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Return to Egypt: Off to a Shaky Start

Exodus 4:18-5:23

Part Two - 5:1-23

Introduction

Chapter 4 closes on a high note with the people affirming the message of Moses and Aaron. Aaron played his role as spokesman. Moses was probably right in concluding that his abrupt return to announce such a lofty place of leadership for himself and his vision to take the Hebrews into the wilderness would have met with many questions, if not skepticism and concerns. Recall the last words spoken to Moses before he fled for his life. The day after he killed the Egyptian, he tried to break up a fight between two Hebrews and their response was a telling one. They said, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" So Moses fled Egypt in fear because he knew his sin had been discovered, Exod 2:12-14; Numb 32:23.

Chapter 5 explores three major themes:

1. The demand to let the Hebrews go is repeated two times, vv. 1, 3.
2. Pharaoh's resistance is clearly seen as insufficient fear of Yahweh, vv. 2, 4.
3. Pharaoh's stubbornness is seen in his failure to let the Hebrews go and his doing the opposite of the request brought by Moses and Aaron, vv. 4-14.

5:1-21 - Moses' First Encounter with Pharaoh

Moses had a just concern that he might not be readily accepted if he returned alone with his story of God's special revelation. Aaron had remained in Egypt, and he obviously commanded much respect. He, the older brother of Moses, was eighty-three, and Moses was eighty, Exod 7:1, 7. Nevertheless, God had promised that He would provide credibility for Moses before the people when He promised Moses, "I will certainly be with you," Exod 3:12. Moses and Aaron, having given their story and given confirmation of it by showing the people the miracles and signs that God gave him, 4:30, were ready to assume their role as representatives of the people before Pharaoh. If our chronology is correct, the Pharaoh would have been Thutmose III (1479-1425 BC), and the time 1448 BC.

Let My People Go!, 5:1-3

Verses 1-2. "Afterward" suggests an indefinite passage of time. Moses and Aaron were perhaps accompanied by some of the elders as suggested by Exodus 3:18. Moses came with the demand from God to "let My people go, to celebrate a feast to

Me in the wilderness," v. 1. The use of the term "feast" was the Hebrew *חַגַּג*, *chagag*, and specifically refers to a religious festival or pilgrimage to a sanctuary for the purpose of offering a sacrifice. We do not know just where Moses planned to take the people to hold this feast. It is significant that Moses used the divine name, *Yahweh*, in his invocation of the demand that they be allowed to obey a direct command of the God of the Hebrews.

Pharaoh's immediate response was "Who is Yahweh, that I should obey His voice and let Israel go?" v. 2. F. B. Meyer says that this response was "neither unnatural nor unreasonable . . ." Meyer, *Studies in Exodus*, p. 89. Pharaoh doubtless concluded that if *Yahweh* had chosen to be the God of slaves and was powerless to be able to deliver them, there was no reason for him to obey such a demand. So he said, "I don't know *Yahweh*, and I will not let Israel go." This statement, "I do not know *Yahweh*," is significant.

Ancient Egyptian religion was a pantheon with Amun-Ra, the sun god, as the head of the pantheon with a long list of lesser gods under his command. Each community had its own gods, and it is estimated that there were at least 500 to 1200 gods during the 18th and 19th dynasties from about 1700 BC to 1200 BC according to E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians, Volume I*, New York: Dover Publications, 1969, pp. ix-x. A list of some of the prominent gods in the pantheon may be found in the *Believer's Study Bible*, p. 89; a copy of the chart is attached.

There is a further significance of the statement of Pharaoh, whom I believe to be Thutmose III, who ruled Egypt from 1479-1425 BC. He said that he did not know *Yahweh*, but we shall see that he was about to get a dramatic lesson on *Yahwehism* from the signs, wonders, and plagues that followed, leading to the death of the firstborn. It is probable that the Egyptian rulers kept up with the fate of the Hebrews during their forty years in the wilderness and their exploits after that on entering the land.

