

Exodus 4:27–6:1*

Introduction

Moses has just come through his harrowing, near death experience at the lodge on his way to Egypt. But now this morning we pick up again with Moses as he continues on his journey, and finally arrives at his destination.

I. Exodus 4:27–31 — The LORD [had] said to Aaron, “Go into the wilderness to meet Moses.” So he went and met him at the mountain of God and kissed him. And Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD with which he had sent him to speak, and all the signs that he had commanded him to do. Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the people of Israel. Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses and did the signs in the sight of the people. And the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.

It seems like the main point of these verses is to move us forward as quickly as possible to the next part of the story, where suddenly we’ll slow back down again. But there’s at least one thing we should still take a moment to notice. We learn here that the Lord had specifically told Aaron to go out into the wilderness to meet Moses. That’s why the Lord could say in chapter four that Aaron was already on his way – because He had already *sent* him on his way. (cf. 4:14) So I think we can also assume that the Lord had specifically told Aaron and Moses *where* they were to meet.

We read in verse 27, “So [Moses] went and met [Aaron] *at the mountain of God*.” What a thing to say! At the time of their meeting, it probably wasn’t known as the “mountain of God.” And yet already, it was on this mountain (Horeb; or Mount Sinai) that the Lord had revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush. Already, the Lord had specifically said to Moses from the burning bush: “This shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall *serve God on this mountain*.” (3:12) And, of course, by the time Moses was writing these words, the entire nation of Israel had already witnessed the glory of God descending on this same mountain to reveal His laws and enter into covenant relationship with them.

So *now*, as he looks back on his reunion with Aaron, Moses can see the full import, and meaning, and significance of their meeting at *this* mountain – the mountain *of God*. It’s really a powerful reminder that *everything* that’s about to happen – *everything* that Moses and Aaron are about to face together – is not about them, *or even about Israel*. Instead, it’s about God’s *revelation* of His own great glory in and through the salvation of His people. Throughout the book of Exodus, and the entire Bible, God looms large – so that He Himself is the main and only attraction. Throughout the book of Exodus, we are called to know the *freedom* of a life lived in *response* to the greatness of His glory. It was no accident that Moses and Aaron met together not just at Horeb, but at “*the mountain of God*.”

* I found Enns to be by far the most helpful in understanding this passage.

So Moses tells Aaron all that the Lord had told him and the signs that He had given him, they travel together to Egypt, Aaron then tells the elders of Israel all that the Lord had told Moses and performs the signs, and what's the result? "The people *believed*; and when they heard that the LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and *worshiped*." What a perfect beginning to the story. Moses could hardly have hoped for anything better than this. Of course, the challenge of *Pharaoh* still lies ahead, but at least the people of Israel are on board. At least the people of Israel have believed God's Word – that He has visited them and seen their affliction. We can hardly imagine how they must have felt – to hear such wonderful, glorious good news. So they bowed their heads and worshiped, in what I can only think would be a perpetual state of euphoria. Now all that remains is Pharaoh. And obviously, Yahweh already has him taken care of.

II. Exodus 5:1–2 — Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.'"[†] But Pharaoh said, "Who is Yahweh, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know Yahweh, and moreover, I will not let Israel go."

So right away the lines are drawn. This is a contest not between Moses and Pharaoh, but between Yahweh, the God of Israel, and Pharaoh, who represents the gods of Egypt. Moses and Aaron say to Pharaoh, "Thus says Yahweh," and Pharaoh responds, "Who is Yahweh...? I do not know Yahweh." Pharaoh's point is not that he's never heard of Israel's God, but that he doesn't give a care about Israel's God. In chapter one, we learned how an earlier king arose over Egypt, "who did not know Joseph." (1:8) Of course, this Pharaoh knew the history of his own nation, and the good that Joseph had done for Egypt, but he just didn't care. He didn't know Joseph in the sense that Joseph was of no concern whatsoever to him. And now in a similar way, this Pharaoh says that he does not know the Lord – Yahweh is of no concern whatsoever to him. And so we see that this is *much, much bigger* than just a dispute over Pharaoh's right to keep Israel enslaved. This has everything to do with who Yahweh *is* – with *His* honor and with *His* glory. In the coming chapters, we'll the Lord speaking words like these to Pharaoh:

- ✓ Exodus 8:22 (cf. 7:17; 8:10; 14:4, 18) — On that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may *know* that I am Yahweh in the midst of the earth.
- ✓ Exodus 9:14 (cf. 9:29) — This time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may *know* that there is none like me in all the earth.

