

Hardening Pharaoh's Heart

Exodus 4:18-26

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If you have Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus, chapter 4, verse 18. In Exodus 1 God's sovereignty was emphasized. In Exodus 2 Moses, the future deliverer of Israel, is introduced to us and put in a favorable light. In the end of Exodus 2, verses 23 through 25 we learn that the redemption of Israel is rooted in God's prior commitments to Abraham. In other words God's redemption of Israel out of Egypt is rooted in the covenant promise that God had made to Abraham more than 430 years before. When we get to Exodus, chapter 3, God reveals Himself to Moses, via the burning bush at Sinai. He announces His concern for His people, He tells Moses that He is going to appoint him to be the deliverer of those people, and God tells Moses that He is going to deliver His people in order that they might worship Him.

And so we see that great emphasis in Exodus, chapter 3 that God delivers His people in order that they might worship. We are saved, in other words, in order to worship. And that term worship or service appears over and over throughout the rest of the story of Exodus. In Exodus, chapter 3, beginning in verse 11 Moses fires five questions to the Lord. He even perhaps presents these questions as objections to God's divine plan. In Exodus 3, verse 11, he asks the Lord, "Well, who am I to be the deliverer of Your people?" In Exodus 3:13, he asks the question, "Well, who do I say commissions me? Who is the One who has sent me to speak to the people of Israel and to Pharaoh?" And in answer to both of those questions, the Lord defines Himself, and not that we haven't seen this from Exodus 1, but especially here in Exodus 3 we see that God Himself is the center of the story of Exodus. We might be tempted to see Moses as the protagonist. Moses is the central character. But as a matter of fact, Moses is a spokesman for the central character of the Exodus who is the God of Israel Himself. That, by the way, will become even clearer tonight as we look at this particular passage. So two objections or questions from Moses in Exodus 3. When you get to Exodus 4, verses 1 through 9, you come to yet another question from Moses. He asked, "Well Lord, what do I do if they don't believe me. What do I do if they don't pay attention to me?" And in answer to that question the Lord gives him three miraculous signs. And He says, "You go show this to the elders and to the people of Israel, and they will believe you." Although Pharaoh would not be moved by this sign, as God will tell Moses in the passage we read tonight.

Then in Exodus, chapter 4, verses 10 through 17 we see two final objections of Moses. He first protests to the Lord that he's not eloquent, he's not a good speaker, and secondly, he says, "Lord, send the message by whomever you desire to send it." Which, being translated, means "Lord, please send somebody else. I hear what you're saying. Please send somebody else." It's the famous, "Here I am, Lord, send somebody else" response. And in that passage, we see God using Moses who is a sinful, weak vessel to accomplish His purpose. We see that God's message is powerful, even apart from the messenger, and that God Himself is always and only our Savior. He may use Moses, He may use men, but God Himself is our Savior. Vanderwaal says this: "Thus you can see that we have no right whatsoever to depict Moses as a hero of superhuman proportion who draws on his immense abilities and dynamic personality to lead Israel out of bondage in Egypt. Here as elsewhere the Bible is painfully honest in showing us the weaknesses and shortcomings of its central figures."

And that brings us to Exodus 4, verses 18 through 26. This is God's word for you. Here it expectantly. "Then Moses departed and returned to Jethro, his father-in-law, and said to him, 'Please let me go that I may return to my brethren who are in Egypt and see if they are still alive.' And Jethro said to Moses, 'Go in peace.' Now the Lord said to Moses in Midian, 'Go back to Egypt. For all the men who were seeking your life are dead.' So Moses took his wife and his sons and mounted them on a donkey, and he returned to the land of Egypt. Moses also took the staff of God in his hand. And the Lord said to Moses, 'When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord, Israel is My son, My first born." So I said to you, "Let My son go that he may serve Me. But you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your first born.'" Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the Lord met him and sought to put him to death. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and threw it at Moses' feet, and she said, 'You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me.' And so he let him alone. At that time, she said, 'You are a bridegroom of blood' because of the circumcision."

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord, this passage is rich with truth and significance, and it's also mysterious. Open our eyes to understand it, reveal Yourself by it, cause us to glory in you for it, teach us, instruct us, correct us, tame our hearts, draw us to Yourself as Your word is proclaimed, in Jesus name we ask it, Amen.

God is the central character of this mysterious passage, and in this great passage God shows once again that He is the redeemer of His people, He is sovereign, and He is holy. I'd like to look at those truths with you in this passage,

beginning first in verses 18 through 20.