We know, for example, that Beit She'an is first listed among Thutmose III's conquests in the 15th century BC, and the remains of an Egyptian administrative center from the 18th and 19th dynasties, 1550-1200 BC, have been excavated. The Bible mentions it as a Canaanite city in Joshua 17:11, and its conquest by David and inclusion in the later kingdom is noted, and large Solomonic administrative buildings destroyed by the Assyrian ruler, Tiglath-pileser, 2 Kgs 15:29, also were excavated from this period. Its capture by the Pharaoh Shishak, 1 Kgs 14:25-26, is corroborated by his list of victories in Assyrian records. All this affirms that the Egyptians had an interest in what was going on in the land. They would have been in a position to hear about all the exploits of Joshua, and how God took care of the Hebrews during the conquest and beyond.

Here is the point of this bit of history. The immediate successors of Thutmose III would have been well informed on what God did during and after the visitation of the miracles, plagues, and death of the firstborn of Egypt. These successors were Amenhotep II (1425-1401 BC), Thutmose IV (1401-1391 BC), Amenhotep III (1391-1353 BC), and the fourth generation Pharaoh was Amenhotep IV, who took the throne name, Akenaten (1353-1336 BC). Akenaten reigned during the time of the judges. He was king Tutankamun's father, and was known as the heretic king because he did away with the pantheon of gods and affirmed that there was only one god whom he called Aten, who was the god of light, represented by the image of the sun disk with rays coming down to earth. Where did he get his monotheistic ideas? I believe it came from more than a century of experiencing and watching the exploits of the Hebrews, knowing that *Yahweh*, their God, had defeated all the gods of Egypt.

Lessons

1. We should be sensitive to the fact that a lost person does not have the same knowledge of and regard for God that we have. They will therefore often fail to understand our motives, our attitudes, our actions, or even our words about spiritual things, v. 2.
2. We need to remember the background of those we seek to reach and where they are or are not spiritually. Pharaoh, for example, was steeped in polytheistic worship, which was part of the religious-political system of the land, v. 3.
3. We never know or see the long-term impact that will result from our faithful service to God. God's dealings with the Hebrews in Egypt were very likely the basis for the brief, but significant, rise of monotheism in Egypt during the reign of Akenaten. The attempt to convert Egypt to monotheism failed because it was not based on worship of *Yahweh*, but a modified version of Egypt's pagan idolatry.

Verse 3. Moses and Aaron may have expected that Pharaoh would immediately acquiesce to their demands. Their response suggests that they believed a word of explanation was in order, and as soon as Pharaoh understood their demand, he would relent and let them go. So they explained how *Yahweh* had appeared to them and softened their demand to a "please" let us go a three days' journey into the desert and offer a sacrifice to *Yahweh*. They then added, ". . . if we do not go, He may fall upon us with some pestilence or with the sword." It is ironic that the mention of pestilence here is exactly what happened to the Egyptians who would eventually be struck with the ten plagues. The use of the word "sword" is the Old Testament way of referring to defeat and death in battle, which would be experienced by the Egyptian armies at the Red Sea. The use of the terms "famine, sword, and pestilence" is a triumvirate of terms used often by Jeremiah and Ezekiel in reference

to the judgment of God on Judah. These terms also appear in Revelation 6:8 as a sign of impending doom. The specific mention of a "three days' journey" was necessary to get the Hebrews beyond the borders of Egypt. It would have been an abomination to sacrifice to God in a pagan land, see 8:26-27.

Lesson

1. The world has no interest in pleasing or worshipping God. It has gods of its own creation. The world will only come to Him when faced with the undeniable evidence that will be revealed when Jesus comes again, Rev 6:14-17; Phil 2:10-11.
2. Like Akhenaton, the world often tries to imitate what believers have, but there is no substitute for the true and living God. All idols are worthless abominations in God's sight, Deut 29:17-18. People still worship idols today. But, today they are shaped like boats, cars, houses, and other modern fetishes.