But for right now, Pharaoh still doesn't "know" who Yahweh is. For right now, Pharaoh couldn't care less. Now, of course, Pharaoh is a polytheist. He believes in many gods – even the gods of enemy nations. But Yahweh he won't even acknowledge. Yahweh, the God of Israel, isn't even fit to be on his list – not even at the very bottom. Therefore, when *Yahweh* says, "Let My people go," Pharaoh isn't fazed in the slightest. "And moreover," he says, "I will not let Israel go."

[†] A number of commentators (Currid; Motyer; Hamilton) notice Moses' apparent failure to follow the instructions in 3:18, and proceed to various conclusions based on this observation. I remain unconvinced, however, that Moses' apparent failure is really the point of the text (cf. Enns), and so therefore I also remain unconvinced that there is actually any failure at all. In particular, for Moses to say, "Thus says Yahweh," when Yahweh has not commanded him to say anything of the sort would be far more than even a very big mistake – even for Moses!

The disdain and utter scorn of Pharaoh is perhaps a bit unsettling. But then, it was to be expected that he wouldn't just give in. We can still believe that Yahweh has everything in hand. Surely Yahweh already has Pharaoh taken care of. So Moses and Aaron come again.

III. Exodus 5:3–5 — 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.” 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.” And Pharaoh said, “Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens!”

Moses’ and Aaron’s second attempt is polite, but underneath, there’s a not very veiled warning and threat. “The God of the Hebrews has met with us.” In other words, this is truly not just our word, but the word of our God. So therefore, *please*, don’t stand in the way of us doing what our God has required. I think even the reference to pestilence and the sword is another not very veiled warning and threat. After all, if it’s Israel that refuses God’s command, then perhaps they might expect God’s judgment. But if the *reason* they cannot obey God’s command is because of Pharaoh standing in the way, then surely the pestilence and sword that might have come to Israel will be transferred to Pharaoh!

Surely Pharaoh hears the warning and threat – but he’s completely unconcerned. Because Yahweh isn’t even worthy to be on his list of gods, therefore Pharaoh has no problem using and exploiting the people of Israel. Notice what he says: “Behold, the people of the land are now *many*...” This was the theme of chapter one, where we saw that “the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.” (1:7; cf. 1:12, 20) The theme of chapter one was the fulfillment of God’s *covenant* promise to Abraham—that his descendants would be fruitful and multiply—which was in turn rooted in God’s original *creation* mandate and blessing to be fruitful and multiply. Through the multiplication of Israel, God will bring the blessings of His rule to all the nations of the world. In chapter one, the king of Egypt viewed the multiplication of Israel only as a threat – as something to be stopped.

✓ Exodus 1:9–11 — He said to his people, “**Behold, the people of Israel are too many** and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply.”

But now, all these years later, the attitude of the Pharaoh’s has apparently changed. And so this Pharaoh, rather than say, “Behold, the people of Israel are *too many*,” *boasts* instead, “Behold, the people of the land are *now many*.” This Pharaoh, rather than stop Israel from multiplying would exploit this amazing fruitfulness of Israel as an abundant and unending supply of slave labor. What neither of these Pharaohs understand is that their attempts either to hinder or to exploit the multiplication of Israel is actually a direct, full out attack on *Yahweh*’s creation and covenant purposes.

So now maybe we can hear just how sinister, and even how demonic are these words: “Behold, the people of the land are now *many*, and you make them rest from their *burdens*!” Once again,

we're reminded very vividly that this is *much, much bigger* than just a dispute over Pharaoh's right to keep Israel enslaved. This has everything to do with God's plan for the revelation of *His own great glory*, in and through the salvation of His people. But be that as it may, for right now Moses and Aaron are left hanging with what appears to be Pharaoh's own not very veiled threat: "Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens!"

IV. Exodus 5:6-9 — The same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their foremen, "You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as in the past; let them go and gather straw for themselves. 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.' Let heavier work be laid on the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words."

Pharaoh continues to reveal more, and more, and more of his true colors. He doesn't just insist that the people keep on working, he gives the order that they should be made to work even *harder* than they already were. In fact, they'll now be *required* to do what is literally *impossible*, and then be severely punished when they fail as expected.

