their meeting at Mt. Sinai, the two returned to Egypt where they immediately gathered all the elders, and Aaron excitedly told them all the words God had given them. Moses then performed the signs that God had given him: the staff that became a serpent; the leprous hand that was healed; and the water from the river that became blood when poured out on dry land. The demonstration was convincing, and all the people believed that Yahweh had finally visited them in their affliction and had sent to them leaders in Moses and Aaron. In reverent response, they all bowed their heads and worshipped, praised, and gave thanks to Yahweh.

Lessons:

1. God knows our human limitations and that we are "dust," Ps 103:14. His loving accommodation of companionship for Moses by sending Aaron to be a helper is a marvelous statement of God's grace and compassion, even in the face of Moses' rebellious spirit, v. 28.
2. God not only knows our limitations but also provides people and resources to enable us to fulfill our calling. It would have been more difficult, but not impossible, for Moses to get a hearing with the elders without the help of Aaron. Moses was remembered as a fugitive from justice, a fact that could have jeopardized his leadership role with the people. Aaron's position as an elder provided Moses with a legitimate entrée before the elders and all the Hebrews, vv. 29-31.
3. God proves to be faithful to those He had called, another of many affirmations of the truth of Romans 8:28. God uses all the circumstances of our lives and overrules them for blessing and benefit to us and others.