Pharaoh's Answer, Hardened Labor, Death of a Vision, 5:4-14

This passage presents a familiar pattern in Scripture known as "death of a vision." Moses had a vision when he was growing up in Egypt that somehow he would be used by God to deliver the Hebrews from bondage. He failed miserably when he sought to implement the vision by his own initiative and killed the Egyptian for mistreating a fellow Hebrew, Exod 2:11-12. He spent forty years in the wilderness watching his vision die. He had hopes of its revival when he returned with Aaron to announce his appointment from God to lead the people out of captivity. But then, he had to watch as Pharaoh adamantly refused to let the Hebrews leave. His leadership was compromised and failing when God finally revealed that the deliverance would come from a divinely initiated intervention of God.

Verse 4. Pharaoh's immediate conclusion was that the Hebrews had too much time on their hands. He said to Moses and Aaron, "Why do you take the people from their work?" v. 4. Remember that Pharaoh already was suspicious of these foreigners because of their prior experience of the Hyksos people. He easily could conclude that what he had were two trouble-making insurrectionists.

Lesson

1. Taking people from their work by using religious reasons will not be met with enthusiasm by an ungodly authority. Moses might have had better success if he had proposed to offer additional work concessions or some other offer to compensate for the requested time off.
2. Moses seems to have assumed that because God gave him the assignment for the Hebrews' release, he could make demands and Pharaoh would acquiesce. He failed in protocol by not recognizing that Pharaoh was not used to taking

orders from others. This is a fact he should have known based on his time as a resident in the court of Pharaoh.

Verses 5-14. Instead of release and relief, Pharaoh outlines an even more rigorous work schedule that would allow no time for daydreaming about a pilgrimage to worship this God named *Yahweh*. In any case, Pharaoh was not going to consent to allow a major work force of so many Hebrews to have an unscheduled holiday, v. 5.

Instead, Pharaoh outlines a six-point plan to punish the Hebrews and see to it they have no time for thoughts of a festival. On the same day, he gave the taskmasters orders to heavily increase the Hebrews' workload. The plan was as follows:

1. The new policy took place immediately and was formulated by Pharaoh's immediate response to Moses and Aaron, v. 6.
2. The Hebrews would receive no straw, used as a binder, from the Egyptians. The workers would have to gather the straw themselves, v. 7. Chopped straw was mixed with clay to make the bricks stronger. Up to this time, the Egyptians provided the straw for making the bricks.
3. There would be no reduction in the required quota of bricks, in spite of the extra work, which means they had to gather straw on their own time, v. 8.
4. This extra work for the men would take the place of time for idle talk about feasts a three days' journey into the wilderness, v. 9.
5. The new work plan was to be enforced by the taskmasters, v. 10.
6. There would be no reduction in workload or production, v. 11.

There were three immediate results.

1. The people were scattered throughout the land to gather stubble to use for straw, v. 12.
2. The taskmasters forced them to hurry to get both the straw gathering and brick making done with no reduction in production, v. 13.
3. The Hebrew foremen were beaten and chastened for not reaching their production quota, v. 14.

Lessons

1. Our work for God will not necessarily be recognized or appreciated by the world and unbelievers, especially if it conflicts with our employment schedule, vv. 5-8.
2. We should not expect that the natural man, like Pharaoh, would understand or respond to spiritual truths, 1 Cor 2:6-16. The things of God are a mystery to the world, "which none of the rulers of this world understand," 1 Cor 2:7-8.

An Appeal from the Hebrew Foremen, 5:15-19

Verses 15-16. The Hebrews sent their foremen to appeal to Pharaoh for relief. It is apparent that Moses and Aaron had not told the people the reason for the change in policy. They came to appeal the "no straw" policy and to ask why such a thing had been implemented. They said the real fault is your own people, fixing the blame on the taskmasters and ultimately on Pharaoh himself.

Verses 17-19. Pharaoh's response, "You are idle! You are idle!" in that they had asked for time to go into the wilderness to have a feast to their God, *Yahweh*. The word translated "idle" is the Hebrew נִרְפִּים, *nirpim*, which means "lazy." Pharaoh is saying in no uncertain terms that they have too much idle time, or they would not be asking for such an event that takes them from their work. They are "lazy," failing to get the assigned work done. So Pharaoh told them to get back to work. They will get no straw given to them, but they must still produce their same allotment of bricks, v. 18. It wasn't rocket science; they knew they were in trouble and would get no concessions from Pharaoh to assist their plight or alleviate their circumstances, v. 19.