The bricks in Egypt were much larger than the kind of bricks that we think of today. They were made out of mud from the Nile, mixed with straw for added strength, and then baked in the sun. To this point, the Israelite slaves had been supplied with the straw they needed for making the bricks, but that wasn't the result of kindness or mercy. Already, the people were being worked to their limits so that they groaned and cried out in their suffering and affliction. (cf. 2:23-24; 3:7, 16-17) The supply of straw was only intended to make their work barely possible. Now, however, they must not only continue producing the *same number of bricks as before*, but they must find, and gather, and prepare all of their own straw. It shouldn't be hard for us to imagine the feeling of frantic desperation.

V. 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. Go and get your straw yourselves wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced in the least.'" So the people were scattered throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. The taskmasters were urgent, saying, "Complete your work, your daily task each day, as when there was straw." 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?"

Apparently, the Israelites are not actually allowed access to straw, but only to stubble – the short left over stalks of already harvested fields. And so we find that the already impossible task is even more impossible than we originally thought. The people scatter everywhere, frantically looking for what there could never possibly be enough to find, while all the time the taskmasters are pressing them to turn out the same amount of bricks as before, and then beating the Israelite foremen when they fail – as expected.

If the people of Israel experienced affliction and suffering *before*, then what are they experiencing *now*? If the people of Israel were groaning and crying out *before*, then how much

more must they be groaning and crying out *now*? Was *this* supposed to happen? Was *this* part of the plan? It was to be expected that Pharaoh wouldn't just give in. Yahweh had said to Moses: "I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand." (3:19) In fact, God had said that He Himself would harden Pharaoh's heart so that he would not willingly let the people go. (4:21) OK, but what about this? What about Israel's lot going from bad to *worse* – from already horrible to worse than horrible? Can we still believe now that Yahweh has everything in hand? Can we really still believe now that the promised salvation and deliverance is just around the corner?

And all the while, Pharaoh continues to flaunt himself in the face Yahweh – Israel's so-called "god" that he considers unworthy even to be on his list of deities. If Yahweh says to let Israel go that they may serve Him (cf. 4:22-23; 8:1), Pharaoh will demand that the people of Israel serve *him* all the more. If Yahweh says that he has visited His people and has called them out to worship Him, Pharaoh will show that these are nothing more than "lying words." If Yahweh says that He has heard the cries of His people (cf. 2:23; 3:7), Pharaoh will say that the people are crying out only because they are idle and lazy. If Yahweh sends his messenger to Pharaoh with the words, "Thus says Yahweh," then Pharaoh will send the taskmasters and foremen to Israel with these words: "Thus says Pharaoh." At every possible point, the lines are drawn deeper, and deeper, and deeper.

And so we continue to be reminded over, and over, and over again that this is ***much, much bigger*** than just a dispute over Pharaoh's right to keep Israel enslaved. This is a contest not between Moses and Pharaoh, but between Yahweh, the God of Israel, and Pharaoh, who represents the gods of Egypt. This has everything to do with who Yahweh is – with His honor and His glory. This has everything to do with God's plan for the revelation of His own great glory, in and through the salvation of His people. We can see this, because we're standing on the outside looking in. But will Israel see this? Will Israel still ***believe*** that Yahweh has everything in hand? Will Israel still ***believe*** that the promised salvation and deliverance is just around the corner, even when in the moment, everything is only going from bad to much, much worse? Will Israel still bow their heads in ***worship***?

VI. Exodus 5:15–18 — Then the foremen of the people of Israel came and cried to Pharaoh, "Why do you treat your servants like this? 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." But he said, "You are idle, you are idle; that is why you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD.' Go now and work. No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number of bricks."

Clearly, when the Israelites signed on with God's agenda, they had absolutely no thoughts that it could mean things might get *worse* than they *already were*. The foremen of the people of Israel are in disbelief. Pharaoh must be unaware of what his taskmasters are doing. There must be some mistake – some error in communication. "Why does Pharaoh treat his servants like this?" But they learn very quickly that there's been no mistake. Pharaoh mocks them, "You are idle, you are idle; that is why you say, 'let us go and sacrifice to Yahweh,'" and then he orders them back to work, apparently enjoying his own cruelty: "No straw will be given you, but you must still

deliver the same number of bricks.” If at first the foremen were in disbelief, then *what now?* How are God’s people to make sense of this? What are God’s people to do?

VII. Exodus 5:19— The foremen of the people of Israel saw that they were in trouble when they were told, “You shall by no means reduce your number of bricks, your daily task each day.”

The Hebrew word for “trouble” here is the same word for “evil.” The foremen of the people of Israel saw that their plight was evil – they were in deep, deep, deep trouble.