I. Moses goes as deliverer by the command of God, with the assurance of God, dependent upon the power of God.

Here, we are told a story of Moses' preparations to return to Egypt. The account of these verses tells us what Moses did in preparation to go to Egypt according to the Lord's command. But what strikes us is Moses goes as the deliverer by the command of God; God has to command Moses to go. He goes with the assurance of God. He is clearly fearful of what is ahead. And he goes dependent upon the power of God. In other words, it is very clear that God is the one who is redeeming his people, Moses is his spokesman, his messenger, his mediator, but it the power of God, it is the heart of God for his people that is going to lead to their redemption. Look at verse 18. Moses had flocks with him when he was meeting God at Sinai, so he couldn't just leave from Sinai and go straight to Egypt. He had to go back to his father-in-law, Jethro, and take the flocks back to him. And unlike Jacob, he does at least show the courtesy of seeking his father-in-law's leave before going on his journey. This followed custom, and it speaks well of Moses.

But it's interesting, isn't it? If you look at verse 18, Moses doesn't tell Jethro the whole story, or at least he doesn't tell us that he told Jethro the whole story. If indeed, this is all he told Jethro, I wonder if Moses thought that Jethro would have thought that he was crazy for doing what he was about to do. Whatever the reason is, Moses says to Jethro, let me go that I may return to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see if they are still alive. That phrase indicates that Moses is concerned for the general welfare of his people in Egypt. It is idiom that would have been used in his time to say that Moses wants to see how they have been fairing in Egypt since he left them some forty years previously. In verse 19, we have the Lord coming to Moses again while he's still in Midian, and before his departure and assuring him of His purposes for him. God assures Moses that those who had sought to kill him before are now dead. He's telling him that the coast is clear for him to enter back into Egypt, and it's interesting isn't it that that very same language is taken up in Matthew, chapter 2, verse 20. It's applied to Herod's death when God is telling Joseph that it is now safe for Jesus to come out of Egypt and back into the land of Judah. We see here then a parallel, something almost typological of the life of Christ.

In verse 20, we're told that Moses takes his family by donkey and goes down into Egypt. This is the first time that a holy family travels down into Egypt. But again, in Matthew, chapter 2, verse 13, Joseph will take Mary and the baby Jesus to escape Herod and go down into Egypt. I want to pause here and comment on the fact that despite this enormous redemptive task that God has given to Moses, he takes his family with him. It's clear that for Moses, his divine responsibilities do not trump his family responsibilities. Now later in the story, by the way, it will be

apparent that Moses has sent his family out of Egypt back to his father-in-law, perhaps for their safety, because things have gotten very, very dangerous. But it's clear that Moses sees it still as his responsibility to care for his family as head. And that's an important lesson. Especially to those of you who are called into Christian ministry. That Christian ministry does not trump your family responsibilities. You still have them. At the end of verse 20, we are told that as Moses goes into the land of Egypt, or makes out for the land of Egypt in his journey, he goes with the staff or the rod of God in his hand. This indicates that it is God's authority that Moses is wielding, and in fact, presages the coming conflict which is really not one between Moses and Pharaoh, but between the God of Israel and Pharaoh.

Just let me remind you again, Pharaoh was considered by himself and his people to be a god. He was considered to be the living manifestation of two Egyptian gods, Ra, the god of the sun and Horace, the god of death. These two gods were sovereign over all gods; and so the story of the Exodus is the story of the God of Israel entering into contests with the god of Egypt, the self-proclaimed god of Egypt, Pharaoh. Moses goes to meet Pharaoh with the staff of God. It's very interesting. In the Near Eastern world the gods are constantly depicted as having staffs or scepters or rods. This shows their power, it's an artistic or literary expression of their power and their authority. For Moses to go into Egypt carrying the rod of God is a visible depiction that he goes wielding the power of God. It is a picture that even Pharaoh would have understood. When somebody shows up in Pharaoh's court with a rod, Pharaoh knows that somebody is there claiming authority. And that is, of course, precisely what God wanted Pharaoh to receive as far as the message. But notice again here that God is the real deliverer of Israel. Moses has to be commanded to go down into Egypt, he has to ask permission of his father-in-law to go down into Egypt. He has to be assured by God that it's safe to go back to Egypt, and he has to be clothed with God's might. So God sends Moses as His deliverer, but God is the One who is the real the deliverer of Israel.