Lessons

1. Sometimes God gives us a vision but then lets us watch it die so that when it comes to pass, we know it is all of God and none of its accomplishment is our own work, v. 15ff.
2. Don't expect the world to understand your motives or desire to devote time for spiritual things that conflict with an assigned work schedule. Demand for such things is never met with enthusiasm or favor, v. 17. A solution is to pray for God to reveal some creative alternatives, see Eph 6:5-8.

Rejection of Moses' and Aaron's Leadership, 5:20-23

Verses 20-21. As soon as the foremen came from their meeting with Pharaoh, they met with Moses and Aaron, who were waiting outside. It was not a cordial meeting. The foremen were very angry at the responses of Pharaoh. The heated retort was, "Let the Lord look on you and judge, because you have made us abhorrent in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants, to put a sword in their hands to kill us," v. 21. They responded with an imprecatory prayer asking God to judge Moses and Aaron as troublemakers. Moses and Aaron used the same tactic in their appeal to Pharaoh in 5:3 saying to him, if you don't let us go He will "fall on us with pestilence or with the sword," v. 3. The response of the foremen must have been a stinging rebuke to Moses, who had every expectation that things would go smoothly since God obviously was in it.

Lessons

1. Even when God has called us to an assignment, we must not conclude that there will be no difficulties in carrying it out. When God called Ezekiel, He

- warned him that the people to whom he was to bring the Word of God would reject him and rebuke him because of their obstinate attitudes, see Ezek 2:1-8.
2. When you are doing a work for the Lord and things go wrong, have the maturity, as did Moses, to take it to the Lord. Moses took responsibility for this matter; he didn't try to justify himself, he didn't blame God, but he did question his calling. It is appropriate to search ourselves and talk to God.
 3. In God's service, always remember that sometimes the people you are trying to help may be hurt, offended, or even reject you. This will be especially true if your efforts or advice has brought difficult circumstances into their lives, v. 21.

Verses 22-23. It is understandable that Moses' rejection by the Hebrew foremen brought a feeling of dejection. He realized that in making the demands as God had directed him, it had brought further hardship on the people instead of relief, v. 22. Everyone who is faithful to God will have to face such experiences. F. B. Meyer states it well when he says:

Moses could not take Aaron with him on this errand. As Jehovah had sent him, he must deal with Jehovah alone. He must enter his closet, and shut the door, and pray to his Father in secret. Ah, there are moments in the lives of all God's servants when they must have matters out with God—they and they alone—in the bitterness of their soul. When they have been true to the truth; when they have done what they thought was His will; when they have wrought their utmost, and all has ended in failure; when they seem to have done harm rather than good, and to have marred what they longed to adjust—what resort is there save that of prayer? "Lord why is it Thou hast sent me? And where is Thy promised aid? Since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Thy name, he hath evil entreated this people; neither has Thou delivered Thy People at all!" But all these things were working together for good! Meyer, *Studies in Exodus*, p. 91.

Lessons

1. God is not offended when we speak frankly to Him about our frustrations, disappointments, lack of understanding, and failure to see what He is about when we are going through difficult circumstances. He may not respond immediately, but He will respond, vv. 22-23.
2. When the work fails that we have attempted for the Lord, we need to meet with Him in prayer and seek a reaffirmation of His direction in our lives. It also needs to be a soul-searching time of re-examination of our efforts and their effects, vv. 22-23.

Conclusion

Any assessment of what has happened would have to conclude that Moses and Aaron were off to a shaky start on their *God-assigned* mission. They had every right to expect that things would go smoothly. The last thing that would have been expected was the adamant and stubborn rebuff of Pharaoh. Yet, *God IS* on His throne, and Romans 8:28 is not a some time principle, but is at work in every circumstance of life. Everything was working according to *God's* plan, as was His immediate response to Moses in 6:1, which we shall see in the next lesson.