VIII. Exodus 5:20–21—They met Moses and Aaron, who were waiting for them, as they came out from Pharaoh; 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.”

And so the story that began with the people *believing* Yahweh’s messengers and bowing their heads in *worship* ends with the same people calling on Yahweh to judge His own messengers.‡ The story that began with the joyful reception of Moses and Aaron ends with their bitter rejection. At least for now. The *reason* is obvious, isn’t it? The *reason* is that before there was ever any sign of things getting better, things only got far, far *worse*.

Conclusion

So how are we to make sense of this? I think the first thing we should admit is that there really is no “*easy*” answer. But there is a very deeply *satisfying* answer.

We started out this morning with the reminder that *everything* that’s about to happen – *everything* that Moses and Aaron are about to face together – is not about them, *or even about Israel*. Instead, it’s about God’s *revelation* of His own great glory *in and through* the salvation of His people. We were reminded of this as Moses and Aaron met together at “*the mountain of God*.” And then throughout this entire first confrontation, we’ve seen again and again that this is *much, much bigger* than just a dispute over Pharaoh’s right to keep Israel enslaved. This has everything to do with who Yahweh is – with His honor and His glory. So here, as throughout the entire book of Exodus, God looms large. He Himself is ultimately the main and only attraction. This is obvious for anyone who has eyes to see. But the problem is that we don’t naturally have these eyes to see.

The problem is that for the Israelites, apparently, they’ve heard the glorious good news of salvation to be primarily *about them*.§ Apparently, what they’ve heard Moses saying is that God’s *ultimate driving motive is their salvation* – which then relegates God’s glory to be a secondary bi-product of their salvation. That may seem to us like a minor technicality, but it can

‡ “The expression, ‘the Lord—judge,’ is, as it were, to impose upon Him the law by which He must condemn Himself.” (Calvin) “What perversity of the natural heart! They call upon God to judge, whilst by their very complaining they show that they have no confidence in God and His power to save.” (Keil) From the foremen’s naming of Yahweh, Stuart draws the very different conclusion that they must not have lost faith in Yahweh.

§ “The Israelites’ reaction here to Moses is indicative of their own hardness of heart toward not only Moses but the God who has come to save them, which subsequent chapters will make clear.” (Enns; cf. Calvin; Motyer)

actually mean the difference between life and death, between belief and unbelief, between hope and despair. In a world with me at the center, the only life that will ever make sense is a life that, as a general rule, keeps on getting better. And so Jesus can speak of those who, “when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.” (Mark 4:16-17) The Israelites received the word *with joy*. They even bowed their heads and *worshipped*. But in the end, their “faith” and their “worship” was all of the wrong kind. Their faith and worship, as sincere and genuine as it *appeared*, was rooted in the idea that God’s promised salvation was ultimately about them – when, in reality, *nothing* could *possibly* be *further* from *the truth*. So now maybe we can make sense of these verses:

Exodus 5:22–6:1 — Then Moses turned to the LORD and said, “O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? 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.” 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.”

Did you notice that God never “answers” Moses’ question? Surely God could have skipped all the extra suffering, and still shown Moses what He was going to do to Pharaoh. But then again, in so many words God *has* answered Moses question – by very carefully reminding Moses that His infinitely loving plan for Israel’s salvation is rooted in His zeal for His own glory. In a world with me at the center, the only life that will ever make sense, and that I’ll ever be able to be “satisfied” with, is a life that, as a general rule, keeps on getting better. It’s only in a world with God truly at the center where these things can exist side by side: faith *and* affliction, hope *and* suffering, worship *and* trials. When we understand that God’s passion for our salvation is driven not just by His love for us, but even more ultimately by His zeal for His own glory, then we are free not only to suffer, but to remain absolutely, unceasingly secure even in our sufferings – even in those times when it seems that things just keep going from bad to worse.

What are the subtle ways that we’ve been living, or thinking, or even worshipping as though the glory of God was a secondary bi-product of our salvation? What are the ways that this often subtle, self-centered thinking has left us in bondage – vulnerable and exposed to every attack of the enemy – to doubt, discouragement, self-pity, and fear? How we need to ask God to be constantly renewing our minds! May God help us to literally exult(!) and be free(!) in this truth – that God’s passion for our salvation is driven not just by His infinite love for us, but even more ultimately by His zeal for the revelation of *His own* infinite glory. Knowing this can mean the difference between life and death, belief and unbelief, joyful hope and self-centered despair. Knowing this changes everything.