II. The Exodus is about God, His sovereignty, His worship, His Kingdom and Pharaoh is in the way!

Then in verses 21 through 23, there are many interesting things to comment on, but I want to focus on two things in particular. In verse 21, God tells Moses to confront Pharaoh with the signs. God in this passage announces His intentions to Moses, and He tells Moses at this time that He plans to harden Pharaoh's heart. In other words, the Exodus is about God's sovereignty, it's about His worship, it's about His kingdom, and Pharaoh is in the way. And God is telling Moses here not only what He wants him to do, but He's telling him His intentions ahead of time, and He's telling him that He plans to harden Pharaoh's heart. In verse 21, God says, "Moses, confront Pharaoh with these three signs. But let me tell you something ahead of time." Look at the end of verse 21. He tells Moses ahead of

time that Pharaoh is not going to listen to his pleas, he's not going to be impressed by the signs, and he's not going to let Israel go. Now Moses, "Go and tell Pharaoh this, but let me tell you something ahead of time. He's not going to listen to what you tell him."

Now how would that have made you feel if you were the messenger? Go Moses. You're going to be totally ineffective in your proclamation. Pharaoh's not going to do a thing that you ask him to. In fact, I have ordained that Pharaoh is not going to respond to what I have decreed for you to tell him. Now friends, let me remind you that John Calvin did not write this pericope. One might be tempted to think that he had sneaked into the original Hebrew manuscript, and written the passage. But this is the Bible, this is Moses' writing.

Two things I'd like you to see. Verse 21. God does not simply say to Moses that Pharaoh will not listen, and Pharaoh will not let his people go. God goes a step further, and says that He Himself, God, is going to harden Pharaoh's heart. We see God's sovereignty then displayed. I do want to remind you that in this story of Moses and Pharaoh over the next several chapters, the idea of hardening God's heart or hardening Pharaoh's heart will be used in three different ways. It will be said that God hardens Pharaoh's heart. It will be said that Pharaoh hardens Pharaoh's heart, and it will be said that Pharaoh's heart was hardened. In all three ways, this incident, whatever it is, whatever it means will be described. One I would suggest is describing God's sovereignty. One I would suggest describing man's responsibility. One I would suggest describing the fact of the matter. What had indeed happened in the heart and in the life of Pharaoh. What does it mean? Well, clearly we see here God's sovereignty in hardening Pharaoh's heart. God deliberately sends Moses to Egypt to make a spectacle of Pharaoh. God had told Moses He would do so in Exodus 3, verses 19 and 20. God tells Moses that He knows that Pharaoh will have to be compelled to let Israel go. Exodus 3:19. But He goes even further. He tells Moses that He is going to harden Pharaoh's heart so that He will not let His people go. This shows God's complete control of the situation. He will deliver in the way that He wants to deliver. John Currid, one of our Old Testament professors at Reformed Seminary who is a respected Old Testament scholar and a student of Egypt, what is called an Egyptologist, has recently shed important light on this phrase, "the hardening of the heart." Dr. Currid tells us that that can literally be translated, "And God or I will make his heart heavy." The phrase is apparently an illusion to Egyptian after-life beliefs. The ancient Egyptians believe that those whose hearts were weighed and found heavy in the after-life were condemned. While those whose hearts were judged light in the after-life, were considered righteous and blessed. Do you see what Moses is saying here?" God is so sovereign that He has determined that the god of Egypt will be condemned in the after-life. The God of Israel has made that judgment, over the embodiment of Ra and Horace. God is sovereign. The Lord is master of all. Though the Egyptians considered Pharaoh himself to be a god, yet the God of Israel is so sovereign as to make heavy to condemn the heart of Egypt's god.

Then if you'd look at verses 22 and 23 you'll see something else. God tells Moses to let Pharaoh know about the special relationship that Israel has to God. Or rather that God has to Israel. Israel is His firstborn. I'd like you to see three things about this. First of all, in verse 22 we see a phrase introduced that has never been used before in the Bible but will be used hundreds of times hereafter. It is the phrase, *Thus says the Lord*. Or in the King James, "Thus sayeth the Lord." It is classic Near Eastern formula whereby a prophet announces that he is delivering the words of the deity verbatim. Everyone in the Near East would have known that when a prophet entered the room and announced *thus sayeth the Lord*, he was claiming to speak not his own words, not his own ideas, but to the very words of the god who had sent him. And in this passage Moses is to announce to Pharaoh that what is about to be spoken to him is the very word of the God of Israel.

Secondly, notice what that word is. "Moses, tell Pharaoh this. Israel is My son, Israel is My firstborn." The status of being firstborn was one of tremendous importance in late antiquity. It's still pretty important here in the American South. But it was of tremendous importance in late antiquity. It meant that you had the headship of the family upon your father's death. It meant that you received a double portion of the inheritance, and I want to note that this is the only place in the Old Testament where Israel is identified as the firstborn of God. That image of the pre-eminence of Israel amongst all the nations as the firstborn will be transferred in the New Testament to the Lord Jesus Christ who has pre-eminence in the heart of the Father above all things in the created order. At any rate, God announces to Pharaoh through Moses that Israel, His people, sustains a unique relationship to Him amongst all the peoples in the earth.

And then thirdly, God says to Pharaoh this: "I will kill your son, your firstborn, because you have not listened to Me." Now I need not say to you that was not the most politic thing that Moses could have said to Pharaoh in their first meeting. I mean you understand that God has given Moses a word to go into the court of Pharaoh and speak, which constituted a direct assault on the royal succession of Egypt. Moses, in other words, is basically saying to Pharaoh that my God will determine who will sit on your throne. And He has determined that your son will not be the one who will sit on your throne. You cannot imagine a more shocking announcement to the most powerful monarch in the world than that. But of course that announcement is sort of a pre-announcement of the final plague, isn't it, the plague of death to the children of Egypt. What Pharaoh didn't know and perhaps couldn't have known at that time was that this judgment would be far, far more severe than simply the judgment of his own son. It would mean the loss of all the firstborn of Egypt as we see in Exodus, chapter 11 and 12.

So what's the point of this section? The Lord of Israel is sovereign. It is He who determines who will sit on the throne of Egypt, and Moses needs to be very, very aware of that. His people need to be very, very aware of that. And the

announcement of that to Egypt constitutes one of the central themes of Moses' encounters with Pharaoh. Egypt must know that God is the Lord, because the nations must know that God is the Lord. For He is the creator, and He is the sovereign.

III. God is holy and will not be trifled with.

One last thing. Perhaps the most mysterious part of this passage is found in verses 24 through 26. Moses or Gershom, it doesn't say which, it just says "he" is almost killed by God. You have to ask yourself the question, what's going on here? Look again at verse 24. "Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the Lord met him and sought to put him to death." Now my personal view is that this is Moses that God is coming to. There are good arguments for the other side which I'm not going to go in to right now. If you'd like to talk about those afterward, I'd be glad to give you my take on them, and to fill you in on those particular arguments. But it seems to me that what we're being told in verse 24 is that God is holy and will not be trifled with.

Why does God seek to kill Moses on the way? Because Moses had been disobedient to the commandment of God. This strange event at the lodging place on the way in which God seeks to kill Moses illustrates both the significance of God's covenant signs and the importance of holiness and obedience. Moses was the divinely appointed spokesman and servant of God. And yet he, himself, had not obeyed the commands of God from Genesis, chapter 17, verses 9 through 14 to circumcise his son. And so God would not suffer such a blatant lawbreaker to deliver the law to His people at Sinai. Nor would he allow the covenant sign of circumcision to be taken lightly. By grace integrity must characterize His prophets. Holiness is the clothing in which God's people serve Him, especially those whom He calls to represent Him before His people in the world. So here in Exodus 4, verse 24 we see God seeking judgment against Moses because of His disobedience.

Secondly, however, especially in verses 25 and 26 we see God not for the first time in the book of Exodus, showing His sovereignty by bringing deliverance through a woman. God's sovereignty is clearly displayed in this way throughout the first chapters of Exodus. Remember, we see God's frustration of Pharaoh's power through the instrumentality of women over and over in the early chapters of Exodus. In Exodus 1:17, the midwives frustrate the decree of Pharaoh. In Exodus 2, verses 1 through 4, Moses' mother and sister frustrate the plan of Pharaoh. In Exodus 2, verses 6 and 10, Pharaoh's own daughter frustrates the plan of Pharaoh, showing God to be sovereign. Here, however, something even more striking occurs. In Exodus 4, verses 25 and 26 Moses own wife, Zipporah, is God's own chosen instrument to spare Moses not from Pharaoh, but from God. Thus, Zipporah becomes the intercessor for the one whom God has appointed to be the intercessor of Israel. Can you imagine a more striking way for God to

simultaneously display His holiness? "I will not be trifled with." His sovereignty. He rules over all, and the fact that He is the redeemer of His people. He's sending this sinful man into Egypt who himself needed forgiveness, and his wife provided for him mediation by carrying out the obedience that he should have done himself. God is holy, God is sovereign, God is redeemer. Let us worship Him. Let us pray.

Our Lord and our God, You are awesome in Your might and wondrous in Your designs. Help us as Your people to trust You in every circumstance of life, remembering what You have taught us about Yourself in Your word, remembering how You revealed Yourself to us in Your providence. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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